

Navigating Fashion Gender Divide: A Narrative Inquiry on Struggles and Coping Strategies of Couturiers in Aklan, Philippines□

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ABSTRACT:

The fashion industry is moving towards social norms. The gap in gender equality remains a challenge among couturiers involved in creating customized clothing. This study investigated the gender divide in the fashion industry, focusing on the struggles and coping mechanisms of Aklanon couturiers. The study was anchored on social role theory. The study employed a qualitative research design, involving the ten (10) Aklanon couturiers compost of LGBTQIA+, male, and female participants of the study. The validated interview guide was used in gathering the data. The collected information was analyzed and interpreted using a thematic analysis. Results revealed that most participants experienced difficulty in sewing; limited and unavailability of materials, stress, and low-cost service. Likewise, the study found that the task of doing the basic clothing construction from measuring to sewing remains a women's job while creating the design and branding was handled by the LGBTQIA+, where women claimed they shared less recognition in the field because they are working in the back of the house. To cope with these struggles, the most common experiences shared by the participants were: hiring and outsourcing skilled sewers, outsourcing needed materials, conducting regular inventory, upgrading skills, and digitizing some areas of operation to meet clients' satisfaction and expectations. However, some elderly women sewers, who are not updated with the use of the new technology cannot easily apply the platform and they remain traditional in doing their job. Hence, the study implied that there are shared gender stereotypes from the gender division of labor in the fashion industry, though both genders perform differentiated tasks however, women tend to do the cutting and sewing which they claim to be associated with their domestic chores, which is due to cultural stereotypes about gender.

KEYWORDS: fashion industry, gender equality, struggles, coping mechanisms, cultural stereotypes

Introduction

Gender divide or gender gap refers to the distribution of different roles and responsibilities based on gender that leads to tensions between employment demands and responsibilities [1]. The fashion industry has grown as one of the largest industries in the world, employing millions of people around the world [2], [3] however; numerous studies found out that the gap in gender equality remains a challenge among couturiers. Though, there is a strong call to foster gender inequalities (goal 5) through implementing Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Sustainable Agenda 2030 by the United Nations (UN) across the world, gender inequalities still persists. In the Philippines, studies have reported that gender equality is an enabler and the fashion industry experienced gender inequalities. It is emphasized that it is common in cultural industries including fashion, where women far outnumber men (Balaoro, 2022).

Moreover, regardless of gender and skills possessed by Aklanon couturiers, they still experienced various struggles from designing stage, production, promotion, marketing, and personal struggles. To ease those struggles they employ varied coping mechanisms.

The main purpose of the study is to determine the challenges experienced and coping mechanisms of Aklanon couturiers that provides a comprehensive understanding and analysis of the gender stereotyping and gender divide affecting male, female, LGBTQIA+ Aklanon couturiers in the fashion industry in Aklan, Philippines.

2) Methods and Methodology

The study was anchored on social role theory. The social role theory argues that widely shared gender stereotypes develop from the gender division of labor that characterizes a society[4]. Thus, because of the division of labor that women and men are different and not because of evolutionary psychology characteristics. Thus, this division of labor, women tend to be as housewives, doing household chores and caring child compared with men whom acknowledge by society as dominant, aggressive, and provider of family; whereas these traits uphold by men are the reason that they are able to work or to do a task that a women cannot do. Moreover, it suggests that almost behavioral differences between men and women are the result of cultural stereotypes about gender. In addition, the gendered division of labor gives men and women differentiated skills.

This study employed a qualitative research design, involving the ten (10) purposively selected Aklanon couturiers and compost of LGBTQIA+, male, and female. They were selected according to the following criteria: (1) Aklanon couturier; (2) currently working in the fashion industry; and (3) have at least 3 years' work experience as couturier.

To establish the validity of the data gathering instrument, the questionnaire was checked and validated by the panel of experts, an English professor, a gender and development (GAD) advocate, and a social science instructor. The validated interview guide was used in gathering the data. The interview guide presented questions on the struggles they experienced as couturiers in terms of their technical skills, practices, personal struggles, and promotion and marketing. Likewise, their corresponding coping mechanisms were presented in interview guide. In gathering the data the researcher conducted one-on-one interview with nine (9) participants who are based Aklan and online interview with one (1) participant who is based abroad (Dubai).

The data collected were coded, encoded, and transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a method of analyzing qualitative data. It is usually applied to a set of texts, such as an interview or transcripts. It is a good approach to research where trying to find out something about people's views, opinions, knowledge, experiences or values from a set of qualitative data [5]. The researcher examined and reviewed the transcribed and coded data to identify and generate common themes, ideas, and patterns of meaning that came up repeatedly.

3) Results

Background of the participants

Two out of the ten (10) middle-aged participants had worked in the fashion sector for twenty (20) years. All of the participants had more than three years of experience in the field. Most of the participants were member of LGBTQIA+. Nine of the participants were based in Aklan, Philippines, and only one was based in Dubai. Some of the participants had experience working as couturiers and designers internationally, but they chose to stay and continue their passion and business in Aklan, specifically in Kalibo, the center of trade and business in Aklan, Philippines. The one participant who was based in Dubai was a pure Aklanon couturier, and he accommodated clients around the world. Currently, he manages his own atelier in Dubai. The ten (10) Aklanon couturiers had their own expertise and concentration of made-to-order apparel, but the majority made women's apparel, specifically intricate gowns. The majority of their creations were worn during pageantry, one of their means of promotion.

Regardless of gender, Aklanon couturiers experienced various struggles and corresponding coping mechanisms from the designing to promotional stage. The responses were discussed below.

The Struggles of Aklanon Couturiers

Sewing difficulty

Sewing is the most essential skill in the fashion industry. It is the major step in the production of apparel. Couturiers should know sewing techniques like hand stitching and using sewing machine. The LGBTQIA+

participants responded that they struggled in the production stage because they experienced difficulty and they are not skilled in sewing.

Carla (transgender) affirmed, *"Honestly, I do not know how to sew."*

Similar difficulty is experienced by Mel Grecia (transgender), *"My weakness is sewing."*

This implies that LGBTQIA+ Aklanon couturiers are not skilled in sewing because they are more capable and well-versed in designing and on the aesthetic value of clothing than the production process. Doing the basic clothing construction from measuring to sewing remains a women's job while creating the design and branding was handled by the LGBTQIA+.

Limited and unavailability of materials

A quality material gives impact on the total output and value of apparel. The struggles experienced by Aklanon couturiers in the production of their works/designs were due to the scarcity and shortage of materials in Aklan. As Carla put it, *"Here in Aklan I feel hard to adjust because the materials are limited."*

This finding indicates those suppliers of fabrics and other materials used for production of clothing in Aklan were having inadequacy of supplies that can caused delayed to the production of apparel of every Aklanon couturiers.

Stress

The negative circumstances encountered by Aklanon couturier resulted in physical, mental, emotional, and financial strain.

Mel Grecia lamented that, *"Stress, stress particularly on due dates."*

This revelation shows that there are diverse experiences of stress encountered by couturiers in practicing their profession. There is a season in the fashion industry when there are a lot of works to be accomplished and they may experience long hours and excessive work to accomplish to meet the deadlines given by the clients which cause them stress.

Low-cost service

This is about clients who do not meet the standard pricing of Aklanon couturiers and always tend to ask discounts.

Carla shared his struggle experience by stating that, *"In Aklan, the pricing is too low."*

The same experience was shared by Mel Grecia, *"Low budget of client most especially here in province, they are very particular in terms of pricing."*

These showed that local clients do not meet the standard pricing and minimum service fee of Aklanon couturiers which results to become a struggle of couturiers in promotion and marketing aspects.

The Coping Mechanisms of Aklanon Couturiers

Hiring and outsourcing skilled sewers

Aklanon couturiers hire and outsource competent and experienced sewers for the production of their designs, most of their sewers and master cutter where women because they believe that women are skilled in that particular field and their outputs are neat. This finding was proven by Carla, *"I look for skilled sewer, specifically women sewers, because they are good and their output is clean."*

This result implies that hiring and outsourcing of women skilled sewers might sustain the production process and produce quality output.

Outsourcing needed materials

This is the manner of Aklanon couturiers in solving their struggles experienced on the limited and unavailability of materials locally. The Aklanon couturiers responded that they outsourced the needed materials from other provinces or places and/or ordering from their direct supplier from Manila.

As verified by Abner, *"I don't have any option, sometimes I bought from Iloilo."*

Carla added that, *"Before when I was in Aklan, since that the materials were limited here, I bought from Iloilo or even in Manila."*

This result entailed that outsourcing the needed, ideal and quality materials, specifically fabric might contribute to the general look of garment designed by couturiers that is why they are making way to purchase their needed and ideal materials for their designs.

Conducting regular inventory

Through this coping mechanism Aklanon couturiers may help to minimize costs, improve their supply chain, develop customer satisfaction, and lessen the stress. To avoid the stress caused by simultaneous deadlines, bulk orders and materials to be purchase Aklanon couturiers conducted regular inventory to cope and get rid of stress. As Adriano attested, *"What I did was doing inventories to cope with stress caused by bulk orders."*

This result showed that the fashion industry in Aklan might experience bulk orders/clients that require monotonous work and cause stress among Aklanon couturiers. In order to accomplish and lessen the stress they have to conduct regular inventory to sustain their business.

Upgrading skills and digitizing some areas of operation to meet clients' satisfaction and expectations

LGBTQIA+ Aklanon couturiers explore to make exceptional designs to attract more clients and to compete with young and talented fellow couturiers. They upgraded their skills in designing by using computer aided designs (CAD). Through this they can explore more and enhance their creativity. As proven by Allentueah, *"I can say that I overcome this by experimenting colors and designs by using CAD software instead of drawing, this is time consuming."*

Another response from Eugene stated that, *"For me, in order to have more clients, I do experimentation of designs to make it more unique, like 3D designs of gowns."*

These findings suggest that Aklanon couturiers need to be more creative and innovative when it comes to the designs; they have to establish their signature designs to attract customer and to compete with fellow local couturiers. Most importantly they also have to upgrade their skills by utilizing new technology.

4] Discussion

The gendered division of labor in the fashion industry, especially among Aklanon couturiers, reflects a persistent gap between genders, particularly impacting women and LGBTQIA+ individuals. Women are frequently assigned basic tasks like sewing, which are often seen as an extension of their domestic roles [6], [7] traditionally viewed as a feminized skill that ties into caregiving and household responsibilities, further entrenching gender norms. Conversely, LGBTQIA+ individuals tend to take on creative roles such as design and branding, which are often perceived as more innovative and prestigious within the industry. This division reinforces deep-seated stereotypes that gender-specific roles in the workforce are natural and inevitable rather than based on individual skills or preferences [8].

In terms of visibility and recognition, women in this sector often express frustration over being marginalized, despite their significant contributions to garment production and construction. This lack of recognition points to a broader pattern in creative industries where women's labor is underappreciated, even when their output is crucial to the overall success of the business [9]. The marginalization of women highlights how gender bias persists in ways that continue to undervalue traditionally feminine tasks while celebrating male or LGBTQIA+ contributions, especially in creative and leadership roles.

Several challenges are apparent in the work of Aklanon couturiers. Issues such as limited access to materials, sewing difficulties, and the pressure to provide low-cost services further entrench this gendered division. These challenges impact job satisfaction and perpetuate the view that certain tasks are less valuable, further influencing who performs these roles. Sewing, for instance, is not only physically demanding but also economically undervalued compared to design or branding [10]. This mirrors a broader global pattern, where women dominate labor-intensive, lower-paid jobs, while creative and managerial positions tend to be occupied by men or LGBTQIA+ individuals [11].

In response, couturiers have developed various coping mechanisms, including outsourcing skilled labor, sourcing materials from different regions, and adopting digital tools to meet industry demands. However, there remains a technological gap, particularly between older and younger women sewers, indicating that technological advancements are not being uniformly embraced or supported. This gap reflects the broader digital divide often seen in industries undergoing rapid technological changes, where older workers, often women, are at a disadvantage due to a lack of training or resources [12], [13]. Targeted support and training are necessary to help bridge this divide, ensuring that all workers, regardless of gender or age, can benefit from technological advancements in fashion production [14].

The implications for gender equality within the fashion industry are significant. Gender stereotypes continue to limit women's access to creative tasks traditionally seen as male-dominated, further reducing their chances for career advancement. The fact that women are pigeonholed into roles based on stereotypes rather than abilities indicates that more systemic interventions are necessary to challenge these entrenched norms [15]. Social role theory offers a useful lens through which to understand how these stereotypes persist, showing that societal expectations often dictate occupational roles and behaviors rather than personal choice or talent [16]. To foster greater gender equality, interventions must address both organizational policies and societal expectations that continue to reinforce these divisions [17].

Finally, the interplay between gender dynamics, stereotypes, and coping strategies in the Aklanon couturier community underscores a broader need for inclusivity and recognition. Efforts to combat gender stereotypes and promote diversity within the industry are critical to fostering a more equitable workplace where all contributions are valued, regardless of gender identity [20]. Only through such comprehensive efforts can the fashion industry move towards a future where talent and skill, rather than gender, determine roles and opportunities

5] Conclusion

The fashion industry in Aklan presents a multifaceted setting where couturiers often encounter challenges ranging from mastering the technical skills to navigating personal struggles, promoting their creations effectively, and most importantly the gender gaps where women couturiers feel and experienced outcast and unrecognized in the fashion industry in Aklan. To cope with these struggles, it is essential that regardless of gender, couturiers may practice continuous learning, embrace innovation, seek mentorship, and leverage strategic marketing approaches. By embracing resilience and adaptability, couturiers can navigate these challenges and carve their path to success in the ever-evolving world of fashion whilst also addressing and promoting gender equality.

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9] Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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