

Research Bank

Journal article

Fashion education in Sri Lanka : The nexus between formal and informal education

Gopura, Sumith, Payne, Alice, Bandara, Deepthi C., Buys, Laurie and Seneheweera, Leena

This is an Accepted Manuscript version of the following article, accepted for publication in *International Journal of Fashion Design, Technology and Education*.

Gopura, S., Payne, A., Bandara, D. C., Buys, L. and Seneheweera, L. (2019). Fashion education in Sri Lanka : The nexus between formal and informal education. *International Journal of Fashion Design, Technology and Education*, 12(1), pp. 23-34.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/17543266.2018.1467500>.

It is deposited under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

Research Bank

Article

Fashion education in Sri Lanka: the nexus between formal and informal education.

S. Gopura, A. Payne, D. C. Bandara, L. Buys & L. Seneheweera

Sumith Gopura, Alice Payne, Deepthi C. Bandara, Laurie Buys & Leena Seneheweera (2019) Fashion education in Sri Lanka: the nexus between formal and informal education, *International Journal of Fashion Design, Technology and Education*, 12:1, 23-34, DOI: 10.1080/17543266.2018.1467500

This work © The Textile Institute and Informa UK Ltd 2018.

This accepted manuscript is available under Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial No Derivatives 4.0. <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/4.0/>

Fashion education in Sri Lanka: The nexus between formal and informal education

For the past fifteen years, the Sri Lankan apparel industry has been upgrading from apparel assembly to providing design and product development services. The country's fashion education developed in response to the industry's need for design professionals. The purpose of this study is to explore how fashion designer competencies are developed within Sri Lanka. This study adopts a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews conducted with twenty-eight fashion and product-development professionals, selected through purposive sampling. The development of fashion designer competencies within SL in this context are analysed and discussed. The study proposes a 'fashion education ecosystem' that has emerged from the nexus between formal fashion education and training and professional development within the industry, supporting the upgrading of the industry through the enhancement of designer skills. Sri Lanka, as a small country that depends heavily on the apparel industry for employment and economic development, provides a model for other developing countries seeking industrial upgrading from apparel assembly to design and product development services through the fashion education ecosystem.

Keywords: fashion education; designer; Sri Lanka; apparel industry; industrial upgrading

Introduction

The apparel industry in Sri Lanka (SL) was established more than four decades ago (Kelegama, 2009) and now offers design and product development services beyond apparel assembly. The SL government, in collaboration with apparel industry associations, introduced fashion education for the country's higher education in the 2000s to strengthen the apparel industry's design and product development services (Senanayake, 2013; Wijayasiri & Dissanayake, 2008). Currently, both public and private sector institutions offer fashion education in SL, with qualifications ranging from diplomas to bachelor degrees in fashion design and product development. The

graduates are chiefly employed by a few major apparel manufacturing companies in SL (Loker, 2015), through which they acquire a wide range of soft skills for their professional development, along with technical skills that are crucial in their design practice.

This study was conducted with fashion and product-development professionals in the SL apparel industry and the data collection focused on the designers' fashion education through higher education institutions and the apparel industry. Each participant had more than five years of working experience in the SL apparel industry. This article discusses how fashion designer competencies are developed within SL in this context.

Apparel industry and fashion education in Sri Lanka

The global fashion system is best understood within the context of the apparel value chain (Cattaneo, Gereffi, & Staritz, 2010), within which the apparel production industry operates, contributing substantial employment and economic development for the countries engaged in the process. The industry is characterised by its decentralised production networks, mainly in Asian countries, including India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and SL, that provide various services, from apparel assembly to design and product development for the value chain (Acevedo & Robertson, 2012, p. 47; Lopez-Acevedo & Raymond, 2016). The value chain process is chiefly mediated by traders from Hong Kong, South Korea and Taiwan, while brands and retailers from United States, the United Kingdom and Japan focus on higher value activities such as design, marketing, and distribution (Lopez-Acevedo & Raymond, 2016). However, as Western brands and retailers restructure their functions around cost benefits, some of these value-added activities, such as design and product development services, are pushed towards apparel producing countries, as is the current situation in the SL apparel industry (Lopez-

Acevedo & Raymond, 2016). Because of this, SL designers require creative, cultural and commercial fashion knowledge — i.e., professional skills other than the technical knowledge necessary to apparel production.

The SL apparel industry has developed since the 1970s as a part of global apparel production industry shift from East Asia to south Asian countries(Acevedo & Robertson, 2012). The SL apparel industry accounts for approximately 45% of total merchandise exports from the country (EDB, 2016). In 2002, the SL government, together with the apparel industry, formulated a five-year strategy to upgrade the industry from contract manufacturing to a fully integrated service provider, thereby strengthening the industry's future (Kelegama, 2009). As a result, in 2002, SL introduced fashion design curricula in higher education to harness design capabilities in the country and support the industry through locally trained designers (Senanayake, 2013).

Currently, two public sector universities and at least three private institutions offer fashion education in SL. One public university offers a full-time four-year fashion design and product development undergraduate degree under the SL free education system for up to fifty students from all over the country. The University Grants Commission Sri Lanka conducts selections for this programme based on students' performance in the General Certificate of Education, Advanced Level (GCE A/L) examination, and also a special aptitude test that is conducted by the university. The other public-sector university offers a four-year undergraduate fashion design and product development degree through distance learning, selecting students based on their GCE (A/L) results, or other qualifications in the field of apparel. Private fashion education institutions in the country, many of which are affiliated with foreign

universities, offer fashion design degrees and diplomas for students selected based on their portfolio assessments.

There is no specific preparation stream in SL for those who want to study fashion in their tertiary education, and students from a variety of secondary education backgrounds are eligible to apply for fashion studies in both public and private sector institutions. Graduates are primarily employed by major apparel manufacturing companies in SL, including those specialising in active, intimate, sportswear, and casualwear products (Loker, 2015). These companies offer a wide variety of training and professional development opportunities to support staff development. Thus, for the last fifteen years, the SL apparel industry has benefited from a high standard of design and product development knowledge.

Fashion Graduates

Fashion is a major segment in the creative industries (Throsby, 2007), but many graduates in this sector experience a significant period of personal and professional uncertainty during their transition to the industry (Bridgstock, Goldsmith, Rodgers, & Hearn, 2015). This is because, as Matthews (2011, p. 43) says, ‘Transferring practices and habits from one context to another is not an easy task’. Graduates transitioning to work must re-contextualise their knowledge and practices, and this may involve revising their personal and professional identity to suit the industry (Bridgstock & Cunningham, 2016). Unlearning past habits, biases and beliefs helps them learn new skills, have new experiences, and create new behaviours in this context (Conner, 2006). Higher education institutions tackle this issue through internships, which prepare graduates for a smoother transition into work (Bridgstock et al., 2015; Kozar & Connell, 2015).

Formal and informal education

Formal education encompasses systematic learning through higher education institutions (Cooms & Ahmed, 1974), and in this study, formal fashion education is defined as occurring through college or university in SL. The current industrial context is very knowledge intensive, and graduates require continuous learning and skill enhancement to stay ahead and adapt to the innovations specific to their field of work. Therefore graduates must possess personal, transferable skills such as the ability to cooperate, communicate, and solve problems (Bennett, Dunne, & Carre, 1999). Zmuda (2009) identifies the prominent skills that students should develop through formal education as: critical thinking, problem solving, collaboration, effective communication and global literacy. Creativity, inventiveness, resilience and empathy are less tangible but equally important capabilities.

Informal education is a lifelong process, through which a person acquires and accumulates knowledge, skills, attitudes and insights from daily experiences and exposure to the environment (Cooms & Ahmed, 1974). Crosbie (2005) lists eight soft skills that are needed by all individuals to succeed in their employment: teamwork, communication skills, initiative, leadership ability, people development, personal effectiveness, planning and organising, and presentation skills. Rae (2009), further emphasises that highly qualified staff require the ability to think, learn and adapt. As Ohly, Sonnentag, and Pluntke (2006) state, those who are in long-term employment generally possess more work experience, task-specific knowledge and skills that often help in solving problems. As such, the skills developed in formal education together with the skills developed in informal education through long-term employment and daily experience and exposure are vital in apparel manufacturing industry context.

Particularly, for the designers who play active roles in developing creative ideas in globalised fashion industry.

In their research on the software development industry, Wohlin et al. (2012) highlight ways in which collaborations between higher education institutions and industry have encouraged innovation, enabling companies to seek new processes and technologies in order to compete globally. Wohlin et al. (2012) identify the important factors for successful collaborations of this nature as being people, coordination and trust. These factors are especially applicable in apparel production, in which the process is fully driven by interactions and relationships (both personal and professional) between many different actors in the value chain.

The skills developed in both formal and informal education are vital for the cross-fertilisation of fashion across science, business and technology, to expand designers' creative processes (Faerm, 2014). The discussion in this article explores successful higher education and industry collaborations in SL fashion education.

Fashion Education

Craik (2009) believes that designers should be able to create a link between fashion practice and a sense of self, as the apparel industry is widespread across the globe. For example, designers should be able to understand the fashion consumer needs and fashion manufacturing technology which are geographically wide apart in apparel value chain. Hence, it is essential to develop designers' aptitudes and transform their attitudes (Kozar & Connell, 2015). As Robinson, Freeburg, and Workman (2013) point out, the attributes of creativity in fashion students define the success of the future fashion industry. Formal aspects of education in higher education institutions focusing on skills such as creativity, inventiveness, empathy, problem solving, team work, communication and global literacy are vital in developing designers' aptitudes (Zmuda 2009). Designers

are increasingly becoming ‘storytellers’, attracting consumers through empathic designs, i.e., designs that align with the needs and identities of consumers (Faerm, 2014, p. 108). Therefore, most importantly, empathic relationships between designers and Western brands, retailers, buyers and consumers are vital in the apparel value chain, particularly for SL designers when acquiring fashion knowledge through interactions with the world of fashion.

The informal aspects of education within the industry, focusing on skills such as the ability to think, learn and adapt through the experience of leadership, teamwork, planning and organising, (Crosbie 2005) are essential in designers’ attitude development. Wright, Cushman, and Nicholson (2002) note that industry professionals are aware of the most satisfying skills for successful work performance, while educators often place more emphasis on cognitive skills.

SL, as a small country that is actively participating in the apparel value chain through manufacturing and offering design and product development services, has a heavy dependency on the apparel industry for employment and economic development. This article explores how fashion designer competencies are developed within SL through formal and informal education, based on the methodology below.

Methodology

The study was designed using a qualitative approach and the data were gathered by qualitative semi-structured interview.

Participants

In order to obtain fashion education related data, the study focused only on expert professionals in fashion design and product development whose job required them to have undertaken fashion education. The participants were selected through purposive

sampling (Berg, 2001); existing expertise of the research team in the SL apparel industry and the informal networks in the industry were used in identifying potential participants. Eight design managers, two product-development managers, seventeen designers, and one product-development merchandiser were interviewed, drawn from different product categories of four major apparel manufacturing companies.

Table 1: Participants’ mode of fashion and apparel education

	On the job training	Public education	Private education	
		Local	Foreign	Local
Design Manager	1	2	5	2
Designer	1	11	-	5
Product developer	1	-	-	-

The number of participants was split nearly equally between publicly and privately trained designers (Table 1). Seven out of ten managers in the study obtained their formal fashion and apparel education from the private sector, including five foreign graduates and two SL graduates. Only two managers out of ten graduated from the SL public education system, while one manager obtained the required managerial skills through on the job training. The seventeen designers included eleven who graduated from the SL public sector and five who graduated from the SL private sector, while one designer obtained the required skills in design through on the job training. All managers had more than ten years’ experience each in the SL apparel industry and the designers and product developer had more than five years’ experience.

Data Collection

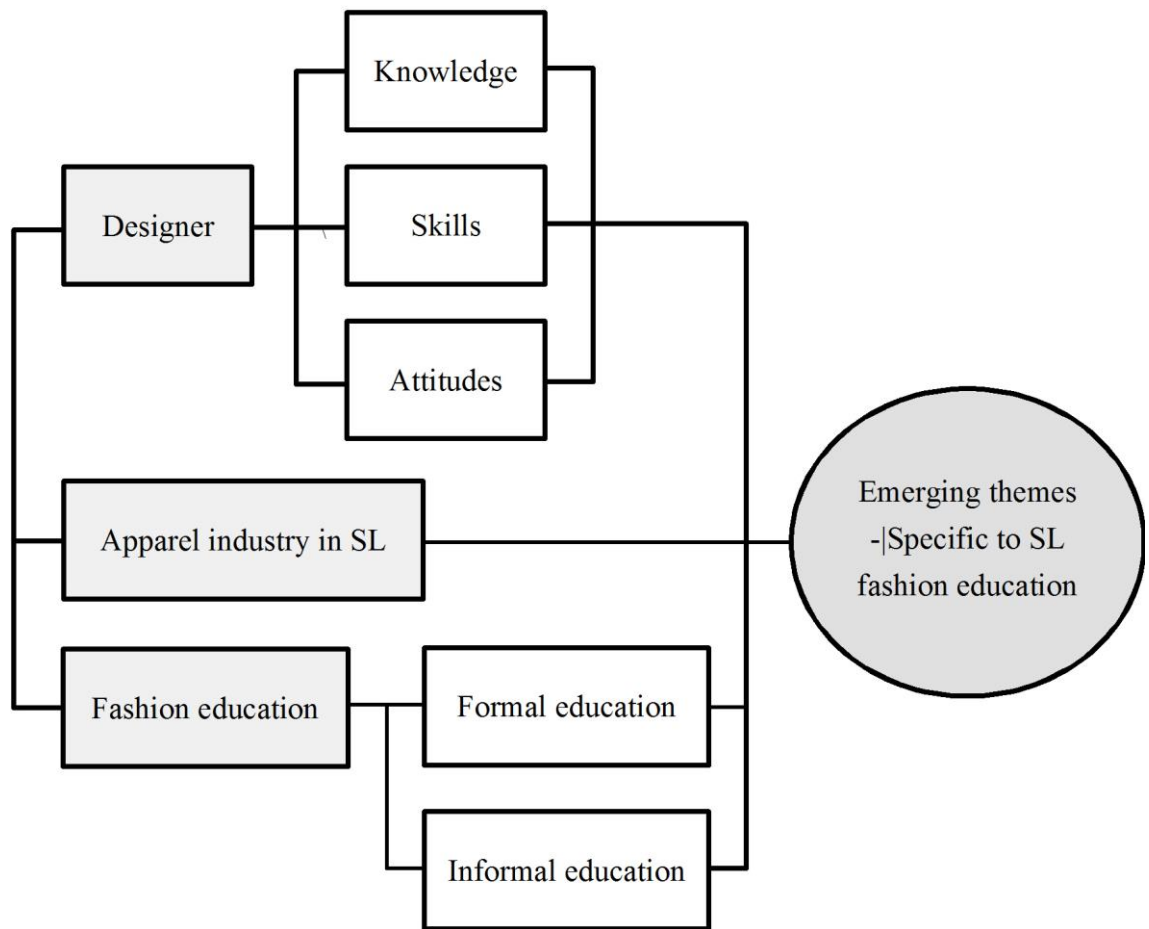
Semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately one hour, were conducted by the researcher during the period from July, 2016 to January, 2017, at participants’

workplaces (see Table 1), except for two participants who were on a work abroad programme and were interviewed through Skype. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as they are considered to provide reliable, comparable qualitative data, allowing informants the freedom to express their views in their own terms (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). An interview guide was used with a number of predetermined open-ended questions about the designers' career and fashion education (Berg, 2001); however, other relevant topics in the conversation were pursued when the researcher felt it appropriate. The interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent following the ethics of the study (Ethics clearance no. 1600000073) and later transcribed for analysis.

Analysis

Interview recordings were transcribed orthographically in alignment with the Edwards and Lampert (2014) approach. The initial codes were determined by the researcher (Author 1) after familiarisation with the data, and collaboratively reviewed with one other researcher (Author 2) based on an analytical approach to the semi-structured interview protocol. First, the data were organised around three main codes: Designer, Apparel industry in SL, and Fashion education (Figure 1). The data within the 'Designer' code were categorised again under three sub-codes: Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes. The code 'Apparel industry in SL' consisted of industry background and apparel manufacturing process-related data, which assisted in framing the themes specific to a SL industry context. Fashion education data were separately organised under the two sub-codes of Formal education and Informal education, and also linked with the Designers' Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes. NVivo11 software was used in organising the data.

Figure 1: Code grid



Using an inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), the coded data were systematically identified and organised to offer insight into patterns of meaning. The analysis took an inductive approach as the data were mainly coded based on participants' experiences and industry exposure. Author 1 manually sorted data in this step using a collaborative and iterative approach between the two researchers (Author 2); thus naturally occurring themes were developed on the theme of SL fashion education. The remaining members of the study contributed to additional validation processes of checking and commenting on themes. The next section discusses the findings in detail.

Results

Participants discussed their perceptions of formal and informal fashion education through their experience of and exposure to the apparel industry, as discussed below. Participants' formal fashion education views are listed under the themes of designers' learning challenges, industry internships, creative and commercial skills. Their informal fashion education insights are recorded under the themes of exposure to the fashion world, designers' specific skill development: communication skills, leadership training. At the end of each quotation, a reference is given, indicating the code name used for the company and the participant (e.g., A1D1: Company A1; Designer 1).

Overview of participants

Table 2 indicates participants' information related to gender, their current position, mode of obtaining their formal fashion education, and the training and development received in the industry. It was noted that sixteen out of twenty-eight participants were female, including seven managers.

Table 2: Participants' information¹ and the training and development received by them

No.	Company	Code	Gender	Position	Fashion education	Training and Development	
Company A							
1.	A1	A1DM1	Male	Manager		SL (Pvt)	Pattern design, travel exposure
2.		A1D1	Male		Designer	SL (Pub)	Communication, marketing, leadership
3.		A1D2	Female		Designer	SL (Pub)	Leadership, team work, executive development programme, marketing, toastmasters, technical knowledge
4.		A1D3	Female		Designer	SL (Pvt)	Pattern design, costing, language, lean manufacturing, market research
5.	A2	A2DM1	Male	Manager		SL (Pvt)	Building empathic relationships
6.		A2D1	Male		Designer	SL (Pub)	Bra making, presentation, travel exposure, brand exposure, commercial skills, consumer study, creativity
7.	A3	A3DM1	Female	Manager		Pvt-foreign	Communication, CAD, PD training
8.		A3D1	Male		Designer	SL (Pvt)	Travel exposure
9.	A4	A4D1	Male		Designer	SL (Pub)	-
Company B							
10.	B1	B1DM1	Female	Manager		Pvt-foreign	Personal grooming, marketing, internships with buyers, overseas work placements, travel exposure, CAD, washing, fabric, denim, pattern design, management, graphic design, communication

¹ PD-Product development, Pvt-Private sector, Pub-Public sector

11.		BID1	Female		Designer	SL (Pub)	Managing people, leadership training, presentation, technical design
12.		BID2	Male		Designer	On the job training	Washing, team work
13.		BIPD1	Male		Product Developer	On the job training	Time and task management, merchandising, costing, language skills
14.		BID3	Male		Designer	SL (Pub)	-
15.	B2	B2PDM1	Female	PD Manager		On the job training	Leadership, merchandising, pattern design
16.		B2DM2	Female	Manager		Pvt-foreign	Travel exposure, comp shopping, speaking up, mentored learning
17.		B2D1	Male		Designer	SL (Pub)	Communication, language skills, woven apparels
18.		B2D2	Female		Designer	SL (Pvt)	Leadership, managing people, team work, graphic design, communication, presentation
Company C							
19.	C1	CID1	Female		Designer	SL (Pub)	Internships with buyers, overseas work placements, communication and interrelationship, product knowledge
20.		CID2	Female		Designer	SL (Pvt)	Travel exposure, personal relation, store visits
21.		CID3	Female		Designer	SL (Pub)	Garment technology, costing, supplier meetings, understanding customer, understanding people, working with people in different ages, market knowledge
22.	C2	C2DM1	Female	Manager		Pvt-foreign	Travel exposure, overseas work placement, commercial understanding
23.		C2DM2	Female	Manager		Pvt-foreign-expat	Internships with buyers, in-house industry placements, travel exposure
24.		C2PDM3	Male	PD Manager		SL (Pub)	Travel exposure
Company D							

25.	<i>DI</i>	<i>DIDM1</i>	Female	Manager		SL (Pub)	Team work, design terminology, networking, read and react, respect for others' time, travel exposure
26.		<i>DID1</i>	Male		Designer	SL (Pub)	Understanding people, working with different hierarchy, fabric & pattern design, team work, leadership
27.		<i>DID2</i>	Female		Designer	SL (Pvt)	Marketing, visiting fairs, internships with buyers
28.		<i>DID3</i>	Female		Designer	SL (Pub)	CAD, mentored learning

Formal fashion education

This section discusses the designers' reflections on their time as students of formal fashion education through higher education institutions.

Designers' learning challenges

Subjects previously studied at school can have an influence on the student experience in higher education (Conner, 2006). Some students in this study found it hard to take in fashion education that involved a higher level of creative thinking than their secondary education allowed. One designer said:

I did my A Levels in mathematics. ... I have selected a fashion design course in *SI* [fashion education institute] ... First year I got couple of projects repeated. ... We were lacking in arts [creative skills]. I did less manual drawings and moved to computer-aided design, imaginations and we brought new concepts. (Company A2, Participant D1)

One participant highlighted the issue of industry preparedness of graduates by the time they left university, noting that more practical research projects, integrated with live industry and real industry projects that allow students experience real industry context, would improve the alignment of graduates with current industry needs, developing their commercial sense. A designer from company A stated, "In the final year we have product strategy. It's not enough ... we need more practical research, more practical analysing methods" (Company A2, Participant D1). Live industry projects led companies to identify talented students for their future employments as designer noted.

A design manager highlighted the hardship of understanding consumer culture and consumer lifestyles, and thus the difficulties of adapting to the cultural context of fashion.

It was difficult to understand consumer and the brand design philosophy, start creative conversations on level terms, because we are far away geographically from where the products [are] being consumed, where the brands are.
... We couldn't fix the problem of geography; the only way to fix that is to get closer to the consumer (Company A2, participant DM1).

Cultural blocks may also impede understanding of fashion consumer culture and lifestyle when designers are geographically disconnected from the consumers, as is the case with SL designers who develop products for North American or European consumers. Participants highlighted that SL fashion students find it difficult to comprehend the cultural context of fashion in their formal education. However, from their informal industry education, they are exposed to fashion and consumer cultures and develop their capacity to understand consumer needs, which is a key capability of a fashion designer. Formal fashion education and industry therefore work together to develop designer competencies. A design manager said:

It's very hard to get designers who get it right. There is a cultural context, there is a communication context, there is an aesthetic and taste level context. That's where the cultural block also comes into play (Company B1, participant DM1).

Industry internships

Industrial training is one important component of formal fashion education in SL (AoD, 2017; University of Moratuwa, 2015, pp. 32-33), providing students with a commercial sense of the industry. Students from both public and private fashion education institutions can take advantage of live industry exposure through internships. In public universities, students complete an internship of a minimum of thirty weeks in their third

year, while private sector fashion education internship programmes vary from three to six months. Live industry exposure helps students to practise theories they have learnt during their studies, and reflect on their strengths as designers. Participant D1 from Company A2 said, “Third year was the key because of the training period; the industry encouraged me to develop. I had a one-year internship period at A8 [apparel manufacturing company]. That year changed my whole designer life”. It can be seen from this that the connections between universities and industry are key in developing graduates’ practice-based skills.

A designer from Company A highlighted the importance of industry exposure in putting formal fashion education into practice, in order to be a good designer. He noted, “Soon after the graduation ... I was a guy who was like a clay ball. Industry moulded me and made into a shape” (Company A2, Participant D1). This designer also noted that formal fashion education prepared students to receive the training and professional development that the industry would then later provide in order to develop their skills in accordance with its needs.

Creative and commercial skills

One of the key areas of formal fashion education is students’ creativity and commercial knowledge. Participants highlighted the need for a balance between creativity and commercial knowledge through formal fashion education. They viewed university education as a time of creativity and play, unencumbered by commercial restraints. As they reflected on their experiences at university, some described the naivety of that position, sometimes with a little nostalgia. Two designers commented:

With the academic background, we were more conceptual. We didn’t understand the market limits. We thought creativity could change the world.... But the live industry is different ... more commercial (Company A2, participant D1).

When we go to first year, second year ... we thought about conceptual designing. We didn't know about commercial designing. Now we know how to minimise [sic] designing and it's very commercial (Company B2, Participant D1).

One participant from Company B said of the exploratory learning at university, "In university we thought like crazy things and we did" (Company B2, Participant D1). This participant said that university education is a time for unfettered creativity, which is later harnessed and shaped by the industry to become commercial; hence the benefits of creativity being fostered at university. These interactions between university and industry suggest the emergence of an ecosystem.

Informal fashion education

The kinds of informal education and training provided by the companies fall into two categories that encourage designers' continued education: 'spot', and 'on request' training programmes. 'Spot' training programmes are set by the company's Human Resources and are regularly recommended for employees. 'On request' training sessions are identified by the individual and departments to fulfil the specific needs of an individual or team for their professional development. One manager said, "Then they [designers] will get spot courses ... like leadership courses ... they get CAD training. Some of them might like wash training ... graphics" (Company B1, Participant DM1). A designer noted, "I always have a chance to request some of these [training programmes] in my annual appraisals; most of them are nominated by the company" (Company A2, Participant D1).

The supportive nature of the industry in providing 'on request' training programmes was noted by participants when describing the ways in which management communicate their expectations and tailor the required training to each person's

individual ambitions and abilities to foster specific aspects of their professional development. For example, these two participants note:

Every year we get time to communicate with our management and tell them where we need to improve. If you want to learn more about graphics, we can find a place, they will fund us. In terms of what you want, it's how much you want, depending on the management helping you. (Company B2, participant D2)

I especially tell them, this year you focus on this development... understand better patterns ... understand more management ... It's a very personalised plan between the designer and me that we discuss during the review. I like them to learn as they work. (Company B1, Participant DM1)

Exposure to the fashion world

In addition to the industry internships in formal fashion education that provide live industry experience, one of the main sources of SL designers acquiring exposure to the world of fashion is travel and meeting with customers [Western brands and retailers] and consumers. Weller (2007, p. 40) says that linking the worlds of fashion design with the global apparel manufacturing system requires transmission, diffusion and translation of high-profile designer fashion knowledge into the mass production system and into consumer perceptions. Hence, designers' exposure to the world of fashion is vital to designers' continuing education. One design manager noted:

Travel isn't an opportunity per se; it's like a requisite of your job. If a designer can handle a meeting alone, can take a product, present, capture what they [Western brands and retailers] say, come back, and follow through. When we know they are ready for that we throw them into that plunge here. (Company B2, Participant DM2)

Travel consists of visiting Western brands, retailers and consumers in the countries to which SL exports apparel, mainly the US and UK. As one designer from

Company A stated, “I got the opportunity to travel overseas and see my real consumer and brand” (Company A2, Participant D1). Travel exposes designers not only to consumer culture but also to trends through comparison, or ‘comp’ shopping and trade fairs of fabric, trends, colour, and innovations. The design manager from Company B highlighted experiential learning opportunities that occur overseas: “Even comp shopping is a big one for us ... they do fairs. So they get the experience” (Company B2, participant DM2).

Internships within overseas design houses of leading Western brands, retailers and the buyers of SL export apparel are another critical education experience for SL designers that enable a buyer-supplier relationship and increase business opportunities. One manager noted that being able to place designers at brand design houses was one of the best aspects of the buyer-supplier rapport: “[T]hey get training on the job in terms of an internship, like what *BID3* [designer] is getting. It’s a wonderful opportunity” (Company B1, Participant DM1).

These perspectives highlight a view that contextual understanding of fashion markets and consumer needs is vital for SL designers in their design process. Weller (2007) noted that fashion knowledge gravitates to centres such as Paris, Milan, New York, and London, and knowledge of these is important to the formation of consumer preferences, as well as to the ever-changing character of design-based inputs in the apparel value chain. Hence, travel defines a medium of transmission of ideas in these key locations to the apparel manufacturing destinations, especially countries such as SL that are geographically disconnected from the main fashion cities.

Designers’ specific skill development

Training and professional development provided by the industry focus on skills across technical and professional aspects. One designer stated, “I got lots of training related to

the technical part of bra making ... conducted by international bra experts” (Company A2, Participant D1). Companies are continuously in search of ways to enhance employees’ skills, and recommend training programmes as required. “The company identified the most [training opportunities] ... my weakest area was presentation; the company tried out couple of programmes for me ... They are frequently having chats with me about my development,” as one designer noted. One product developer said:

I didn’t have any technical knowledge when I joined SMTR [apparel manufacturing company]. I did only the merchandising management at S11 [private education institute]. I got a chance to participate in time management sessions and merchandising sessions at B6 [apparel buying office]. (Company B1, Participant PD1)

Table 2 illustrates the training and professional development obtained by the designers in this study. As Table 2 indicates, training and professional development received by the designers and product developers are targeted to a wide range of competency development: creative, cultural, commercial, technical, and professional. Some training programmes were tailored based on the participants’ ambitions, while targeting personal skills such as communication and leadership training, which are crucial to professional life.

Communication skills

Communication and language blocks have been major barriers for SL designers in reaching and interacting with overseas brand designers and buyers; hence communication and language training is a key component of the industry professional development programmes, as seen in Table 2. This training also highlights the emotional aspect of professional development, by developing an understanding of different mindsets, working with different hierarchies in different age groups, and

building deep empathic relationships, all of which are vital factors in designers' careers.

Training of this nature can only be gained through the industry. One manager noted:

It's about relationships, building credibility and proving capability. It's about building a very deep empathic— we talk about empathic design ... how can you talk about empathic design if you can't even form an empathic relationship ... [U]nderstanding the brand and the company that you work for from a manufacturing perspective (Company A2, Participant DM1).

Creating empathic relationships is at the forefront of the apparel value chain, and the designers acquire an understanding of consumer culture and lifestyle through their interactions with Western brands, retailers, designers and consumers in order to produce empathic designs. The designs express consumer identities. Company A2 design manager describes 'empathy' as skill of designing.

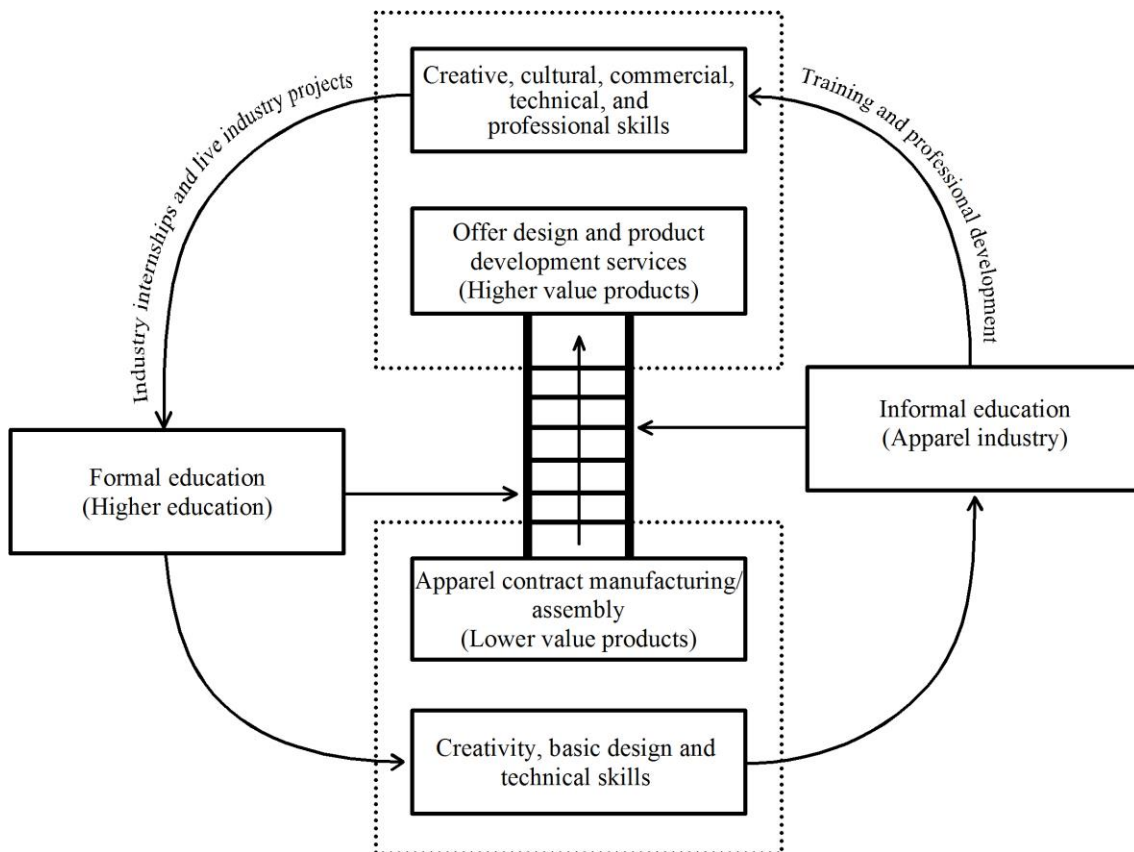
Leadership training

The tradition of undertaking leadership training was well established in Company B and the training programmes varied from basic to advanced. As Table 2 indicates, leadership training was one of the most common training programmes undertaken by participants. The aims of different leadership training programmes were varied, from developing skills of time, task and people management, to fostering the next generation of leaders and promoting strategic innovations for companies to develop their long-term plans. One designer noted why leadership training is a key element of a company's ambition to develop their designers capabilities, saying that by 2020, "I feel that we might even have different teams, closer to the customers (i.e. Western brands and retailers) than where we are right now" (Company B2, Participant D2). Development of leadership skills is crucial for them to interact with customers and extend designer responsibilities in the future.

Discussion

This study proposes the nexus between these two forms of education as a ‘fashion education ecosystem’ that has emerged in the SL apparel industry (Figure 2) and that is developing designer skills during the industry’s transition. Formal fashion education develops designers’ basic design and technical skills as well as their creativity, while the industry prepares them (both during their higher education and employment) to understand consumer culture and lifestyle, as well as the commercial constraints on creativity.

Figure 2: Fashion education ecosystem framework



This study proposes that this nexus between formal and informal education has been critical for developing the fashion education ecosystem framework (Figure 2). As Figure 2 illustrates, the SL apparel industry is moving from apparel assembly to offering design and product development services in a significant industrial transition.

This involves an industry shift in production from lower value products to higher value products. SL designers' skills are developed by higher education together with the industry. As undergraduates, their higher education initially provides basic design skills, technical skills, and creativity while in later years of the course, industry internships and live industry projects provide student designers with glimpses of live industry experience (see industry-education connections illustrated in Figure 2). When they enter the workforce, the industry provides continual training and professional development for the designers in practice, strengthening their creative, cultural, commercial, technical, and professional skills. Therefore, the designers are able to overcome the cultural blocks of their geographical disconnection from the sites of consumption of Western brands and retailers. These close ties between higher education and the industry reveal a fashion education ecosystem which is specific to the SL apparel industry. The two forms of education thus work together in achieving a common goal of producing competent designers who support the industry.

Designers' learning challenges

As evidence from the study affirmed, some students find it difficult to undertake fashion studies that involve a higher level of creative thinking than they experienced in their secondary education. Their learning challenges in formal education suggested that they require openness to learn, and to transfer practices and habits from their previous studies to fashion education. A collaborative approach between higher education institutions and the industry occurs through internships and develops graduates' basic design skills, technical skills and creativity to overcome learning challenges.

In terms of the industry-preparedness of graduates, the evidence of this study indicate that practical research projects integrated with live industry improved the quality of graduates and attuned them to the requirements of the industry. Formal

fashion education prepares graduates to receive the training and professional development offered by the industry through workshops, travel and overseas internships during their employment. The results of this study indicate that formal fashion education, and training and professional development in the SL industry (both during higher education and employment) are well connected to each other and thus prepare designers well to fit in with the industry and meet the demands placed upon designers.

This study has highlighted that travel and overseas internships are the main form of designers' fashion exposure and of knowledge transmission between key fashion cities in the world and the apparel manufacturing destinations such as SL that develop products for Western brands and retailers. This exposure creates new business opportunities through empathic relationships between SL designers and Western brand designers, retailers and buyers. However, the evidence in this study affirms that geographical disconnectedness and cultural blocks have an impact on SL designers' understanding of fashion consumer cultures and lifestyle. Therefore, designers require continued learning and exposure to the consumer cultures of the Western brands in order to understand consumers' needs. Meeting with real life consumers through travel and overseas internships makes it easier for them to familiarise themselves with consumer culture and lifestyles, and hence to overcome cultural blocks. The informal education within the industry plays a vital role in this process, as fashion exposure of this nature is otherwise out of reach for students within the public university system. According to the participants' reflections, fashion students in SL find it difficult to comprehend the cultural contexts of fashion for this reason. However, the evidence of this study indicates that industry internships (during higher education) provide opportunities for students, to some extent, to overcome challenges in understanding the cultural contexts of fashion.

Professional development in the industry

The results indicate that training and professional development in the SL industry stretch across creative, cultural, commercial, technical, and professional skills development, extending the basic design skills, technical skills, and creativity nurtured by higher education. The industry provides designers training for their individual ambitions and abilities, thereby fostering specific aspects of their professional development.

The findings of the study reveal that communication and language blocks are major barriers for SL designers interacting with Western brand designers, retailers, and buyers; unsurprisingly these areas are therefore prioritised in industry training and professional development programmes. ‘Empathy’ emerged from this study as an important capability in designers’ professional development. Understanding and working with people in different hierarchies and of different ages, and building deep empathic relationships, are skills that enable SL designers to obtain higher value fashion knowledge from Western brand designers, retailers, and buyers that could otherwise not be obtained. These high level, abstract skills are chiefly developed through the training and professional development provided by the industry.

The industry identifies leadership ability as one of the important skills for individuals to develop in order to succeed. It is clear from the participant interviews that the culture of undertaking leadership training is well established in the SL apparel industry. Industry higher management expectations of different leadership training programmes were varied, from developing skills of time, task and people management, to fostering the next generation of leaders who can guide the strategic innovations of the companies. The leadership training of designers therefore extends their responsibilities

in making strategic decisions on aligning design and product development as a valuable function in providing a full package service in the industry's transition.

Creative and commercial skills

The results of this study reveal that formal fashion education is a time of creativity and play, unfettered by commercial restraints. Such attributes of creativity often helped designers' success in the industry. Designers reflected on their experiences at university, looking back on the naivety of their views of the industry. They highlighted the need for a balance between creativity and commercial knowledge through formal fashion education, which would allow them to adapt more easily to the industry. Live industry exposure through internships and industry projects incorporated into formal fashion education improve the commercial competencies of graduates, as this study has revealed. Successful industry collaborations through live industry projects often lead to the industry taking inspiration from students' work and identifying successful students to offer employment after their graduation.

While formal fashion education allows graduates to develop their creativity, basic design skills, and industry preparedness, the necessary training and professional development (Table 2) provided by the industry advances designers' creative, cultural, commercial, technical, and professional skills.

Concluding remarks

This study presents a new perspective on the role that fashion education may play in industrial upgrading within the SL apparel industry. Formal fashion education primarily lays the first foundations for developing designers' creativity, basic design skills and technical skills, while the apparel industry expose them to consumer culture, consumer lifestyles and commercially viable designing for brands and buyers. The combination of

these two forms of education have been instrumental in developing the diverse skill sets required of competent designers when offering design and product development services. We propose that a ‘fashion education ecosystem’ has developed in this context within SL that has supported the industry as it upgrades.

The results of the study also reveal the challenge of designers’ lack of understanding of fashion consumers’ culture and lifestyle during their formal fashion education due to the lack of exposure to the apparel industry and to the world of fashion. The designers in this study identified the challenges of balancing creativity and commercial constraints in the interplay between their formal studies and the industry. They only began to develop this capacity through informal education in the industry, which developed a wide range of creative, cultural, commercial, technical, and professional skills, crucial to their design practice.

The SL apparel industry’s success in developing a fashion education ecosystem in this context provides a model for other developing countries that seek industrial upgrading from apparel assembly to providing design and product development services in the apparel value chain. In particular, this might be useful to other apparel manufacturing countries in the Asian region, such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Vietnam, which have similar strengths and share some of the same industry attributes in the apparel value chain. However, key challenges still exist for the SL apparel industry designers, due to their lack of exposure to fashion knowledge — a lack that they are addressing in a number of positive ways such as education and industry proactive collaboration, and building credible relationships with Western brands, retailers and buyers.

References

- Acevedo, G. L., & Robertson, R. (2012). *Sewing success?: Employment, wages and poverty following the end of the multi-fibre arrangement*. Washington DC: The World Bank.
- AoD. (2017). Fashion & Textile Design. Retrieved from <https://www.aod.lk/pages/fashion-textile-design>
- Bennett, N., Dunne, E., & Carre, C. (1999). Patterns of core and generic skill provision in higher education. *Higher Education*, 37(1), 71-93. doi:0.1023/A:1003451727126
- Berg, B. L. (2001). *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences* (4th ed.). Allyn & Bacon.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. doi:10.1191/1478088706qp063oa
- Bridgstock, R., & Cunningham, S. (2016). Creative labour and graduate outcomes: implications for higher education and cultural policy. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 22(1), 10-26. doi:10.1080/10286632.2015.1101086
- Bridgstock, R., Goldsmith, B., Rodgers, J., & Hearn, G. (2015). Creative graduate pathways within and beyond the creative industries. *Journal of Education and Work*, 28(4), 333-345. doi:10.1080/13639080.2014.997682
- Cattaneo, O., Gereffi, G., & Staritz, C. (2010). *Global value chains in a postcrisis world: A development perspective*. Washington, D.C: World Bank.
- Cohen, D., & Crabtree, B. (2006). Qualitative research guidelines project. Retrieved from <http://www.qualres.org/HomeSemi-3629.html>
- Conner, M. (2006). Learn, Unlearn and Relearn. *Fast Company*. Retrieved from <https://www.fastcompany.com/919166/learn-unlearn-and-relearn>
- Cooms, P. H., & Ahmed, M. (1974). *Attacking rural poverty: How nonformal education can help*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Craik, J. (2009). *Fashion*. Oxford, UK: Berg Publishers.
- Crosbie, R. (2005). Learning the soft skills of leadership. *Industrial and Commercial Training*, 37(1), 45-51. doi:10.1108/00197850510576484
- EDB. (2016). Sri Lankan Apparel Export Performance at a glance. Retrieved from <http://www.srilankabusiness.com/apparel/apparel-export-performance.html>
- Edwards, J. A., & Lampert, M. D. (2014). *Talking data: Transcription and coding in discourse research*. New Jersey: Psychology Press.
- Faerm, S. (2014). Industry and academia. *Cuadernos del Centro de Estudios en Diseño y Comunicación*. 48, 107-112. Retrieved from http://fido.palermo.edu/servicios_dyc/publicacionesdc/vista/detalle_articulo.php?id_libro=462&id_articulo=9355
- Kelegama, S. (2009). Ready-made garment exports from Sri Lanka. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 39(4), 579-596. doi:10.1080/00472330903076875
- Kozar, J. M., & Connell, K. Y. H. (2015). The fashion internship experience: Identifying learning outcomes in preparing students for the 'real world'. *International Journal of Fashion Design, Technology and Education*, 8(1), 3-11. doi:10.1080/17543266.2014.974690
- Loker, S. (2015). Sri Lanka: A Model of Sustainable Apparel Industry Initiatives. In J. Hethorn, C. Ulasewicz, & W. McDonough (Eds.), *Sustainable fashion: what's next? : a conversation about issues, practices and possibilities* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Fairchild Books.

- Lopez-Acevedo, G., & Raymond, R. (2016). *Stitches to riches?: Apparel employment, trade, and economic development in South Asia*. World Bank Publications. doi:10.1596/978-1-4648-0813-5
- Matthews, N. (2011). Transition or translation?: Thinking through media and cultural studies students' experiences after graduation. *Cultural Studies Review*, 17(2), 28-48. doi:10.5130/csr.v17i2.2003
- Ohly, S., Sonnentag, S., & Pluntke, F. (2006). Routinization, work characteristics and their relationships with creative and proactive behaviors. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 27(3), 257-279. doi:10.1002/job.376
- Rae, D. (2009). Connecting entrepreneurial and action learning in student-initiated new business ventures: The case of SPEED. *Action Learning: Research and Practice*, 6(3), 289-303. doi:10.1080/14767330903301799
- Robinson, J. R., Freeburg, B. W., & Workman, J. (2013). Family environment and creativity in fashion design students. *International Journal of Fashion Design, Technology and Education*, 6(3), 200-209. doi:10.1080/17543266.2013.835875
- Senanayake, R. (2013). *Fashion design for the emerging creative economy of Sri Lanka*. (Master of Arts thesis, RMIT University, Melbourne). Retrieved from <https://researchbank.rmit.edu.au/eserv/rmit:160577/Senanayake.pdf>
- Throsby, D. (2007, January). *Modelling the creative/cultural industries*. Seminar on New Directions in Research: Substance, Method and Critique, Edinburgh, Scotland. Retrieved from http://www.acpculturesplus.eu/sites/default/files/2015/03/27/lse_creaindseminar_davidthrosby_2007.pdf
- University of Moratuwa. (2015). Graduation Fashion Show 2015. Colombo, Sri Lanka: University of Moratuwa.
- Weller, S. (2007). Fashion as viscous knowledge: fashion's role in shaping trans-national garment production. *Journal of Economic Geography*, 7(1), 39-66. doi:10.1093/jeg/1bl015
- Wijayasiri, J., & Dissanayake, J. (2008). The ending of the multi-fibre agreement and innovation in Sri Lankan textile and clothing industry: Trade and innovation project - case study no. 3, *OECD Trade Policy Papers*, 75. Paris: OECD Publishing. doi:10.1787/240487016735.
- Wohlin, C., Aurum, A., Angelis, L., Phillips, L., Dittrich, Y., Gorschek, T., ... Low, G. (2012). The success factors powering industry-academia collaboration. *IEEE Software*, 29(2), 67-73. doi:10.1109/MS.2011.92
- Wright, J., Cushman, L., & Nicholson, A. (2002). Reconciling industry and academia: Perspectives on the apparel design curriculum. *Education + Training*, 44(3), 122-128. doi:10.1108/00400910210424300
- Zmuda, A. (2009). Leap of faith: Take the plunge into a 21st-century conception of learning. *School Library Monthly*, 26(3), 16-18.