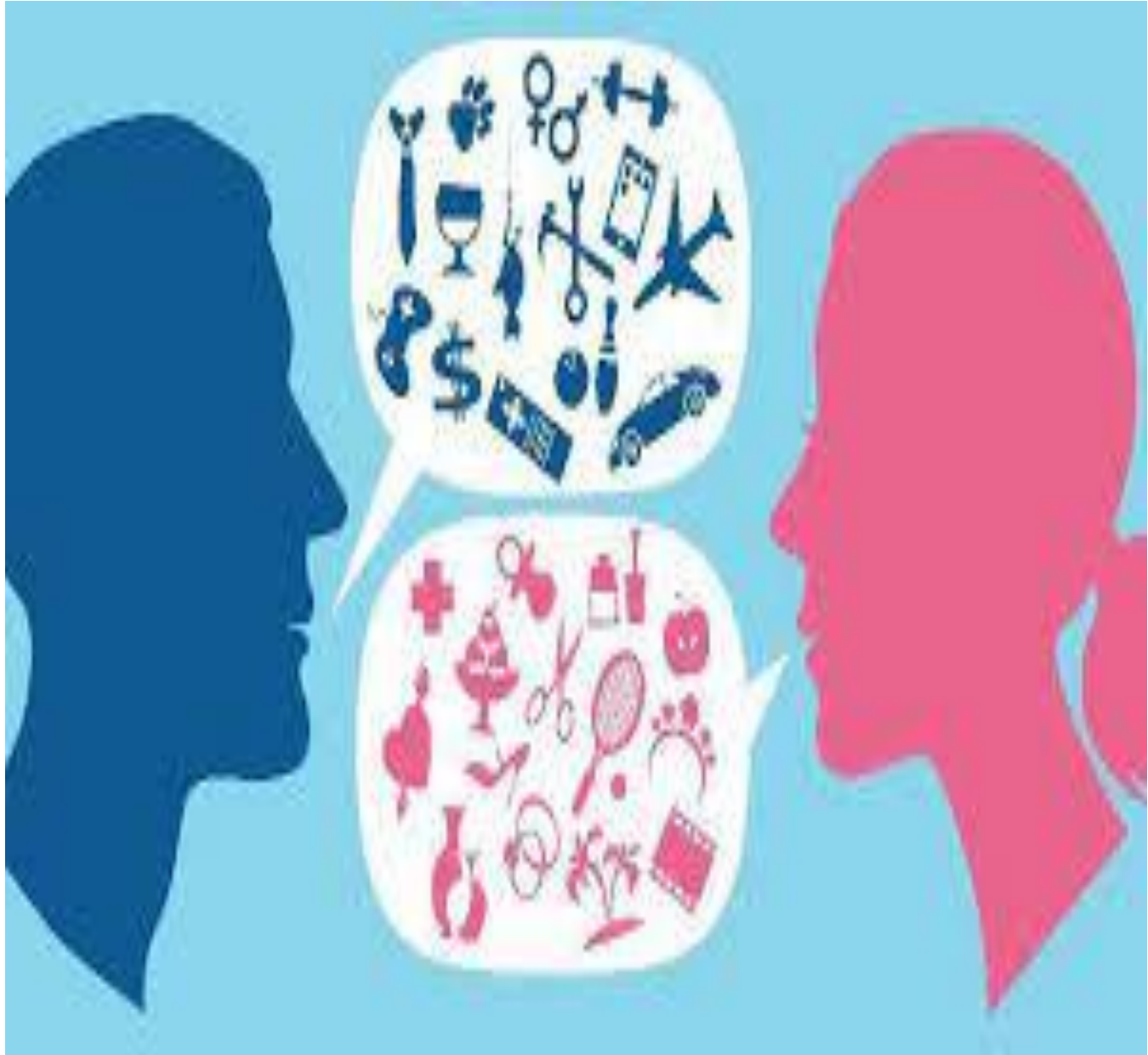


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Empowering Women Leaders in Fashion Technology: A Phenomenological Approach

Sukhi Akter¹; Md. Sahid Al Shehab¹; Kazi Abdul Mannan²

The integration of digital technologies into the fashion industry has created new opportunities for innovation, leadership, and entrepreneurship, yet gender disparities persist in leadership roles within fashion technology. This study explores the lived experiences of women leaders in fashion technology using a qualitative phenomenological approach based on secondary data. Drawing on feminist leadership theory, intersectionality, and the Technology Acceptance Model, the research examines how women navigate structural barriers, digital skill gaps, and organisational inequalities. Thematic analysis of academic literature, industry reports, and documented narratives reveals that women face persistent challenges such as gender bias, limited access to technological education, and underrepresentation in decision-making positions. However, the findings also highlight key empowerment mechanisms, including mentorship, digital literacy, inclusive organisational cultures, and policy support. The study underscores the dual role of technology as both an enabler and a barrier, depending on access and institutional support. By providing a nuanced understanding of women's leadership experiences, this research contributes to the discourse on gender equity in emerging industries and offers practical recommendations for fostering inclusive leadership in fashion technology.

Keywords: women's leadership, fashion technology, phenomenology, gender equity, digital transformation, empowerment, intersectionality

¹Department of Fashion Design & Technology, ²Department of Business Administration, Shanto-Mariam University of Creative Technology, Dhaka, Bangladesh Email: zaratanisha4240@gmail.com

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1. Introduction

The rapid convergence of fashion and technology has given rise to a dynamic and evolving field commonly referred to as fashion technology or “fashion-tech.” This interdisciplinary domain integrates digital innovations such as artificial intelligence (AI), big data analytics, wearable technology, blockchain, and virtual reality into traditional fashion processes, including design, manufacturing, marketing, and retail (McKinsey & Company, 2023; Niinimäki et al., 2020). As the global fashion industry undergoes digital transformation, leadership within this sector is becoming increasingly complex, requiring not only creative expertise but also technological proficiency and strategic adaptability.

Despite the growing importance of technology-driven innovation, gender disparities remain a persistent issue in leadership positions across both the fashion and technology sectors. Women represent a substantial proportion of the global fashion workforce, particularly in manufacturing and retail; however, they are significantly underrepresented in executive and decision-making roles, especially those involving technological innovation (UN Women, 2022). This disparity is reflective of broader structural inequalities that exist across industries, where women face barriers such as gender bias, unequal access to resources, and limited opportunities for professional advancement (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

The issue is further compounded in the context of fashion technology, which sits at

the intersection of two fields with distinct gender dynamics. While the fashion industry has historically been perceived as female-dominated, leadership positions within fashion houses and corporations are often occupied by men (Kawamura, 2005). Conversely, the technology sector has long been characterised by male dominance, particularly in technical and leadership roles (UNESCO, 2021). As a result, women seeking leadership positions in fashion technology must navigate a “double bind” of gendered expectations and structural constraints.

In developing countries such as Bangladesh, where the garment industry plays a pivotal role in the national economy, these challenges are particularly pronounced. Bangladesh is one of the world’s largest exporters of ready-made garments, employing millions of women in production roles (World Bank, 2021). However, women’s representation in managerial and technological leadership positions remains limited due to socio-cultural norms, lack of access to higher education in STEM fields, and insufficient institutional support (ILO, 2020). The transition toward fashion technology presents both opportunities and challenges for women in these contexts, as digitalisation can either exacerbate existing inequalities or serve as a tool for empowerment, depending on access and inclusivity.

This study seeks to explore the phenomenon of women’s leadership in fashion technology through a qualitative phenomenological lens. Phenomenology, as a research approach, focuses on understanding individuals’ lived

experiences and the meanings they ascribe to those experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). By examining secondary data sources such as documented narratives, interviews, and case studies of women leaders, this research aims to uncover the essence of their leadership journeys, including the challenges they face and the strategies they employ to overcome them.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to both academic and practical discourse. From a theoretical perspective, it integrates insights from feminist leadership theory, intersectionality, and technology adoption models to provide a comprehensive understanding of women's experiences in fashion technology. From a practical standpoint, it offers valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and industry stakeholders seeking to promote gender equity and inclusive leadership in emerging sectors.

Furthermore, the study addresses a critical gap in the literature. While there is a growing body of research on women in leadership and gender disparities in technology, limited attention has been given to the intersection of these issues within the context of fashion technology. By adopting a phenomenological approach, this research moves beyond quantitative metrics to capture the nuanced and subjective experiences of women leaders, thereby providing a richer and more holistic understanding of the phenomenon.

The objectives of this study are fourfold. First, it aims to identify and analyse the structural and socio-cultural barriers that hinder women's advancement into leadership roles in fashion technology. Second, it seeks

to explore the strategies and mechanisms through which women leaders achieve empowerment and success in this field. Third, it examines the role of organisational and institutional structures in shaping women's leadership experiences. Finally, the study aims to provide actionable recommendations for fostering inclusive and equitable leadership in fashion technology.

In conclusion, as the fashion industry continues to evolve in response to technological advancements, it is imperative to ensure that women are not only included but also empowered to lead in this transformative landscape. Understanding their lived experiences is a crucial step toward addressing systemic inequalities and unlocking the full potential of diverse leadership in fashion technology.

2. Literature Review

The study of women in leadership has evolved significantly over the past few decades, with increasing attention to the structural and cultural barriers that limit women's advancement. Early research focused on identifying differences between male and female leadership styles, often emphasising women's collaborative and transformational approaches (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Transformational leadership, characterised by empathy, communication, and motivation, has been associated with effective leadership outcomes and is often linked to women leaders (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

However, despite these strengths, women continue to face systemic barriers such as the

“glass ceiling,” which prevents them from reaching top leadership positions (Cotter et al., 2001). More recent studies have also identified the “glass cliff” phenomenon, where women are more likely to be placed in leadership roles during periods of organisational crisis, increasing their likelihood of failure (Ryan & Haslam, 2005). These challenges highlight the persistent gender biases that shape perceptions of leadership and competence.

Additionally, social role theory suggests that gender stereotypes influence expectations of behaviour, often leading to a mismatch between traditional leadership traits (e.g., assertiveness, dominance) and societal expectations of women (Eagly & Karau, 2002). This incongruity can result in discrimination and reduced opportunities for women in leadership.

2.1 Gender Disparities in Technology and Digital Skills

The underrepresentation of women in technology is a global issue with significant implications for industries undergoing digital transformation. According to UNESCO (2021), women account for less than 30% of the global STEM workforce, with even lower representation in leadership roles. This disparity is attributed to factors such as gender stereotypes, lack of role models, and limited access to education and training in technical fields.

The digital divide further exacerbates these inequalities, particularly in developing countries. Women often have less access to digital technologies, internet connectivity, and digital literacy programs, which limits

their ability to participate in technology-driven industries (World Bank, 2021). This gap not only affects individual career prospects but also hinders broader economic development.

In the context of fashion technology, digital skills are increasingly essential for roles involving data analytics, AI-driven design, and supply chain management. The lack of these skills among women creates a barrier to entry and advancement, reinforcing existing gender disparities.

2.2 The Evolution of Fashion Technology

Fashion technology represents a paradigm shift in the fashion industry, driven by the integration of advanced technologies into traditional processes. Innovations such as 3D printing, smart textiles, and virtual fitting rooms are transforming how fashion products are designed, produced, and consumed (Niinimäki et al., 2020). Additionally, digital platforms and e-commerce have revolutionised retail, enabling brands to reach global audiences.

The adoption of these technologies has significant implications for leadership, as it requires new competencies and skill sets. Leaders in fashion technology must navigate complex technological systems while maintaining creative vision and market responsiveness (McKinsey & Company, 2023).

However, the leadership landscape in fashion technology remains predominantly male, particularly in technical roles. This imbalance reflects broader trends in the technology sector and underscores the need

for targeted interventions to promote gender diversity.

2.3 Empowerment and Women's Agency

Empowerment is a central concept in understanding women's leadership and participation in economic activities. Kabeer (1999) defines empowerment as the process by which individuals gain the ability to make strategic life choices in contexts where this ability was previously denied. This involves access to resources, agency, and achievements.

In the context of fashion technology, empowerment can be facilitated through education, access to digital tools, and supportive networks. Mentorship and role models play a crucial role in enhancing women's confidence and leadership capabilities (Ibarra et al., 2013). Additionally, organisational policies that promote diversity and inclusion can create enabling environments for women leaders.

2.4 Intersectionality and Diverse Experiences

Intersectionality provides a framework for understanding how multiple social identities intersect to shape individuals' experiences of privilege and discrimination (Crenshaw, 1989). For women in fashion technology, factors such as race, class, and geographic location can significantly influence their leadership trajectories.

For example, women in developing countries may face additional challenges related to economic constraints and cultural norms. In Bangladesh, socio-cultural expectations

often limit women's participation in leadership roles, despite their significant contribution to the garment industry (ILO, 2020).

2.5 Organisational Culture and Institutional Support

Organisational culture plays a critical role in shaping leadership opportunities and experiences. Inclusive cultures that value diversity and promote equality are more likely to support women's advancement (Sharma, 2016). Practices such as flexible work arrangements, mentorship programs, and leadership training can enhance women's participation in leadership roles.

Institutional support, including government policies and educational initiatives, is also essential for addressing gender disparities. Programs aimed at promoting STEM education among women and providing financial support for female entrepreneurs can contribute to greater gender equity in fashion technology.

2.5 Research Gap

While existing literature provides valuable insights into women's leadership, gender disparities in technology, and the evolution of fashion technology, there is a notable gap in research that integrates these themes. Specifically, limited studies have explored the lived experiences of women leaders in fashion technology using a phenomenological approach.

This study addresses this gap by examining secondary data to uncover the essence of women's leadership experiences, providing a

nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities in this emerging field.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in an integrative theoretical framework that combines Feminist Leadership Theory, Intersectionality Theory, and the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) to provide a multidimensional understanding of women's leadership experiences in fashion technology. These theoretical lenses collectively enable the exploration of gendered power dynamics, socio-cultural influences, and technological engagement within a rapidly evolving industry.

3.1 Feminist Leadership Theory

Feminist Leadership Theory provides a critical foundation for analysing women's leadership by challenging traditional, hierarchical, and male-dominated leadership paradigms. It emphasises collaboration, inclusivity, empowerment, and social justice as central components of effective leadership (Chin, 2014). Unlike conventional leadership models that prioritise authority and control, feminist leadership advocates participatory decision-making and values diverse perspectives.

In the context of fashion technology, feminist leadership is particularly relevant because the industry requires interdisciplinary collaboration among designers, technologists, and business strategists. Women leaders often adopt transformational and relational leadership styles, which foster innovation and team cohesion (Eagly & Carli, 2007). These leadership approaches are

well-suited to the dynamic and creative nature of fashion-tech environments.

Moreover, feminist leadership theory highlights the importance of dismantling systemic barriers that hinder women's advancement. These barriers include gender bias, lack of representation, and organisational cultures that marginalise women's contributions. By focusing on empowerment and equity, feminist leadership provides a framework for understanding how women navigate and challenge these constraints.

3.2 Intersectionality Theory

Intersectionality Theory, introduced by Crenshaw (1989), offers a nuanced perspective on how multiple social identities, such as gender, race, class, and geographic location, intersect to shape individuals' experiences of privilege and discrimination. This framework is essential for understanding the diverse and often complex experiences of women in fashion technology.

In global contexts, particularly in developing countries like Bangladesh, intersectionality plays a critical role in shaping women's leadership trajectories. Women from marginalised socio-economic backgrounds may face compounded challenges, including limited access to education, financial resources, and professional networks (ILO, 2020). These intersecting inequalities influence not only their entry into the fashion-tech sector but also their ability to ascend to leadership positions.

Intersectionality also highlights the importance of contextual factors, such as cultural norms and institutional structures, in

shaping leadership experiences. For instance, societal expectations regarding gender roles may restrict women's participation in leadership, particularly in technology-driven fields that are traditionally male-dominated (UNESCO, 2021). By incorporating intersectionality, this study acknowledges that women's experiences are not homogeneous and seeks to capture the diversity of their lived realities.

3.3 Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)

The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), developed by Davis (1989), provides a theoretical basis for understanding individuals' adoption and use of technology. According to TAM, two key factors, perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use, determine an individual's willingness to engage with new technologies.

In the context of fashion technology, TAM is particularly relevant for analysing how women leaders interact with digital tools and innovations. As the industry becomes increasingly technology-driven, the ability to adopt and leverage new technologies is a critical determinant of leadership effectiveness. However, gender disparities in digital literacy and access can influence women's perceptions of technology and their willingness to adopt it (World Bank, 2021).

Furthermore, TAM can be extended to consider external variables such as organisational support, training opportunities, and social influence, which can enhance or hinder technology adoption. For women in fashion technology, supportive environments that provide access to training

and resources can significantly improve their engagement with technological innovations.

3.4 Integrative Framework

The integration of these three theoretical perspectives provides a comprehensive framework for analysing women's leadership in fashion technology. Feminist Leadership Theory addresses the structural and cultural dimensions of leadership, Intersectionality Theory captures the diversity of experiences shaped by overlapping identities, and TAM explains the role of technology in shaping leadership practices.

Together, these frameworks enable a holistic understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by women leaders. They also highlight the interplay between individual agency and systemic factors, emphasising the need for both personal empowerment and institutional change.

4. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative phenomenological research design, which is particularly suited for exploring the lived experiences of individuals and understanding the meanings they assign to those experiences. Phenomenology seeks to uncover the essence of a phenomenon by examining commonalities across individuals' narratives (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

In this study, the phenomenon under investigation is the experience of women leaders in fashion technology. By focusing on subjective experiences, the research aims to move beyond surface-level observations and provide a deeper understanding of the

challenges, strategies, and empowerment processes that characterise women's leadership journeys.

4.1 Data Sources and Sampling

Given the scope of this research, a secondary data-based approach was employed. Secondary data were collected from a wide range of sources, including:

- Peer-reviewed academic journal articles
- Industry reports (e.g., McKinsey & Company, World Bank)
- Biographies and autobiographies of women leaders
- Published interviews and case studies
- Reports from international organisations (e.g., UN Women, ILO, UNESCO)

The use of secondary data is appropriate for phenomenological research when direct access to participants is limited, as it allows for the analysis of rich, documented narratives (Johnston, 2017). A purposive sampling strategy was used to select sources that provide detailed accounts of women's experiences in fashion technology and related fields.

4.2 Data Collection Procedure

The data collection process involved systematic identification and selection of relevant literature and documented narratives. Key inclusion criteria were:

- Relevance to women's leadership in fashion, technology, or related sectors
- Availability of detailed experiential accounts

- Credibility and reliability of sources

Databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, and Web of Science were used to identify academic literature, while organisational websites provided access to industry reports and case studies.

4.3 Data Analysis

The study employed thematic analysis, following the six-step framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006):

- **Familiarisation with data:** Reading and re-reading selected sources to gain an in-depth understanding
- **Generating initial codes:** Identifying meaningful segments related to leadership experiences
- **Searching for themes:** Grouping codes into broader themes
- **Reviewing themes:** Ensuring coherence and consistency
- **Defining and naming themes:** Refining themes to capture the essence of the data
- **Producing the report:** Synthesising findings into a coherent narrative

This approach allows for the identification of recurring patterns and themes across diverse data sources, providing insights into common experiences and challenges.

4.4 Validity and Reliability

To ensure the rigour of the study, several strategies were employed:

- **Triangulation:** Multiple data sources were used to validate findings and reduce bias

- **Credibility:** Only reputable and peer-reviewed sources were included
- **Dependability:** A systematic and transparent data analysis process was followed
- **Reflexivity:** The researcher maintained awareness of potential biases and assumptions

These measures enhance the trustworthiness of the research and ensure that the findings accurately reflect the phenomenon under study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

4.5 Ethical Considerations

Although this study relies on secondary data, ethical considerations remain important. All sources were properly cited to acknowledge original authors, and care was taken to accurately represent the perspectives and experiences documented in the data.

Additionally, the study adheres to principles of academic integrity and avoids misinterpretation or misrepresentation of data (Mannan & Farhana, 2026). Since no primary data were collected, issues related to informed consent and confidentiality were not directly applicable.

4.6 Limitations of the Methodology

While the use of secondary data provides access to a wide range of perspectives, it also has limitations. The researcher has no control over the original data collection process, which may affect the depth and consistency of the data. Additionally, the absence of direct interaction with participants may limit the ability to probe deeper into specific experiences.

Despite these limitations, the phenomenological approach, combined with rigorous thematic analysis, provides valuable insights into the lived experiences of women leaders in fashion technology.

5. Findings and Analysis

The thematic analysis of secondary data revealed a complex interplay of structural, cultural, technological, and personal factors shaping the experiences of women leaders in fashion technology. The findings are organised into six major themes: structural and institutional barriers, digital skill disparities and technological engagement, organisational culture and leadership pathways, empowerment mechanisms and strategies, identity negotiation and lived experiences, and emerging opportunities in fashion technology.

5.1 Structural and Institutional Barriers

A dominant theme across the literature is the persistence of structural barriers that hinder women's advancement into leadership roles. These barriers are deeply embedded in organisational systems, societal norms, and institutional practices. Women in fashion technology often encounter gender bias in recruitment, promotion, and performance evaluation processes (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

The "glass ceiling" remains a significant obstacle, preventing women from reaching top leadership positions despite their qualifications and experience (Cotter et al., 2001). In addition, the "glass cliff" phenomenon places women in precarious leadership roles during times of

organisational instability, thereby increasing the likelihood of failure and reinforcing negative stereotypes (Ryan & Haslam, 2005).

In developing economies, such as Bangladesh, these structural barriers are further intensified by socio-cultural constraints. Women often face limited access to higher education, particularly in STEM fields, which restricts their entry into technology-driven roles (ILO, 2020; World Bank, 2021). Furthermore, patriarchal norms and expectations regarding women's roles in society can limit their career aspirations and opportunities for advancement.

The analysis also highlights disparities in access to financial resources and investment opportunities. Women entrepreneurs in fashion technology often struggle to secure funding for startups and innovation projects, which limits their ability to scale their businesses and compete in the market (UN Women, 2022).

5.2 Digital Skill Disparities and Technological Engagement

Another critical theme is the digital skill gap that affects women's participation in fashion technology. As the industry becomes increasingly reliant on advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence, data analytics, and digital design tools, the lack of digital literacy among women poses a significant barrier (UNESCO, 2021).

The Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989) provides insight into how perceived usefulness and ease of use influence women's engagement with technology. Women who have access to training and resources are more likely to adopt and utilise digital tools

effectively. However, those with limited exposure may perceive technology as complex or inaccessible, leading to lower adoption rates.

The findings also indicate that digital skill disparities are not solely a result of individual limitations but are influenced by systemic factors such as unequal access to education and training programs. In many cases, women are excluded from technical training opportunities due to institutional biases or socio-economic constraints (World Bank, 2021).

Despite these challenges, some women leaders have successfully leveraged technology to innovate and transform their businesses. For example, the adoption of e-commerce platforms and digital marketing strategies has enabled women entrepreneurs to reach global markets and overcome traditional barriers to entry.

5.3 Organisational Culture and Leadership Pathways

Organisational culture plays a pivotal role in shaping women's leadership experiences in fashion technology. Inclusive and supportive work environments are associated with higher levels of women's participation in leadership roles (Sharma, 2016).

The analysis reveals that organisations with diversity and inclusion policies, mentorship programs, and leadership development initiatives are more likely to promote women into leadership positions. These organisations recognise the value of diverse perspectives and actively work to create equitable opportunities.

Conversely, organisations with rigid hierarchical structures and male-dominated cultures often marginalise women's contributions and limit their career progression. In such environments, women may face discrimination, lack of recognition, and limited access to decision-making processes.

Leadership pathways in fashion technology are often non-linear, requiring a combination of creative, technical, and managerial skills. Women who succeed in this field typically demonstrate adaptability and continuous learning, navigating complex career trajectories that involve both fashion and technology domains.

5.4 Empowerment Mechanisms and Strategies

Empowerment emerges as a central theme in the findings, highlighting the strategies that enable women to overcome barriers and achieve leadership positions. These strategies operate at individual, organisational, and societal levels.

At the individual level, education and skill development are critical for enhancing women's capabilities and confidence. Access to digital literacy programs and technical training enables women to engage effectively with emerging technologies (Kabeer, 1999).

Mentorship and networking are also key empowerment mechanisms. Women who have access to mentors and professional networks are better equipped to navigate organisational challenges and access opportunities for advancement (Ibarra et al., 2013). Mentorship provides guidance,

support, and role modelling, which are essential for leadership development.

At the organisational level, policies that promote gender equality and diversity play a crucial role in empowering women. Flexible work arrangements, parental leave policies, and leadership training programs can create supportive environments that facilitate women's career progression.

At the societal level, government initiatives and international programs aimed at promoting gender equality and digital inclusion are essential for addressing systemic barriers. These initiatives can provide resources, training, and financial support for women in fashion technology.

5.5 Identity Negotiation and Lived Experiences

The phenomenological analysis reveals that women leaders in fashion technology often engage in complex processes of identity negotiation. They must balance multiple roles and expectations, including professional responsibilities, family obligations, and societal norms.

Many women experience imposter syndrome, characterised by self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy despite their achievements. This phenomenon is particularly prevalent in male-dominated environments, where women may feel pressure to prove their competence (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

At the same time, women leaders demonstrate resilience and adaptability in navigating these challenges. They develop coping strategies, such as building support

networks and seeking continuous learning opportunities, to overcome obstacles and achieve success.

Intersectionality further shapes these experiences, as women from different backgrounds face unique challenges and opportunities. For example, women from lower socio-economic backgrounds may encounter additional barriers related to access to education and resources.

5.6 Emerging Opportunities in Fashion Technology

Despite the challenges, the findings highlight significant opportunities for women in fashion technology. The digital transformation of the fashion industry has created new roles and career pathways that were previously unavailable.

Technologies such as e-commerce, digital design, and virtual reality have democratized access to the industry, enabling women to start their own businesses and reach global markets (McKinsey & Company, 2023). Additionally, the growing emphasis on sustainability and ethical practices in fashion aligns with values often associated with women's leadership, creating opportunities for women to lead in these areas (Niinimäki et al., 2020).

The rise of remote work and digital platforms has also increased flexibility, allowing women to balance professional and personal responsibilities more effectively. These developments have the potential to reduce barriers and promote greater inclusion in leadership roles.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing women's leadership in fashion technology, offering insights that align with and extend existing theoretical frameworks. This discussion interprets the findings through the lenses of feminist leadership theory, intersectionality, and the Technology Acceptance Model, while also considering broader socio-economic and organisational implications.

6.1 Reinterpreting Leadership Through a Feminist Lens

The findings strongly support the principles of feminist leadership theory, which emphasise collaboration, inclusivity, and empowerment (Chin, 2014). Women leaders in fashion technology often adopt transformational leadership styles that prioritise team engagement, innovation, and social responsibility (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

These leadership approaches are particularly relevant in the context of fashion technology, where interdisciplinary collaboration is essential. The ability to integrate creative and technical perspectives requires leaders who can foster inclusive environments and encourage diverse contributions.

However, the persistence of structural barriers indicates that traditional leadership paradigms continue to dominate organisational practices. The glass ceiling and glass cliff phenomena highlight the need for systemic change to create equitable opportunities for women.

6.2 Intersectionality and Contextual Realities

Intersectionality provides a critical framework for understanding the diverse experiences of women leaders in fashion technology. The findings reveal that women's experiences are shaped by a combination of gender, socio-economic status, and cultural context (Crenshaw, 1989).

In developing countries, such as Bangladesh, these intersecting factors create unique challenges. Women often face socio-cultural constraints that limit their access to education and professional opportunities (ILO, 2020). At the same time, the global nature of the fashion industry presents opportunities for women to engage with international markets and networks.

The discussion highlights the importance of context-specific interventions that address the unique needs of women in different settings. Policies and programs that are effective in one context may not be applicable in another, underscoring the need for localised approaches.

6.3 Technology as Both Enabler and Barrier

The role of technology in shaping women's leadership experiences is characterised by a dual dynamic. On one hand, technology serves as an enabler, providing new opportunities for innovation, entrepreneurship, and global connectivity. On the other hand, the digital skill gap and unequal access to technology act as barriers that limit women's participation (World Bank, 2021).

The Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989) helps explain this dynamic by highlighting the importance of perceived usefulness and ease of use. Women who perceive technology as accessible and beneficial are more likely to adopt it and leverage it for leadership purposes.

This underscores the importance of digital literacy programs and training initiatives that enhance women's confidence and competence in using technology. Organisations and governments must invest in capacity-building efforts to bridge the digital divide.

6.4 Organisational Culture as a Catalyst for Change

The findings emphasise the critical role of organisational culture in shaping leadership opportunities. Inclusive cultures that value diversity and promote equality are essential for empowering women leaders (Sharma, 2016).

Organisations that implement mentorship programs, diversity policies, and leadership development initiatives create environments that support women's advancement. These practices not only benefit women but also contribute to organisational performance by fostering innovation and creativity.

However, the persistence of discriminatory practices in some organisations highlights the need for stronger accountability mechanisms. Leadership commitment to diversity and inclusion is essential for driving meaningful change.

6.5 Empowerment as a Multi-Level Process

Empowerment is a multi-dimensional process that operates at individual, organisational, and societal levels. The findings align with Kabeer's (1999) framework, which emphasises the importance of resources, agency, and achievements.

At the individual level, education and skill development enhance women's capabilities and confidence. At the organisational level, supportive policies and practices create enabling environments. At the societal level, government initiatives and cultural shifts are necessary to address systemic inequalities.

This multi-level perspective highlights the need for coordinated efforts across different stakeholders to promote women's leadership in fashion technology.

6.6 Implications for Policy and Practice

The discussion has several implications for policy and practice. First, there is a need for targeted interventions to promote women's participation in STEM education and digital skills training. Second, organisations must prioritise diversity and inclusion by implementing policies and practices that support women's leadership.

Third, mentorship and networking programs should be expanded to provide support and guidance for emerging women leaders. Finally, governments and international organisations must play a proactive role in promoting gender equality and digital inclusion.

6.7 Contribution to Knowledge

This study contributes to the existing literature by integrating multiple theoretical perspectives and providing a phenomenological understanding of women's leadership in fashion technology. It addresses a significant research gap and offers insights that can inform future research and practice.

7. Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive exploration of women's leadership in the evolving domain of fashion technology through a phenomenological lens. By integrating insights from feminist leadership theory, intersectionality, and the Technology Acceptance Model, the research highlights the complex interplay of structural, technological, and socio-cultural factors shaping women's leadership experiences.

The findings reveal that, despite significant advancements in the fashion-tech industry, women continue to face systemic barriers, including gender bias, limited access to STEM education, and organisational inequalities. These challenges are particularly pronounced in developing contexts, where socio-cultural norms and economic constraints further restrict women's participation in leadership roles. At the same time, the study demonstrates that women leaders exhibit resilience, adaptability, and innovation in navigating these obstacles.

Importantly, the research identifies several key empowerment mechanisms that facilitate women's leadership development. Access to

education and digital skills training enhances women's ability to engage with emerging technologies, while mentorship and professional networks provide critical support for career advancement. Inclusive organisational cultures and gender-sensitive policies also play a vital role in creating enabling environments for women leaders.

The study further emphasises the dual role of technology as both an enabler and a barrier. While digital transformation offers new opportunities for entrepreneurship, global connectivity, and innovation, unequal access to technology and digital literacy can reinforce existing gender disparities. Addressing this digital divide is essential for ensuring that women can fully participate in and benefit from the fashion-tech sector.

From a practical perspective, the findings underscore the need for coordinated efforts among policymakers, educational institutions, and industry stakeholders. Promoting gender-inclusive policies, investing in digital education, and fostering supportive organisational cultures are critical steps toward achieving gender equity in fashion technology leadership.

In conclusion, empowering women leaders in fashion technology is not only a matter of social justice but also a strategic imperative for innovation and sustainable development. By addressing systemic barriers and enhancing empowerment mechanisms, the industry can unlock the full potential of diverse leadership, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and dynamic global fashion ecosystem.

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