



Magdalena Wesoły

Doctoral School of the University of the National Education Commission, Krakow, Poland

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-4783-4061>

Fashion for Women? Exploring Women’s Career Paths in the Fashion System

Abstract: The article explores the paradox of underrepresentation of women in the leadership positions in the fashion industry. Despite the large number of women in lower-tier positions in the industry, higher positions are mainly held by men. By the analysis of data collected through qualitative interviews with female managers from fashion companies, combined with interviews published in leading fashion press, the research aims to explore the differences in career opportunities for women and men. The analysis is grounded in Pierre Bourdieu’s field theory, which provides a framework for demonstrating the relationship between position in the field of fashion and potential career prospects.

Keywords: leadership, gender equality, fashion, underrepresentation, women

Introduction

Fashion is one of the largest and most profitable industries globally, hiring directly more than five million people in the fashion value chain (European Commission, 2024), with the global apparel and footwear market in 2024 accounting for \$1.79 trillion (Uniform Market, 2024). Many researchers highlight the struggle of the sector with addressing the UN sustainable goals, particularly environmental or social responsibility. Water and air pollution, toxic waste and the landfill of clothes (Greenpeace, 2022), as well as poor working conditions (Bick et al., 2018), pay disparity (Global Fashion Agenda, PWC, 2024), and lack of inclusivity or gender

equality (Stokes, 2017), are just some of the issues that the industry has been accused of. This article will focus on the fashion sector challenge with addressing the gender imbalance and women's representation (or rather the lack of it) in senior management and C-suite positions in leading fashion brands.

Due to fashion's associations with beauty, creativity and celebrity culture, many graduates perceive positions in fashion companies as "dream jobs," offering flexibility, freedom and numerous creative opportunities (Moon, 2020). At the same time, the lack of stability and unequal pay (Global Fashion Agenda, PWC, 2024), high expectations towards personal image (Entwistle, 2006), and lack of diversity in key sector positions (Conor et al., 2015) are constantly discussed in media and academic research.

Many female managers have raised the issue of a "glass ceiling" in the industry (Acker, 2003; Titkow, 2003), claiming that higher, C-suite positions are often unattainable for women in fashion corporations, as the industry is male-dominated, and top positions are secured by men (MBS, 2024). Various industries are struggling with similar diversity challenges in higher management positions, including academia (Alfano et al., 2025), the entrepreneurship sector (Rietveld et al., 2022) and the technological industry (Naseviciute, Juceviciene, 2024). While in the latter sectors this imbalance is often linked to the low number of women pursuing STEM degrees and the lack of role models in the sector (Tal et al., 2024), which may discourage young women from choosing such career paths, the situation in fashion and other creative industries is quite different. There is a large overrepresentation of women in Cultural and Creative Industries' (CCI) degrees, with female fashion degree graduates constituting over 85% of students (SNAAP, 2022), and clothing sector professions employing more than 71% of women (Euratex, 2024).

Fashion, like other CCI industries, through the work culture based on flexibility, "gig economy" (short-term, task-based employment), and project-based work (Pulignano, 2024), places the responsibility of career development on the employees themselves. Freelancers, contractors and creative professionals working in the industry are often hired per project and are expected to be entrepreneurial with a "can-do attitude" available on short deadlines (Gill, 2014), eager to fight for new positions or work tasks. Unpaid internships, irregular working hours, and competition for a limited number of full-time positions create an environment in which not everyone can succeed, while the accumulation of strategic networks as well as social and cultural capital may play a significant role in achieving success. Yet, some researchers, including Gander (2018), argue that "symbolic capital" plays a major role in the "career game," and the career progress is rarely a meritocratic one.

In this article, therefore, the aim is to explore the paradox of women's underrepresentation in the fashion industry and to investigate how access to capital impacts their career paths. The aim of this work is therefore to:

- identify and diagnose key features of the fashion field and their role in the leadership homogeneity;
- explore the role of capital accumulation in career progression in the field, particularly the importance of the social, cultural and symbolic capital;
- investigate how this field limits individual agency, and what role habitus and symbolic violence play in reinforcing gender inequality in the industry.

Pierre Bourdieu's Theory of Practice (1972) provides a theoretical framework for this work. Not only has this theory supported researchers in career progress analysis (Brooks et al., 2024; Iellatchitch et al., 2003), but it has also offered a foundation for understanding gender inequality, considering the role of habitus and symbolic violence in reproducing inequalities.

The research is partially built on the analysis of the interviews documented in the press (Business of Fashion), particularly conversations with female managers from fashion companies, and is complemented by in-depth interviews with four managers from fashion companies.

Literature Review

Gender inequality in sociological perspective. Some researchers discuss the concept of subjectivity in relation to the term of identity, as it encompasses “our ways of engaging with and making sense of what we experience through our lived experiences” (Billet, 2010, para. 16), a concept of the self, and set of procedures, beliefs and values that are partially conscious, partially unconscious (Billet, 2010). Others explore subjectivity in relation to agency, as research showcases that subjectivity can be investigated in relation to power, challenging authorities, and negotiating work practices (Somerville, 2007). As gender is an important part of identity, gender inequality is what might impact shaping and enacting employees' subjectivity. Workplace culture and stereotypical notions of masculinity and femininity can result in limited access to resources (Acker, 1990), as well as gendered divisions of labour and tasks, thereby influencing employees' choices, opportunities, and, ultimately, their subjectivity.

Career choices may also be influenced by perceptions of gender and social roles. While one can function in society in several roles (Merton, 1968), some of these roles may be conflicting, particularly those performed in professional (such as employment) and private (such as parenting) contexts. Expectations towards a role fulfilment are implied on both the internal level (through self-perception), but also on the societal level, with general perception on how those roles should be fulfilled. This is particularly difficult for women, for whom “cultural scripts” – i.e. expectations

towards identities and role performance – create “greater identity conflict,” considering, for instance, their professional roles and the roles they take on as parents (Park, 2019).

As Acker states (1990), promotions and moving up the career ladder are reserved for those who are committed to their employment and therefore do not split their time between other responsibilities. In this context, women cannot be ideal workers or be promoted to higher positions, as their home and family responsibilities lessen their value, resulting in them receiving lower-tier jobs. This view of gender inequality in Acker’s perspective is scaled to the level of an organisation as a whole. She perceives an organisation as a collection of processes and practices which are not gender neutral, and a place where gender is embedded in structure through division of labour (which results in men occupying higher positions), constructions and reproduction of symbols that enforce male dominations and organisational logic, to name a few. Gander (2018) argues that symbolic violence also plays a part in career progress, and the “unconscious and taken-for-granted attitudes” can reproduce inequalities leading to the underrepresentation of women.

Those theories could shed light on the paradox of women’s position in the fashion field: while research demonstrates that women often have similar qualifications to men (Doherty, 2010), and those in mid-management positions possess the same amount of economic capital, they are largely underrepresented in the industry’s top positions.

Gender inequality in fashion. Gender inequality in leadership is a sociological phenomenon widely present in industries globally. It can take the form of unequal pay for the same job or unequal treatment, for instance lack or difficult access to resources or career advancement opportunities (Lorber, 2001) or discrimination, diminishing of achievement, etc. Various sources define it in a different manner, yet what all of them have in common are the structural and systematic barriers that prevent women from accessing the same conditions, pay and opportunities as men in the same job positions (Son Hing, 2023). Researchers have shown through multiple cases that mixed teams and diverse leadership improve financial performance (Badal, Harter, 2013; Galbreath, 2018), while employing more women in leadership offers “[a] greater innovation level, healthier cultures, and stronger performance” (McKinsey, 2024, p. 4). Yet some companies still struggle to implement Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DE&I) strategies or even apply laws that require parity in leadership. In the technological and entrepreneurial industry, for instance, the lack of female representation across leadership is usually explained by the small number of students enrolled in STEM fields (Meoli et al., 2024; Piva et al., 2022), the lack of role models in the industry (Tal et al., 2024), but also difficulties in accessing resources and persistent stereotypes (Casad et al., 2020).

Against this backdrop, though, creative industries, and particularly the fashion industry, stand out. Cultural and Creative Industries (CCI) are dominated by a large

representation of women, degrees related to design and arts are dominated by female students, and therefore, the issues with gender representation in the higher positions in those industries pose a different question. Fashion as an example of these industries represents a part of the creative sector, which, due to its association with creativity, design, brands and influencer culture (Moon, 2020, p. 7), attracts a large number of young women to its job market. Currently, only in the US, 298 fashion schools are offering different fashion programs. Young women dominate those degrees, with 82% of students at Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT, 2023) and over 76% of students at the London College of Fashion (UAL, 2022). In 2022, 85% of graduates of American leading fashion schools were women (DataUsa, 2024). With unrealistic expectations and a “romanticised working culture” (Moon, 2020, p. 7), the number of enrolled students grows. The majority of them start their career working in retail and expect to climb the ladder and join managerial positions in the future (Shade, Jacobson, 2015).

Unfortunately, the majority of them stay in low-tier positions. According to McKinsey report (2018), a growing number of high positions have been occupied and passed on to men, while women hold only 14% of higher management positions. The recent British Council of Fashion Report (2024) states that despite the increase in women in the boards of fashion companies, the industry's most senior strategic roles are still dominated by men. An analysis by MBS and British Fashion Council (2024, p. 12) found that “only three of the top-twenty fashion groups (which generate a combined \$280bn in revenue) are led by a woman – and only three have a woman in the role of Chair.”

Fashion companies' internal structure provides a variety of professions, ranging from sewing and sourcing textiles to design and retailing, up to influencers, branding or PR. Due to the complexity of the sector and global challenges that the fashion industry is struggling to address, hiring new employees becomes a significant challenge. Managers and owners often highlight the need for employees who can “hit the ground running,” without additional training (MBS, 2024), and therefore justify hiring similar persons or candidates with similar experience or educational background for the vacancy. Moreover, some researchers claim that due to the large uncertainty of the market, fashion makers follow stereotypes and conventions to address this issue (Mears, 2010).

For exploring the challenge of gender inequality in the field of work, including but not limited to the fashion sector, Pierre Bourdieu's theory might serve as a useful framework.

Bourdieu's Theory of Practice. Bourdieu's notions of *field*, *capital* and *habitus* have been widely used in the context of career progress research. Access to capital is linked in research to career growth, and researchers have explored the career paths of graduates (Brooks et al., 2024) or the roles of social networks in career creation (Lee, 2013) through the *Theory of Practice* lens. Bourdieu's key notions

help to understand what, aside from excellence or effort, impacts the trajectory of the career path. Though initially Bourdieu's theory was applied to explore inequalities in the French educational systems, its universal applicability allowed for the exploration of gender inequality in, for instance, sports (Jeffrey, 2024), academia (Gander, 2018; Heffernan, 2023), entrepreneurship (Meliou, Ozbilgin, 2024) and others, helping to understand how individual experiences from early life (*habitus*) can transform one's approach to career, their confidence level and expectations for career growth.

Bourdieu perceives the *field* as a space where individual actors play in order to secure position and power (Bourdieu, 1984), and also position themselves in relation to each other (Brooks et al., 2024). Bourdieu borrowed the term from the football game and applied it to various social contexts. *Field* is a term which can help describe complex interactions between actors in a particular environment. Within society, there are a number of fields, and each field (e.g., academia, politics, education, sports) has its own rules, expectations, norms and strategies to achieve success.

Habitus, in the football metaphor that Bourdieu uses, refers to different experiences, norms and standards which "players" bring to the game and how this shapes who they are and how they play the game. *Habitus* can therefore be seen as a form of identity (Elhakim, 2024) or a "second nature." Depending on their circumstances, background, and personal history, an unconscious set of personal standards, norms and values is being shaped and can impact one's way of thinking, acting and feeling. *Habitus* is interconnected with the field – habitus is often produced and shaped by the field (Gander, 2018), and one's actions in the field are shaped by *habitus* and *doxa*.

Capital is a "currency" for which actors compete in a field. Not all actors begin with a similar "amount" of capital, and those with more accumulated capital can advance their position in the field. There are different types of capital, including economic, cultural and social. Some researchers also name symbolic and linguistic ones. The amount of capital, according to Bourdieu, can "dictate" one's position in the "field" or social structures, and impact their behaviour (Xu, Jiang, 2020). While economic capital is related to financial wealth, meaning salaries, wages, assets and savings (Bourdieu, 1972), social capital is related to relationships and connections one has built. It is a sum of networks of contacts which can facilitate entering and acquiring jobs in the field or progressing into a career (Elhakim, 2024).

Cultural capital is a more complex concept, as it includes tangible and intangible forms, or rather "embodied," "institutionalised" and "objectified" forms. Institutionalised state can take the form of academic degrees and certifications, objectified state is a form of cultural objects (art pieces, books, etc), and embodied state – a more intangible one – can be acquired through attending high-profile schools, learning languages, extracurricular classes, attending high-profile events, and others.

As Gander (2018), following Bourdieu, states, symbolic capital might be the most valuable capital when looking from a career path perspective, as it

encompasses recognition, prestige, and a positive reputation. Symbolic capital is a field-specific capital; “a form of legitimacy or respect granted according to what is valued in the field” (Jones et al., 2015, p. 122). In entrepreneurship, symbolic capital might look like presenting an image connected with “the willingness to take risks or change the order” or ability to generate profits and build wealth (De Clercq, Voronov, 2009); in country music it can take a form of “authenticity” (Peterson, 2005), while in fashion, as Entwistle and Rocamora (2006) write, discussing the fashion show field, it might be related to “being known and influential player.”

Symbolic capital is therefore intangible, a form of recognition and legitimation of other forms of capital, a socially constructed process through which value is assigned to capitals (Doherty, Dickmann, 2009). More importantly though, symbolic capital represents the ability of a person to impose a vision of organisation of the field: “to control the symbolic and material organization of a society” (Meisenhelder, 2000, p. 5). As Doherty and Dickmann (2009, p. 303) continue, “those recognized as legitimate and accepted can institute taken-for-granted ways of doing things which then become accepted as common practice.”

Subjectivity as the acquisition of capital. Bourdieu's understanding of the field as a hierarchical space where players compete against each other can be implemented to explore industries and work environments. Fashion, like other creative industries, despite its egalitarian and democratic image, is indeed a hierarchical and exclusive field with gatekeepers limiting access to it. The labour market in the creative industries, including fashion, attracts a large number of employees, and with limited opportunities, making it an extremely competitive one. In order to stand out in the market, compete with others for new positions, and gain more prestigious (often meaning more creative) roles, one has to strategically build their own capital, as its accumulation can be a form of moving up the career ladder. As Bourdieu states, “the work of acquisition [of capital] is work on oneself (self-improvement), an effort that presupposes a personal cost [...], an investment, above all of the time, but also of that socially constituted form of libido, libido sciendi, with all the privation, renunciation, and sacrifice that it may entail” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 283).

The fashion industry's transition to the production of “value” instead of “goods or products” (Lazzarato, 1996) has shifted the expectations towards the sector's employees. Lazzarato, in his observations of the transformation of the Italian creative industries (including fashion), highlights how those new forms of “immaterial labour” were grounded in worker's “personality and subjectivity”, often depending on management of social relations, communication skills and ability to build networks, as those capabilities were believed to be essential in the postindustrial economy (Lazzarato, 1996).

What Lazzarato suggests, therefore, is that building social and symbolic capital is one of the key elements in creative industries, as for many of those professionals, work often comes through networks, connections or “word of mouth.”

Researchers constantly highlight that networks can be a key element of finding, sustaining and progressing in careers in the unpredictable and unstable creative labour market (Lee, 2013). A high level of social capital has also been linked to gaining a “competitive advantage” in the firms (Marti, 2004). Not only does the number of networks and relationships matter, but also the characteristics and positions of people with whom one builds ties are important. Surprisingly, as Lee (2013) writes, weak ties, meaning those with extended networks rather than close family and friends, can deliver more benefits in the labour market, as data showcases, some of the job opportunities come to the employees exactly through those contacts. Yet this can be translated into constant expectations of attending industry-related events and networking meetings, being present on social media and building a “digital community,” as those relationships can play a role in career progress.

Traditionally, acquiring institutionalised cultural capital, meaning education and higher-level degrees, was related to a strong position in the industry (*field*). Despite the increase in the education level of the general population, cultural capital still supports societal hierarchisation (Michael, 2017). Women dominate fashion-related degrees and short courses in prestigious universities in order to stand out in the labour market. Attending recognised fashion schools, such as Central Saint Martins College of Art in London, Istituto Marangoni in Italy or the Fashion Institute of Technology in the US is also considered additional support to the person’s reputation and position in the field. However, embedded cultural capital might be even more important in creative industries, as being aware of cultural shifts or popular culture trends is considered “a must.” As fashion is considered a combination of art, design and a highly aesthetic field, which draws its inspiration from theatre, opera, photography or art, embodied cultural capital – taste or lifestyle – is almost an industry standard. “Passion for fashion” often becomes a requirement in job postings, and advice for graduates often includes events and “observing” the culture scene as a tool for being “up to date” with news in the industry, therefore “understanding the rules of the game” or “being comfortable in these environments and situations” (*habitus*) could change one’s position in the field.

Both cultural capital and *habitus* can play a role in reproducing gender inequality. In *fields* (industries, workplaces, etc.), cultural capital associated with the dominant group is often rewarded, thus reproducing power dynamics and barriers (Gander, 2018), while *habitus*, “internalised externalities” (Bourdieu, 1979) or “embodiment of cultural norms and behaviours based on personal background” (Brooks et al., 2024, p. 20) can shape one’s attitudes, behaviours and perspective on the labour market and career possibilities.

Methods. The aim of this research is to explore the paradox of the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in fashion companies. For this work, qualitative research methods have been selected. Qualitative research requires at least two different sources of evidence, therefore two methods of

conducting the studies have been selected: desk research, including the analysis of press interviews, and in-depth interviews (IDI) with previous or current managers from the fashion industry.

For the purpose of this article, the term *managerial staff* includes employees currently or previously working in fashion companies' offices (not manufacturers) and holding positions across all areas of the fashion business, including sales, management, merchandising, and others. In-depth interviews with four female mid-managers, working in the fashion sector for between four and six years, were conducted online and transcribed. In-depth interviews, though time-consuming, can provide rich data about a person's experience, their openness and flexibility provide opportunities for the researcher to explore broader areas than quantitative or structured interviews (Jennings, 2005), as well as a diversity of perspectives on the chosen topic (Johnson, 2002). This is particularly interesting in the context of gender inequality, as qualitative interviews may showcase contrasting attitudes and feelings about the discussed phenomena (Busetto et al., 2020). Purposive sampling was used in order to identify the interviewees who match the chosen criteria, that is, role in the large fashion company, seniority in the position, experience of transition in the role or position with the company.

Written articles were collected from publicly available digital versions of the *Business of Fashion* media outlet. The articles were written by Sophie Soar between 2020 and 2024 under the *Workplace and Talent* section. The series titled "How I Became" included a description of five career paths of senior managers in various fashion companies. All the articles were accessed in February 2025, at the same time when qualitative interviews were conducted. The material was complemented by a similar article about a career path in fashion, under a different series called "How I Got This Job," written in 2019 by the *Business of Fashion* team. The data was enriched by recent (maximum three years of publication) reports published by renewed research institutions investigating diversity, inclusion and equality in fashion companies.

As both forms of data consist of interviews, the articles retrieved from the *Business of Fashion* platform will be either described as secondary sources or secondary data, and/or names will be used as referred in the article, while empirically conducted interviews will be marked by the letter R, which stands for a respondent with a number or will be referred to as primary source or primary data.

Data analysis. All the collected data were subject to thematic analysis. The thematic analysis allows for the recognition and identification of patterns appearing within the data and connecting them to overarching themes (Braun, Clarke, 2006). It can be applied to both document analysis and in-depth interviews. Both collected interviews and transcribed data were coded and labelled with a description of the content. Content analysis of the material allowed for the identification of codes and categories from the experiences of women managers and the barriers they face in career progress.

Discussion and Findings

Subjectivity and accumulation of capital. The qualitative interviews started with questions regarding choosing fashion as a career. All the interviewees (respondents and BoF speakers) highlighted that the career choice was grounded in their interest and “passion for the industry,” whether this means clothing, cultural association or the creative side that it includes. For some of the interviewees, interests were more directed towards the creative/design side (like sewing, pattern making, drawing), for others – towards the managerial and strategic side. Two interviewees and two BoF respondents entered the industry also as a second career, being dissatisfied or disappointed in their initial choices, showing that women enter the sector through diverse paths, sometimes different than initially planned, yet often grounded in CCI.

Respondents have confirmed what interviewees in *Business of Fashion* have discussed in reference to understanding the role of capital in a career. Interviewed managers have emphasised the role social capital plays in progressing a career in the industry, as in creative industries, connections are a crucial element in advancing careers. Social capital can be built through networking (Lee, 2013) or mentoring, as well as through sustaining and expanding social connections from the industry, strategically building a community, attending professional events or connecting with industry recruiters and headhunters. Three of the BoF interviewees have highlighted those connections as potential source of employment and career progression. Social capital is crucial in both situations: when looking to enter or re-enter the industry, in lower as well as higher-level positions. Internships and entry-level jobs, as respondents confirmed, can be secured through gatekeepers. One of the interviewees said that to secure their first positions, they have reached out to the university network, some interviewees connected via social media or personal connections with hiring staff of companies in order to discuss roles. Some respondents also mentioned referral programs in their companies, where one can suggest potential candidates for the roles through internal systems.

The data suggested that interviewees from both primary and secondary sources strategically build and maintain their social capital. One of them highlighted the advice they received from their manager: “Everybody says that: be careful. It’s a small world. [...] make sure that you maintain a perfect reputation” (R2). Ashley (BoF) also highlighted this, stating, “In relation to people, the fashion industry is quite small and [so it’s important] to manage your reputation and have it precede you in a positive way. Your peers today can be your bosses tomorrow.” All of the interviewees also mentioned that in their early careers, managers also encouraged them to progress, and take on new roles, therefore a strong relationship with them was an important element of the career progression. Supervisors and managers can also provide references for candidates for the following roles.

Interviewees highlighted that while early in their career, they were proactive in securing further roles and promotions. Respondents mentioned that after the end of their initial contracts and/or initial timeframes of their roles or when they worked for what they considered “a long period of time” at the lower-tier positions, they were proactive in asking their supervisors about possibilities of extensions, new roles opening or possibilities of moving higher up. In all of the cases, this resulted in their future positions.

Value of capital/ Misrecognition of cultural capital. There are multiple forms of capital, including economic, social and cultural. What is essential in defining the capital value is its recognition by those in control of the field (Moore, 2008). Though women actively accumulate cultural and institutional capital, and approach consciously and strategically the choice of academic education, research showcases that the degree in the field might be surprisingly irrelevant to career progress.

More than 85% of students at fashion schools are women (DataUsa, 2024). As data collected from *Business of Fashion* suggests, women also attend short courses in the renowned fashion school when they consider re-training or entering the field after working in other creative industries. Respondents did attend higher education, with three of them attending degrees directly related to fashion. They have chosen those degrees, as they wanted to work in the industry and consider this a natural path when choosing this career. One of the respondents also stated that not only did the degree matter when considering a role in the fashion industry, but the name and the prestige of the school can also play a significant role.

While limited job ads for senior managerial positions list experience in a similar role or environment as a requirement, those applying for junior positions should possess a “passion for fashion or luxury environment,” which can be interpreted or linked to pursuing fashion education. Yet, the LinkedIn analytical section of four major fashion key players’ profiles (Kering, LVMH, Inditex, H&M) showcases that “Management and Administration” is a degree held by the largest number of employees, while the most common skill used in employment is customer service skills. “Fashion and Apparel” degrees are often listed as the second or third most common degrees among employees. Respondents and interviewees confirmed that indeed they have learnt that a degree in fashion is not a crucial element in securing employment in the fashion industry, due to the complexity of the industry and diversity of roles the sector offers, and often referred to peers or colleagues who worked in their workplaces without a fashion degree. Moreover, data showcases that the second industry hiring the largest number of graduates of fashion and apparel degrees in the US is education, mainly elementary and primary schools (DataUsa, 2024).

Additionally, an analysis of the C-suite and directors’ career paths presented in *Business of Fashion* interviews showcases that their background is grounded in the creative industries, but not in the fashion industry *per se*. They have often worked and gained their experience in the cultural or creative sector, and have secured their

entry to the fashion and luxury job market through connections by either expanding their current roles and adding fashion and luxury companies as their clients, or, for instance, through working in other roles, for instance as assistants.

Findings also indicate that additional formal certifications, courses or training in the chosen fields were not crucial or highlighted by companies as important for promotional purposes, at least at their level, as one of the respondents mentioned. Though respondents as well as BoF interviewees point out that women are involved in educating themselves about the industry in a less formal way, for instance via reading media outlets or watching documentaries about the industry, only one respondent highlighted that their company expected employees to complete additional courses in order to progress to managerial roles. Therefore, acquiring educational capital might not be directly linked to success in this field, and institutional cultural capital might not be as valued in this field as expected.

Gender & Meritocratic System (Symbolic violence). Both respondents and *Business of Fashion* interviewees showcased that though the disparity in the leadership roles is visible and women are aware of this, this does not directly impact their choices in terms of careers. Data highlighted that women felt comfortable in offices “full of women,” and the fact that women also occupied higher roles “encouraged” them to remain in the industry. The majority of gathered responses, whether collected empirically or from magazine materials, have suggested that being a woman is not generally perceived as an obstacle in progressing further in the career in this industry. Some respondents confirmed that, when considering the roles and careers in fashion, they did not initially consider their long-term career prospects to be a C-suite or further leadership roles in companies. One of them mentioned: “[...] to get somewhere and be someone, well, obviously not a CEO, but [on the other hand] why not?” (R3).

The respondents described clear paths of progress and careers in their roles and industry as a whole, starting from the lower level and internships, up until junior or mid-managerial levels, where companies make efforts to describe job descriptions and necessary requirements for the roles. Positions are advertised both internally and externally, but are often initially available for internal employees. Each company differs in terms of internal promotions and offers different systems, yet in all of them, an element of recommendation is common. Yet, half of the respondents also witnessed first-hand or through personal network connection a situation where other employees were promoted without clear and transparent processes.

Rosalind Gill (2002), in her research regarding gender and creative labour, described how some new media workers, both men and women, despite recognising the inequality in the industry and lack of meritocracy (where freelancers get contracts and positions because of qualifications and experience), struggled to critically question the dominant narrative about equal opportunities. She connects this with the work of Flis Henwood (1996) on WISE (Women into Science and Engineering),

who discussed “the effect of individualising one’s experience” and “difficulty in using those experiences as a basis for collective action.” Gill pointed out that the domination of “individualistic understanding” can lead to a perception of those experiences “as personal failures or as random events.” (Gill, 2002, p. 85)

Moreover, all the respondents stated that they were encouraged by their supervisors to apply for certain roles or had put forward respondents’ applications and recommendations for new roles. This data, though, reflects the career path up until the mid-management level, and environments where managers were other women. Research showcases a correlation between women managers’ appointment and gender equality in the workplace or pay equality, highlighting that the proximity between positions is where “advocacy for other women” happens most commonly (Stainback et al., 2024).

Conclusion

The article reviewed the paradox of the fashion industry, where on the one hand women dominate entry-level and retail roles, possessing almost three times more spending power than men, while on the other hand, they are largely absent from the leadership structure of those fashion companies. Though industry, through the academic world and popular media, has been portrayed as frivolous and ephemeral, it is a complex and hard-to-navigate ecosystem that presents itself as full of freedom, equality and democracy, yet offers limited opportunities and a lack of diversity and inclusivity.

This paper explored the relationship between capital accumulation (Bourdieu, 1972) and the positions of women in the field, particularly a career progression concept based on the idea of accumulation of capital as a method of securing higher positions. The aim of this work was to shed a light on career opportunities for women in the industry, explored through their personal experience and desk research. This article pointed out that discourse and narratives about the fashion industry as transparent, equal and “every girl’s dream” workplace are still present despite awareness around gender inequality in leadership positions, highlighting potentially that symbolic violence might play a role in the underrepresentation of women in leadership.

The article demonstrated that female managers are actively accumulating capital, both social and cultural, through educational and institutional degrees, connecting and sustaining networks and relationships, and actively asking and inquiring regarding possible higher roles up until certain, usually between junior to mid, level. However, this might not be sufficient, as their capital might not be recognised or

valued in the field, and field-specific “symbolic capital” might contribute to reproducing inequalities in the company’s hierarchical structures.

Research limitations. Data collected through research have shown the complexity of the fashion field and its diversity across several levels (location, size and type of company, department and functions). The data were collected from both secondary sources, including material collected from the *Business of Fashion* articles, as well as from empirical, in-depth interviews with both current and former employees coming from international fashion companies.

In order to provide a more in-depth overview of the under-representation of women in leadership of fashion companies, a larger and more niche sample could have been chosen. The research shows that the variety in terms of types of fashion products (fast fashion, commercial fashion, haut-couture) has a direct impact on the internal structure and therefore possible career choices and opportunities within a firm, for instance limiting the creative department to a few employees while extending the export and sales department.

As the research included interviews with women coming from different countries and also working in different countries, the article provides a glimpse into the system’s challenges. Based on the presented data, it can be concluded that country-specific research could provide a more in-depth understanding of this phenomenon. For instance, examining the Italian or French fashion ecosystem while considering attitudes towards and awareness of gender inequality in national culture, the structure of fashion companies (e.g. conglomerates versus family-owned brands), and the broader socio-political context of gender equality could yield different and more complex results.

Bibliography

- Acker J., 1990: *Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations*. “Gender and Society,” vol. 4(2), pp. 139–158.
- Acker J., 2006: *Inequality Regimes: Gender, Class, and Race in Organizations*. “Gender and Society,” vol. 20(4), pp. 441–464. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243206289499>.
- Alamanda D., Ahmed A., Kurniady D., Rahayu A., Ahmad I., Nik H., Nik A., 2024: *Linking Gender to Creativity: Role of Risk Taking and Support for Creativity Towards Creative Potential of Employees*. “Journal of Intercultural Communication,” pp. 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.36923/jicc.v24i1.219>.
- Alfano V., Cicatiello L., Gaeta G. L., Pinto M., 2025: *The Gender Gap in the Early Progression of Academic Careers: Evidence from Italy*. “International Journal of Manpower,” vol. 46(10), pp. 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJM-01-2024-0030>.

- Anner M., 2020: *Squeezing Workers' Rights in Global Supply Chains: Purchasing Practices in the Bangladesh Garment Export Sector in Comparative Perspective*. "Review of International Political Economy," vol. 27(2), pp. 320–347. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2019.1625426>.
- Badal S., Harter J., 2013: *Gender Diversity, Business-Unit Engagement, and Performance*. "Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies," vol. 21, pp. 354–365. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1548051813504460>.
- Bick R., Halsey E., Ekenga C., 2018: *The Global Environmental Injustice of Fast Fashion*. "Environmental Health," vol. 17, article 92. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12940-018-0433-7>.
- Billett S., 2010: *Lifelong Learning and Self: Work, Subjectivity and Learning*. "Studies in Continuing Education," vol. 32(1), pp. 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01580370903534223>.
- Bourdieu P., 1977: *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bourdieu P., 1984: *Distinction*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Bourdieu, P. 1986: *The Forms of Capital*. In: *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*. Ed. J. Richardson. New York: Greenwood. pp. 241–258.
- Bourdieu P., 2024: *Forms of Capital: General Sociology*. Volume 3. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons.
- Bowen G., 2009: *Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method*. "Qualitative Research Journal," vol. 9, pp. 27–40. <https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ0902027>.
- Braun V., Clarke V., 2006: *Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology*. "Qualitative Research in Psychology," vol. 3(2), pp. 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>.
- Brooks R., Yeadon-Lee T., Gill S. S., 2024: *Maintaining the Gap: Women's Early Career Experiences of Entry into the UK Graduate Labour Market*. "Journal of Education and Work," vol. 37(1–4), pp. 17–31. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2024.2321443>.
- Busetto L., Wick W., Gumbinger C., 2020: *How to Use and Assess Qualitative Research Methods*. "Neurological Research and Practice," vol. 2(1), p. 14. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s42466-020-00059-z>.
- Casad B. J., Franks J. E., Garasky C. E., Kittleman M. M., Roesler A. C., Hall D. Y., Petzel Z. W., 2021: *Gender Inequality in Academia: Problems and Solutions for Women Faculty in STEM*. "Journal of Neuroscience Research," vol. 99, pp. 13–23. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jnr.24631>.
- Conor B., Gill R., Taylor S., 2015: *Gender and Creative Labour*. "The Sociological Review," vol. 63(1), pp. 1–22.
- DataUsa, 2024.: *Fashion & Apparel Design*, Available at: <https://datausa.io/profile/cip/fashion-apparel-design> [accessed: 23.01.2025].
- De Clercq D., Voronov M., 2009: *The Role of Cultural and Symbolic Capital in Entrepreneurs' Ability to Meet Expectations about Conformity and Innovation*. "Journal of Small Business Management," vol. 47, pp. 398–420. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-627X.2009.00276.x>.
- Dezsö C. L., Ross D. G., 2012: *Does Female Representation in Top Management Improve Firm Performance? A Panel Data Investigation*. "Strategic Management Journal," vol. 33(9), pp. 1072–1089. <https://doi.org/10.1002/smj.1955>.

- Doherty L., Manfredi S., 2010: *Improving Women's Representation in Senior Positions in Universities*. "Employee Relations," vol. 32, pp. 138–155. <https://doi.org/10.1108/01425451011010096>.
- Doherty N., Dickmann M., 2009: *Exposing the Symbolic Capital of International Assignments*. "The International Journal of Human Resource Management," vol. 20(2), pp. 301–320. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585190802670664>.
- Elhakim A., 2024: *The Intersection of Promotion Policies, Research Habitus, and Capital Distribution: A Qualitative Case Study of Two Higher Education Contexts in the United Arab Emirates*. "Frontiers in Education," vol. 9. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2024.1237459>.
- Entwistle J., Rocamora A., 2006: *The Field of Fashion Materialized: A Study of London Fashion Week*. "Sociology," vol. 40(4), pp. 735–751. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038506065158>.
- Essig E., Soparnot R. [online]: *Re-thinking Gender Inequality in the Workplace – A Framework from the Male Perspective*. <https://shs.cairn.info/revue-management-2019-3-page-373> [accessed: 12.02.2025].
- Euratex, 2024: *Facts & Key Figures of the European Textile and Clothing Industry*. Available at: <https://euratex.eu/wp-content/uploads/EURATEX-Facts-Key-Figures-2024.pdf> [accessed: 09.02.2025].
- European Commission, n.d.: *Fashion and high-end industries in the EU*. Available at: https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/sectors/textiles-ecosystem/fashion-and-high-end-industries/fashion-and-high-end-industries-eu_en [accessed: 09.02.2025].
- Galbreath J., 2018: *Is Board Gender Diversity Linked to Financial Performance? The Mediating Mechanism of CSR*. "Business & Society," vol. 57, pp. 863–889. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0007650316647967>.
- Gander M., 2018: *Let the Right One In: A Bourdieusian Analysis of Gender Inequality in Universities' Senior Management*. "Gender, Work & Organization." <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12327>.
- Gill R., 2002: *Cool, Creative and Egalitarian? Exploring Gender in Project-Based New Media Work in Europe*. "Information, Communication & Society," vol. 5(1), pp. 70–89. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691180110117668>.
- Gill R., 2014: *Unspeakable Inequalities: Post Feminism, Entrepreneurial Subjectivity, and the Repudiation of Sexism among Cultural Workers*. "Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society," vol. 21, pp. 509–528. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxu016>.
- Gill R., 2018: *Not All Creatives Are Created Equal*. "Nature Human Behaviour," vol. 2(8), pp. 526–527. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-018-0392-6>.
- Global Fashion Agenda, PWC: 2024, *Unpacking Pay Equity in Fashion: Italy*. <https://www.pwc.com/it/it/industries/consumer/unpacking-pay-equity-in-fashion-italy.html> [accessed: 14.02.2025].
- Greenpeace, 2022: *Poisoned Gifts – From donations to the dumpsite: Textile waste disguised as second-hand clothes exported to East Africa*. <https://www.greenpeace.org/static/planet4-international-stateless/2022/04/9f50d3de-greenpeace-germany-poisoned-fast-fashion-briefing-factsheet-april-2022.pdf> [accessed: 07.02.2025].

- Heffernan T., 2023: *Women in Higher Education*. In: *The Marginalised Majority in Higher Education*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, pp. 129–153. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41432-9_6.
- Henwood F., 1996: *WISE Choices? Understanding Occupational Decision-making in a Climate of Equal Opportunities for Women in Science and Technology*. “Gender and Education,” vol. 8(2), pp. 199–214. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540259650038860>.
- Iellatchitch A., Mayrhofer W., Meyer M., 2003: *Career Fields: A Small Step Towards a Grand Career Theory?* “International Journal of Human Resource Management,” vol. 14, pp. 728–750. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0958519032000080776>.
- Jeffrey A., 2024: *Bourdieu on the Field: Gender, Power, and the Organisation of Sport*. Paper presented at North American Society for the Sociology of Sport, Chicago, United States.
- Jennings G., 2005: *Business, Social Science Methods Used in*. In: *Encyclopedia of Social Measurement*. Ed. K. Kempf-Leonard. San Diego, CA: Elsevier Academic Press, pp. 219–230. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B0-12-369398-5/00270-X>.
- Johnson J. M., 2002: *In-Depth Interviewing*. In: *Handbook of Interview Research: Context and Method*. Eds. J. F. Gubrium, J. A. Holstein. USA: Sage Publications, pp. 106–124.
- Jones C., Lorenzen M., Sapsed J. (eds.), 2015: *The Oxford Handbook of Creative Industries*. Oxford: Oxford Academic. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199603510.001.0001>.
- Joy S., Game A. M., Toshniwal I. G., 2020: *Applying Bourdieu's Capital-Field-Habitus Framework to Migrant Careers: Taking Stock and Adding a Transnational Perspective*. “The International Journal of Human Resource Management,” vol. 31(20), pp. 2541–2564.
- Lazzarato M., 1996: *Immaterial Labour*. In: *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*. Eds. M. Hardt P. Virno. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 133–147.
- Lazzarato M., 2017: *Experimental Politics: Work, Welfare, and Creativity in the Neoliberal Age*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Lee D., 2019: *Creative Hubs, Cultural Work and Affective Economies: Exploring “Unspeakable” Experiences for Young Cultural Workers*. In: *Creative Hubs in Question. Dynamics of Virtual Work*. Ed. R. Gill, A. C. Pratt, T. E. Virani. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 75–92. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-10653-9_4.
- Lee D., 2013: *Creative Networks and Social Capital*. In: *Cultural Work and Higher Education*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 195–213. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137013941_10.
- Lorber J., 2001: *Gender Inequality*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Marti V. J. M., 2003: *SCBS Social Capital Benchmarking System – Profiting from Social Capital when Building Network Organisations*. “Journal of Intellectual Capital,” vol. 9(3), pp. 501–509. <https://doi.org/10.1108/14691930410550381>.
- MBS Group, British Fashion Council, 2023: *Diversity and Inclusion in Fashion: In-Depth Research and Analysis from the MBS Group and British Fashion Council*. <https://www.thembsgroup.co.uk/internal/diversity-inclusion-in-fashion-2023/> [accessed: 14.02.2025].
- McKinsey, 2018: *Shattering the Glass Runway*. <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/retail/our-insights/shattering-the-glass-runway#/> [accessed: 10.02.2025].

- McKinsey, 2024: *Women in the Workplace 2024: Designed Report*. <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/women-in-the-workplace-2024> [accessed: 10.02.2025].
- McRobbie A., 2011: *Reflections on Feminism, Immaterial Labour and the Post-Fordist Regime*. "New Formations," vol. 70, pp. 60–76. <https://doi.org/10.3898/NEWF.70.04.2010>.
- Mears A., 2010: *Size Zero High-End Ethnic: Cultural Production and the Reproduction of Culture in Fashion Modelling*. "Poetics," vol. 38(1), pp. 21–46. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2009.10.002>.
- Meisenhelder T., 2000: *Toward a Field Theory of Class, Gender, and Race*. "Race, Gender & Class," vol. 7(2), pp. 76–95. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41674938>.
- Meliou E., Ozbilgin M., 2024: *How Is the Illusion of Gender Equality in Entrepreneurship Sustained? A Bourdieusian Perspective*. "Journal of Management Studies," vol. 61(4), pp. 1536–1561. <https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.12930>.
- Meoli A., Piva E., Righi H., 2024: *Missing Women in STEM Occupations: The Impact of University Education on the Gender Gap in Graduates' Transition to Work*. "Research Policy," vol. 53(8). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.respol.2024.105072>.
- Merton R. K., 1968: *Social Theory and Social Structure*. Enlarged edition. New York: The Free Press; London: Collier Macmillan Publishers.
- Michael J., 2017: *Highbrow Culture for High-Potentials? Cultural Orientations of a Business Elite in the Making*. "Poetics," vol. 61. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2017.01.002>.
- Moon C., 2020: *Labor and Creativity in New York's Global Fashion Industry*. New York: Taylor & Francis.
- Moore R., 2008: *Capital*. In: *Pierre Bourdieu: Key Concepts*. Ed. M. Grenfell. Durham, UK: Acumen, pp. 101–119.
- Naseviciute L., Juceviciene R., 2024: *Overcoming the Barriers to Women's Career in Information and Communication Technology Business*. "Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal," vol. 43(1), pp. 23–40. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EDI-09-2022-0265>.
- Park B., Banchevsky S., 2019: *Women and Men, Moms and Dads: Leveraging Social Role Change to Promote Gender Equality*. In: *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*. Vol. 59. Ed. J. M. Olson. Academic Press, pp. 1–52. <https://doi.org/10.1016/bs.aesp.2018.10.001>.
- Peterson, R. A., 2005: *In Search of Authenticity*. "Journal of Management Studies," vol. 42, pp. 1083–1098. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6486.2005.00533.x>.
- Piloto C., 2023: *The Gender Gap in STEM*. MIT Professional Education. <https://professionalprograms.mit.edu/blog/leadership/the-gender-gap-in-stem> [accessed: 12.02.2025].
- Piva E., Rovelli P., 2022: *Mind the Gender Gap: The Impact of University Education on the Entrepreneurial Entry of Female and Male STEM Graduates*. "Small Bus Econ," vol. 59, pp. 143–161. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11187-021-00525-1>.
- Pulignano V., 2024: *Unveiling 'Algorithm Governance' Shaping Labor Platforms' Strategies and Working Conditions in the Digital Era*. "Weizenbaum. Journal of the Digital Society," vol. 4(3), pp. 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.34669/W1.WJDS/4.3.6>.

- Rietveld C. A., Patel P. C., 2022: *Gender Inequality and the Entrepreneurial Gender Gap: Evidence from 97 Countries (2006–2017)*. “Journal of Evolutionary Economics,” vol. 32(4), pp. 1205–1229. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00191-022-00780-9>.
- Shade L. R., Jacobson J., 2015: *Hungry for the Job: Gender, Unpaid Internships, and the Creative Industries*. “The Sociological Review,” vol. 63, pp. 188–205. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-954X.12249>.
- SNAAP, 2022: *Unraveling Gender and Race Bias in Fashion Design Careers*. <https://snaaparts.org/findings/databriefs/unraveling-gender-and-race-bias-in-fashion-design-careers> [accessed: 14.02.2025].
- Somerville M., 2007: *Subjected Bodies, or Embodied Subjects: Subjectivity and Learning Safety at Work*. In: *Work, Subjectivity and Learning. Technical and Vocational Education and Training: Issues, Concerns and Prospects.*, Vol. 6. Eds. S. Billett, T. Fenwick, M. Somerville. Dordrecht: Springer, pp. 37–52. https://doi.org/10.1007/1-4020-5360-6_3.
- Son Hing L. S., Sakr N., Sorenson J. B., Stamarski C. S., Caniera K., Colaco C., 2023: *Gender Inequities in the Workplace: A Holistic Review of Organizational Processes and Practices*. “Human Resource Management Review,” vol. 33(3), p. 100968. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmr.2023.100968>.
- Stainback K., Roberts H., Biswas P. K., 2024: *Women's Representation in Managerial Hierarchies: An Examination of Trickle-Down and Pipeline Effects*. “Human Resource Management,” vol. 63(4), pp. 619–637. <https://doi.org/10.1002/hrm.22220>.
- Stamarski C., Son Hing L., 2015: *Gender Inequalities in the Workplace: The Effects of Organizational Structures, Processes, Practices, and Decision Makers' Sexism*. “Frontiers in Psychology,” vol. 6. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.01400>.
- Stokes A., 2017: *Fashioning Gender: The Gendered Organization of Cultural Work*. “Social Currents,” vol. 4(6), pp. 518–534. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2329496516686613>.
- Tal M., Lavi R., Reiss S., et al., 2024: *Gender Perspectives on Role Models: Insights from STEM Students and Professionals*. “Journal of Science Education and Technology,” vol. 33, pp. 699–717. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10956-024-10114-y>.
- Taylor S., Luckman S., 2020: *Creative Aspiration and the Betrayal of Promise? The Experience of New Creative Workers*. In: *The New Normal of Working Lives. Critical Studies in Contemporary Work and Employment*. Eds. S. Taylor, S. Luckman. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-38246-9_1.
- Titkow A. (Ed.), 2003: *Szklany sufit. Bariery i ograniczenia karier kobiet. Monografia zjawiska*. Warszawa: Instytut Spraw Publicznych.
- Topaz C. M., Higdon J., Epps-Darling A., Siau E., Kerkhoff H., Mendiratta S., Young E., 2022: *Race- and Gender-Based Under-Representation of Creative Contributors: Art, Fashion, Film, and Music*. “Humanities and Social Sciences Communications,” vol. 9(1), pp. 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-022-01239-9>.
- Uniform Market, 2025: *Global Apparel Industry Statistics: Market Size and Trends*. <https://www.uniformmarket.com/statistics/global-apparel-industry-statistics> [accessed: 14.02.2025].

Xu P., Jiang J., 2020: *Individual Capital Structure and Health Behaviors among Chinese Middle-Aged and Older Adults: A Cross-Sectional Analysis Using Bourdieu's Theory of Capitals*. "International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health," vol. 17(20), p. 7369. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17207369>.