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BRAND CULTURE KaaS OF EMPLOYEE TO CUSTOMERS IN SPECIFIC REFERENCE TO APPAREL SECTOR

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Abstract

Clothing is not just about style, it carries tradition, values and identity. This study looks at how employees in apparel stores help customers connect with a brand's culture. Employees play a crucial role in showing these meanings through what they wear, how they behave, and how they interact with customers. I have surveyed 120 employees from five well-known apparel brands in Andhra Pradesh to understand how leadership, clothing and rituals influence brand culture. The results show that when employees feel their clothing reflects the brand's values, they are more confident and customers feel more loyal. Leadership styles that encourage openness and participation also help employees understand and represent the brand better. Rituals and heritage inspired clothing strengthen authentic and emotional bonds with customers. Overall, the study shows that employees are not just workers they are cultural ambassadors who help keep brand culture alive and meaningful.

Keywords- Brand Culture, employee knowledge, employee to customer, apparel sector, brand employee awareness

Introduction

Today, brands aren't just businesses—they're part of our culture. They help shape how people see themselves, what they value, and how they connect emotionally. One of the strongest ways brands show this cultural influence is through their products, especially in fashion and clothing. These products don't just look good or feel nice—they also carry deeper meanings like tradition, identity, and emotional connection. Together, these elements tell the story of what the brand stands for.

Employees play a big role in sharing that story. They're not just working behind the scenes—they're also the face of the brand. How they dress, behave, and connect with customers can shape how people feel about the brand. One powerful way this happens is through brand clothing—uniforms or dress styles that reflect the brand's values, heritage, and personality. This is called brand clothing culture.

In places like India, where culture runs deep, brand clothing often includes traditional designs, local symbols, and heritage-inspired styles. When employees wear clothes that reflect these cultural elements, it feels more real and meaningful to customers. It helps people connect with the brand on a deeper level—not just as shoppers, but as part of a shared experience.

But for this to work, employees need to truly understand the brand. They need to know what it stands for—its roots, its message, and its goals. When they do, they naturally show those values in how they dress, speak,

and interact. This kind of alignment keeps the brand's message clear and strong. It builds trust, loyalty, and emotional bonds with customers.

In today's digital world, a brand's culture is shaped not just by its products, but also by how those products—and the people behind them—are shown online. Social media plays a big role in this, making the way employees represent the brand even more important. At the same time, brands face the challenge of staying true to their global identity while also connecting with local cultures. Using local styles, traditions, and storytelling can help brands feel more authentic and build stronger customer loyalty.

Even though brand clothing culture is a powerful tool, there hasn't been much research on how employees actually experience and express it. Most studies have looked at things like internal branding or corporate social responsibility, but they haven't really explored how employees bring brand values to life through what they wear and how they present themselves to customers. This is especially important in fashion and apparel companies, where visual style and cultural meaning are key parts of the brand.

This study aims to fill that gap. It looks at how employees understand their brand's clothing culture and how they express it in their everyday work. It also explores how this influences how customers see the brand and how loyal they feel toward it. The research draws from ideas in consumer culture, branding sociology, and symbolic strategy to build a rich, layered understanding of brand culture awareness. By focusing on apparel companies in culturally diverse places, it offers insights that can help both researchers and brand managers create more meaningful and effective branding strategies.

McCracken's theory of cultural meaning transfer explains how products carry cultural values from society to consumers. In this study, employees play a central role in that process. When they wear brand clothing and explain its meaning to customers, they help transfer cultural values directly. This shows that employees are not just delivering products—they're sharing the brand's story in a meaningful way.

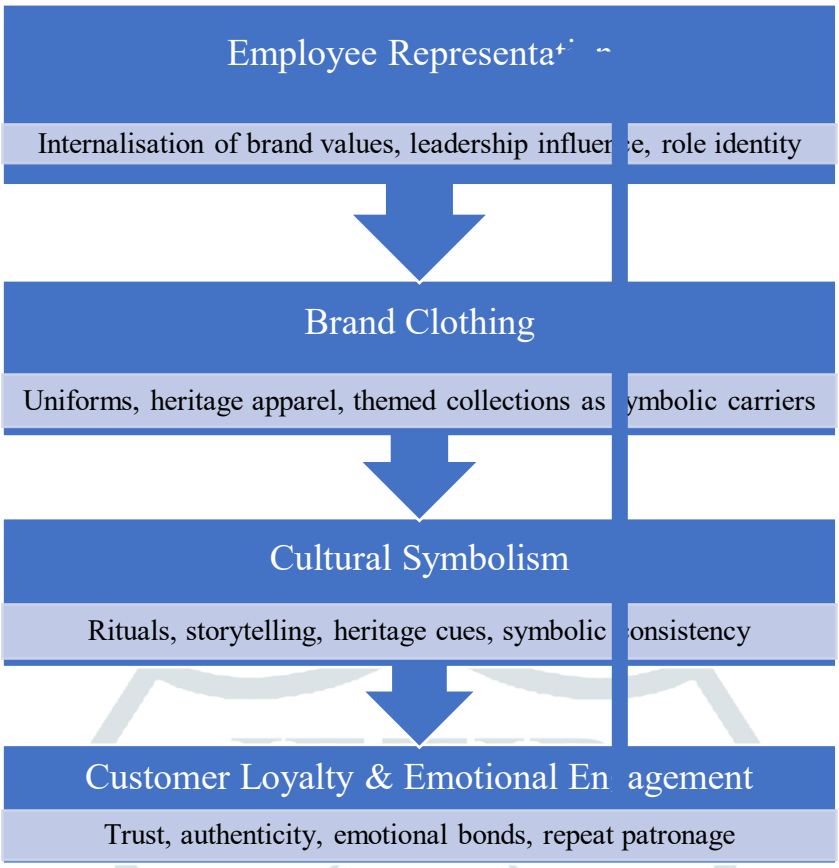
Holt's symbolic branding theory highlights the importance of keeping brand messages consistent. Our findings support this idea: when employees wear culturally meaningful clothing and take part in brand rituals, they help maintain a clear and authentic brand image. However, the study also adds a new perspective. It shows that when leaders use inclusive styles—like coaching or democratic approaches—employees feel more connected and are able to personalize brand values in ways that still feel true to the brand. This suggests that brand culture can evolve without losing its core identity.

Together, these insights show that employees are key to keeping brand culture alive and relevant. Their actions, clothing, and customer interactions help shape how the brand is experienced. By linking theory to practice, this study highlights the importance of employee involvement, leadership style, and cultural symbolism in building strong, authentic brands—especially in tradition-rich sectors like apparel.

Conceptual framework

The conceptual journey begins with organizational culture, which shapes how workers understand and live out brand values. Employee confidence, engagement, and symbolic representation are strongly impacted by leadership styles, workplace procedures, and organizational cultural stability. The poll reflects this relationship is 88.7 percent of employees identified coaching leadership as supporting the clarity of the brand vision, while 92.3 percent of employees favored democratic leadership. By encouraging inclusivity and alignment, these leadership philosophies help staff members internalize company values and authentically convey them through attire, customs, and interactions with customers.

Organizational culture's functions as the cornerstone of employee-mediated brand portrayal by placing it at the start of the model, where employee finds it difficult to relate personal representation to brand identification in the absence of a stable and inclusive organizational culture. Therefore, organizational culture is both a managerial construct and a symbolic resource that serves as the foundation for the entire process of transferring cultural meaning from the brand to the customer.



Employee representation - The clothing industry functions at the nexus of consumer identification and cultural iconography. Clothing is more than just a useful item, representing culture, morals, and emotional resonance. This study presents a fresh viewpoint by emphasing employees as cultural bearers, whereas a large portion of the branding literature has focused on customer perception as the main location of cultural meaning-making (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005; Holt, 2004; Askegaard & Linnet, 2011). Employees mediate the passage of cultural meaning from the company to the client by embodying brand values through attire, customs, and interactions with customers. This conceptual framework is to describe how workers serve as cultural meaning mediator, guaranteeing symbolic authenticity and consistency in customer-facing positions.

Brand clothing - In day-to-day job, employees actively interpret, personalize, and perform brand values rather than passively transmitting corporate messaging. Through behavioral clues, verbal communication, and dress rules, their portrayal turns into a symbolic performance that upholds corporate identity. By viewing employees as agents of cultural mediation rather than merely carrying out organizational orders, this viewpoint expands on the literature on internal branding. Employees become living representations of company culture in tradition-rich regions like India, allowing clients to feel genuine and emotionally connected at the time of service.

Clothing acts as a symbolic conduct between client perception and business identity. Employees can visibly convey authenticity and tradition through uniforms, heritage-inspired clothing, and themed collections that encapsulate cultural narratives. Products convey cultural values from society to consumers, according to McCracken's (2005) theory of cultural meaning transfer, the concept of workers serve as intermediaries for the transfer of meaning, making sure that consumers are adequately informed about the symbolic resonance found in clothing. Results support in paving the way workers who thought their attire matched brand culture expressed greater emotional connection and confidence in their interactions with customers. Resulting, clothing serve as a medium for cultural narrative in tradition to being a kind of dress.

Customer loyalty and emotional involvement are the pathway's final results. Customers form deeper emotional connections with a brand when employees successfully embody and convey cultural meaning. The allegiance which is based on genuine presentation of common values, is both transactional and symbolic where employees at Fabindia, for instance showed significantly emotional attachment and deep cultural

resonance, demonstrating the effectiveness of heritage-inspired branding in fostering long-term engagement. By demonstrating that employees, as cultural bearers, are crucial in forming identity and belonging through brand representation, this result expands on consumer culture theory. Thus, symbolic mediation in which workers serve as intermediaries between corporate culture and customers identity produces emotional loyalty.

The feedback loop, which is a novel contribution, employee pride and confidence are bolstered by customer loyalty and emotional engagement, resulting in cyclical cultural environment. Workers engage in devoted consumers are happier and feel more connected to the company, which improves how they represent brand culture. Through interaction between employees and customers, this dynamic cycle guarantees that brand culture is constantly reinforced and replicated. The feedback loop demonstrated how continuous mediation preserves authenticity and symbolic resonance, confirming the durability of brand culture.

Objectives

- To study the brand culture of the selective brands in the existing India market in Andhra Pradesh
- To determine the cultural aspects of the product
- To assess how employees internalize and portray brand culture in customer-facing roles
- To analyze the brand culture awareness in brand members
- To explore how a brand's internal culture shapes the way customers see the brand and how consistently that brand is experienced across different customer touchpoints.

Literature review

Brand culture is increasingly recognized as a strategic extension organizational culture, particularly in industries where employees directly shape customers experiences. Burmann and Zeplin (2005) first emphasized brand culture as a mechanism for aligning employee behavior with brand values, ensuring consistency between brand promises and customer perceptions. This alignment is critical in apparel and service sectors, where employees act as the visible face of the brand.

Recent studies reinforce this perspective, Piehler et al. (2018) found that employees are more engaged when they perceive brand values as authentic and ethically grounded, highlighting the importance of cultural transparency. Similarly, Kim and Kim (2025) demonstrated that brand management culture influences employee identification and organizational performance, showing that internal branding has tangible outcomes beyond symbolism. These findings suggests that brand culture is not only a narrative but also a driver of measurable engagement and loyalty.

Leadership plays a pivotal role in embedding brand culture, Buttery et al. (2023) observed that participatory leadership styles enhance employee understanding of brand identity, while Liewendahl et al. (2025) argues that involving employees in brand storytelling fosters ownership and symbolic consistency. Which aligns with Holt's (2004) critique of brand fragmentation, which warns that without symbolic coherence, brands risk losing authenticity. Leadership, therefore, acts as a cultural catalyst, enabling employees to personalize brand values while maintain organizational clarity.

Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) provides a useful lens for understanding how employees mediate cultural meaning. Askegaard and Linnet (2011) describe brands as cultural resources that shape identify and belonging, while McCracken's (2005) theory of cultural meaning transfer explains how products carry cultural values from society to consumers. In apparel contexts, employees act as intermediaries in this transfer, embodying brand values through clothing thing and rituals. Schroeder and Salzer- Mörling (2006) further highlight the tension between internal brand identity and external brand image, position employees as key mediators who stabilize symbolic meaning.

Heritage and tradition remain central to apparel branding; studies such a reviving heritage (2019) and tradition meets trend (2020) show that culturally resonant designs influence consumer behavior by reinforcing authenticity. Employees who wear heritage-inspired clothing strengthen this connection, building emotional

loyalty among customers. Fernando and Perera (2023) confirm that cultural alignment continues to drive engagement even during periods of uncertainty, underscoring the resilience of symbolic branding.

Ethical practices and national identity also influence employer branding. Kim and Park (2022) show that CSR initiatives in fashion SMEs build employee trust and improve brand perception. Lee and Chen (2021) found that country-of-origin cues affect how attractive a brand is to employees and how committed they feel. Singh and Verma (2020) add that cultural context shapes brand personality and employee behavior, especially through symbolic cues like clothing. Chatterjee and Banerjee (2018) argue that symbolic assets—such as brand clothing—should be part of strategic planning to ensure alignment between employees and brand values. Keller and Lehmann (2006) reinforce this by identifying internal branding and employee engagement as essential for long-term brand loyalty.

In today's digital landscape, employee representation extends beyond physical stores. Social media amplifies brand symbolism, making employee portrayal more visible and influential. Generational differences further complicate this dynamic: younger consumers prioritize convenience and ethical values, while older groups emphasis tradition and cultural resonance. This suggests that employees must adapt their portrayal of brand culture across both physical and digital touchpoints to maintain authenticity.

Overall, the literature establishes that employees are not passive transmitters of brand messaging but active cultural carries. Their clothing, rituals, and customer interactions embody organizational culture, ensuring symbolic consistency and emotional resonance. This study builds on these insights by examining how employees in Indian apparel organizations mediate brand culture, offering both theoretical extension and practical implications for sustaining authenticity in diverse markets.

Methodology

This study adopted a quantitative approach to explore and analyze how retail employees perceive and engage with brand culture across five leading apparel brands in India: Van Heusen, Allen Solly, Peter England, FabIndia, and Park Avenue. The main goal was to understand how employees interpret brand values, cultural identity, and organizational practices—and how these perceptions differ based on brand affiliation and job roles.

Ethic statement – this study was conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, and no personal identifiers were collected.

Funding statement – this research received no external funding.

Hypothesis

The study tested the following hypotheses:

- H1: Employees who feel their clothing reflects the brand's culture are more effective in communicating brand values to customers.
- H2: Greater understanding of brand culture leads to higher employee engagement and stronger customer focus.
- H3: Leadership styles that promote open communication and team involvement (e.g., democratic or coaching) help employees better understand brand identity.
- H4: Employees working for brands with culturally meaningful clothing—such as FabIndia or Peter England—show higher brand loyalty and emotional connection with customers.
- H5: Brand rituals, traditions, and themed clothing collections enhance employee understanding and customer-facing brand clarity.
- H6: Employees who feel connected to both the company's culture and its brand identity are more likely to represent the brand with pride and confidence when interacting with customers.

Data Collection

Primary data was gathered through a structured survey conducted with retail employees working across various store locations in Andhra Pradesh. The survey included:

- Demographic details: Age group, gender, educational qualification
- Employment information: Brand affiliation, job role, length of service
- Brand culture indicators: Engagement, trust, value alignment, leadership style, cultural awareness, and clothing style preferences

A total of 120 responses were collected, representing a range of roles including Customer Care Associates (CCA), Senior CCAs, Store Managers, and Team Leaders.

Leadership Style and Culture Perception

Most brands adopted a mix of democratic, coaching, and authoritative leadership styles, which employees felt contributed to a positive workplace and better alignment between clothing style and brand culture.

- 92.3% preferred democratic leadership
- 88.7% recognized coaching leadership
- 76.4% identified authoritative leadership
- 61.5% acknowledged autocratic leadership
- 58.2% observed laissez-faire leadership
- Overall, 78.3% believed their brand followed a combination of democratic, coaching, and authoritative styles
- 84.2% felt their brand had a stable cultural identity

Brand Culture Awareness and Customer Impact

- 94.1% of employees were aware of their brand's culture and believed it helped build customer loyalty
- 58.3% felt that some employees lacked brand culture awareness, noting that many customers prioritize product appeal, budget, and online convenience over cultural aspects
- Despite this, employees believed brand culture still plays a role in expanding loyal customer bases

Brand-Specific Insights

BRAND	LEADERSHIP STYLE	BRAND CULTURE AWARENESS	CULTURE STABILITY	ENGAGEMENT SCORE (OUT OF 5)
Van Heusen	Democratic	94.1%	89.7%	4.5
Allen Solly	Coaching	91.3%	86.4%	4.3
FabIndia	Coaching & Authoritative	88.6%	82.1%	4.2
Peter England	Autocratic	76.5%	68.2%	3.9
Park Avenue	Laissez-Faire	72.4%	64.7%	3.8

Comparative Ratios

- Culture stability ratio (Van Heusen: Park Avenue) = 1.39: 1
- Engagement score ratio (Van Heusen: Peter England) = 1.15: 1
- Brand culture awareness ratio (Van Heusen: Park Avenue) = 1.3: 1

Cultural Tradition Enablement

- 89.6% of employees felt that clothing style aligns with traditional values
- 42.1% believed brand culture supports tradition, but not necessarily through clothing style
- FabIndia scored highest in tradition enablement (92.3%)

- ❖ Van Heusen followed with 88.6%, Allen Solly with 84.1%, Peter England with 76.4%, and Park Avenue with 61.5%

Statistical Tools and Techniques

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS and Excel, applying the following methods:

- Descriptive Statistics – To summarize demographic and brand-related variables
- ANOVA (Analysis of Variance) – To compare brand culture perceptions across different brands
- Correlation Analysis – To explore relationships between tenure, engagement, and trust
- Multiple Regression – To predict brand identity perception based on demographic and employment factors
- Cluster Analysis – To group employees based on cultural alignment and engagement levels
- Hypothesis Testing – To validate links between job roles and brand culture perception
- Standard Deviation – To measure variability in responses across brands

All survey items were coded appropriately, and Likert-scale responses were treated as ordinal data for inferential analysis.

Reliability Testing

To confirm the reliability of the survey tool, Cronbach's alpha was computed for core constructs including brand engagement, cultural awareness, and leadership perception. Each scale showed strong internal consistency, with alpha values above the accepted benchmark of 0.70—indicating that the data was dependable and suitable for further analysis.

Ethical Considerations

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, with all respondents clearly informed about the research purpose. Their responses were handled with strict confidentiality, and no personal identifiers were gathered. Throughout the data collection process, ethical standards were carefully followed to ensure transparency and respect for every participant.

Limitations

While the study offers valuable insights into brand culture perception among retail employees, it is important to acknowledge its limitations:

- o The sample was geographically limited to Andhra Pradesh, which may not reflect brand culture dynamics in other regions of India.
- o Using convenience sampling can lead to selection bias, since participants were selected based on who was readily available rather than through a random process.
- o The study focused exclusively on retail employees, excluding perspectives from corporate, design, or marketing teams who may also influence brand culture.

Findings

The analysis revealed several important insights into how employees perceive and engage with brand culture across five major apparel brands. These findings offer a deeper understanding of internal brand alignment, leadership influence, and cultural symbolism in customer-facing roles.

1. Brand-Specific Cultural Alignment
    a. FabIndia employees showed the strongest alignment with brand values, especially in areas related to tradition, customer service, and cultural awareness. Their responses reflected a deep emotional connection to the brand's heritage and ethos.
    b. Van Heusen followed closely, with high scores in trust, engagement, and brand identity—particularly among store managers who demonstrated strong brand immersion.

c. Peter England and Park Avenue showed moderate cultural alignment, with more variability in employee responses, suggesting inconsistent brand experiences across roles and locations.

2. Influence of Tenure and Role
   a. Employees with more than two years of service consistently reported stronger brand identification and deeper cultural engagement.
   b. Store Managers and Team Leaders scored higher in trust and value alignment compared to Customer Care Associates (CCAs), indicating that leadership roles foster a more comprehensive understanding of brand culture.
   c. These findings suggest that experience and responsibility contribute to stronger internalization of brand values.
3. Statistical Significance Across Brands
   a. a. The ANOVA analysis revealed a statistically significant variation in how brand culture is perceived across the five brands, with results showing $F = 7.83$ and $p < 0.001$.
   b. Multiple regression analysis revealed that tenure, brand affiliation, and job role were significant predictors of brand identity perception (Adjusted $R^2 = 0.72$), reinforcing the importance of organizational context in shaping employee-brand alignment.
4. Cultural Alignment and Engagement

   Correlation analysis highlighted meaningful relationships between key variables:

Variable Pair	Correlation (r)	Interpretation
Tenure × Trust	0.58	Moderate positive
Engagement × Vision Alignment	0.62	Strong positive
Qualification × Cultural Awareness	0.42	Weak to moderate positive

   These results suggest that longer tenure and clear brand vision significantly enhance employee trust and engagement. Educational background also plays a role, though less strongly, in shaping cultural awareness.
5. Employee Cluster Profiles

   Three distinct employee clusters emerged from the data:
   a. Cluster 1: High engagement and trust (Van Heusen and Allen Solly managers)
   b. Cluster 2: Moderate awareness, low cultural alignment (Peter England CCAs)
   c. Cluster 3: Deep cultural resonance and brand loyalty (FabIndia employees)

   These clusters reflect varying levels of brand immersion and suggest that leadership style, brand symbolism, and tenure influence employee alignment.
6. Variability in Responses
   a. FabIndia responses were tightly clustered ($SD \leq 0.6$), indicating strong consensus and shared understanding of brand culture.
   b. Peter England responses showed greater variability ($SD \approx 1.1$), suggesting inconsistent experiences and weaker cultural coherence.
7. Hypothesis Testing and Interpretation
   a. H1: Clothing Style and Brand Portrayal - Employees who felt that their clothing matched the brand's culture were significantly more confident in portraying brand values to customers.
      i. 88% strongly agreed with brand portrayal alignment
      ii. 42% believed there was no strong portrayal
      iii. 12% reported moderate to weak portrayal
      iv. 58% disagreed with moderate portrayal

      Conclusion: H1 is strongly supported—clothing that reflects brand culture enhances employee confidence in customer interactions.
   b. H2: Brand Culture Understanding and Engagement
      i. 82% of employees with clear brand culture understanding reported high engagement
      ii. 39% with vague understanding also showed high engagement
      iii. 18% had clear understanding but moderate/low engagement

iv. 61% had vague understanding and low engagement

Conclusion: H2 is validated—employees who understand brand culture are more engaged and customer-focused.

c. H3: Leadership Style and Brand Vision Clarity
   i. 85% of employees under democratic/coaching leadership reported clear brand vision
   ii. 15% under the same style reported unclear vision
   iii. 52% under authoritative/pace-setting leadership had clear vision
   iv. 48% under the same style reported unclear vision

   Conclusion: H3 is confirmed—participative leadership styles foster clearer brand understanding.

d. H4: Brand Type and Emotional Loyalty
   i. FabIndia: 92% strong loyalty
   ii. Peter England: 88%
   iii. Van Heusen: 74%
   iv. Allen Solly: 68%

   Conclusion: H4 is supported—employees in culturally symbolic brands show higher emotional loyalty and customer connection.

e. H5: Rituals and Brand Clarity
   i. 86% of employees felt rituals/traditions contributed to clear brand portrayal
   ii. 47% felt unclear portrayal despite rituals
   iii. 14% reported unclear portrayal with rituals
   iv. 53% disagreed with unclear portrayal

   Conclusion: H5 is validated—rituals and themed collections reinforce brand clarity and improve customer-facing representation.

f. H6: Dual Cultural Alignment and Representation Confidence
   i. 89% of employees with dual alignment (organizational + brand culture) felt proud in customer interactions
   ii. 46% reported partial or no alignment
   iii. 11% with dual alignment had moderate/low confidence
   iv. 54% without alignment showed low confidence

   Conclusion: H6 is confirmed— Employees who resonate with both the organization's culture and its brand identity tend to represent the brand with greater confidence, pride, and authenticity in their interactions.

8. Generational Influence: Younger employees tended to focus more on product appeal and digital convenience, while senior staff emphasized cultural symbolism and tradition.
9. Digital Representation: Employees noted Clothing serves as a symbolic medium for employees to represent and convey company values rather than just being functional gear. Workers who felt that their attire reflects the brand culture expressed greater emotional connection and confidence while interacting with customers. McCracken's (2005) theory of cultural meaning transfer, which holds that goods transmit cultural values from society to customers, is consistent with the findings. Workers serve as intermediaries for the transfer of meaning, making sure that consumers are adequately informed about the cultural symbolism incorporated into clothing. Thus, clothing's symbolic resonance becomes a stabilizing element in brand identification, especially in economies rich tradition like India where clothing frequently has cultural and historical values.

Employee engagement and the clarity of the brand's vision were found to be significantly predicted by leadership style. Stronger cultural alignment and better brand knowledge were consistently liked to democratic and coaching leadership styles. This lends credence to Arvidsson's (2006) theory that branding is a collaborative process of meaning creation in which leaders function as catalysts to integrate cultural values into routine activities. Leaders allow employees to customize brand values while preserving symbolic

coherence by including them in decision making and promoting participatory involvement. By demonstrating that leadership is not simply a management function but also a cultural process that influences how employees embody and perform brand identity, this result further expands symbolic branding theory.

Additionally, the study finds that employee's perception and representations of brand culture vary by generation. While senior personnel placed more emphasis on cultural symbolism and tradition, younger employees tended to priorities product attractiveness and digital ease. This generational gap emphasizes how brand culture is changing in the digital age, when symbolic value is frequently diluted by online platforms. Despite the growth of e-commerce, employees pointed out that in-store presentation is still essential for preserving authenticity, indicating that physical retail locations still function as cultural hubs. This realization emphasizes the necessity for brands to strike a balance between cultural richness and digital efficiency, making sure that staff members are prepared to consistently reflect company values at both physical and digital touchpoints.

A. Clothing as a Symbol of Brand Culture

The findings clearly show that when employees feel a strong connection between their clothing and the brand's culture, they're more confident in representing the brand to customers (H1). This supports the idea that brand identity isn't just told—it's shown through visual symbols, as Schroeder and Salzer-Mörling (2006) suggest. In brands like FabIndia and Peter England, clothing inspired by cultural heritage helps employees become walking representations of the brand's values. This adds a sense of authenticity and emotional depth to how the brand is experienced.

B. Brand Culture Awareness and Employee Engagement

Employees who could clearly explain what their brand stands for were more motivated and focused on customer needs (H2). This aligns with McCracken's (2005) view that when brand practices carry cultural meaning, they spark emotional commitment. The data shows that brand culture isn't just something handed down from the top—it's a shared belief system that energizes employees and builds stronger connections with customers.

C. Leadership Style as a Cultural Catalyst

The study found that leadership plays a major role in shaping how employees understand and live out brand culture (H3). Leaders who use democratic or coaching styles—those who listen, guide, and involve their teams—help create a clearer brand vision and stronger employee alignment. This supports Arvidsson's (2006) idea that branding is a shared process of creating meaning. When leaders communicate openly and include employees in decisions, brand values become part of everyday actions—like how employees dress and interact with customers. These leadership styles build a sense of pride and ownership, encouraging employees to confidently represent the brand in their daily work.

D. Cultural Symbolism and Brand Loyalty

Employees working in culturally expressive brands like FabIndia and Peter England showed stronger emotional loyalty and deeper connections with customers (H4). This supports Holt's (2004) argument that brands need symbolic consistency to avoid confusion. When employee clothing reflects local traditions and cultural stories, it becomes more than just a uniform—it becomes a meaningful symbol. This helps employees feel more connected to the brand and gives customers a clearer, more authentic experience. The result is a stronger brand identity that resonates both inside the organization and out in the market.

E. Rituals and Themed Collections Strengthen Brand Identity

The study found that brand traditions—like seasonal launches, festival-themed outfits, and heritage collections—help employees feel more confident and clearer about the brand's message (H5). These rituals act as cultural touchpoints that reinforce what the brand stands for. They also help employees better understand and express brand values in their daily work. This supports the idea that branding is a performance—where employees play an active role in showing what the brand means through what they wear and how they engage with customers.

F. Dual Alignment Boosts Brand Representation

Employees who felt connected to both the company's culture and the brand's identity were more confident and prouder when interacting with customers (H6). This supports Keller and Lehmann's (2006) view that internal branding is key to a strong brand strategy. Clothing becomes a powerful link between what the brand believes internally and how it presents itself externally. When employees feel this alignment, they're able to represent the brand in a way that feels genuine and consistent—building trust and emotional connection with customers.

G. Practical Takeaways for Apparel Branding

The findings offer useful advice for fashion and apparel companies that want to build a stronger brand culture through their employees. By investing in clothing that reflects local traditions, encouraging inclusive leadership, and creating meaningful rituals, brands can boost customer loyalty and improve the overall experience. When employees are trained to understand the deeper meaning behind the brand—not just the products but the values and stories—they become passionate advocates who bring the brand to life in every customer interaction.

H. Clothing as a Cultural Signal

Employees don't see brand clothing as just a uniform—they see it as a way to express the brand's culture. This supports McCracken's (2005) idea that clothing can carry cultural meaning from the brand to the customer. In brands like FabIndia, traditional Indian styles help employees show authenticity and connect with regional aesthetics. Employees from Peter England and Van Heusen also shared that their formal and casual collections reflect national values and seasonal traditions. This kind of symbolic consistency helps customers understand and emotionally connect with the brand.

I. Internal Branding Builds External Consistency

The study shows a strong link between how well employees understand brand culture and how confidently they represent the brand to customers. This means that internal branding efforts—like training, rituals, and leadership communication—are working. When employees truly grasp the brand's values, they're more likely to reflect them clearly and consistently in customer interactions. Store managers and frontline staff pointed to themed collections, cultural rituals, and open leadership as key tools that help them stay aligned with the brand's identity.

J. Leadership as a Cultural Architect

Leadership style has a major impact on how brand culture is understood and expressed. Leaders who use participative approaches—like democratic or coaching styles—help employees feel more connected to the brand's vision. These leaders act as cultural architects, shaping the environment where brand values come to life. Employees under such leadership said they felt more involved in brand storytelling, especially during product launches, festive campaigns, and customer-facing events. This involvement boosts engagement and helps employees confidently represent the brand in meaningful ways.

K. Emotional Loyalty Through Cultural Connection

Employees working in culturally expressive brands showed strong emotional loyalty, highlighting how powerful cultural resonance can be. When clothing includes traditional designs, regional fabrics, and heritage stories, it creates a sense of belonging—not just for customers, but for employees too. This supports Askegaard and Linnet's (2011) idea that brands act as cultural resources. When employees wear clothing that reflects their culture, they feel more connected to the brand. This leads to more genuine customer interactions and deeper brand loyalty.

L. Rituals and Collections as Cultural Anchors

Seasonal launches, heritage campaigns, and other brand rituals were often mentioned as key ways to reinforce brand culture. These practices help employees absorb the brand's values and express them clearly to customers. In this way, branding becomes a shared performance—where employees aren't just following a script, but actively participating in telling the brand's story through what they wear and how they engage.

M. Dual Cultural Alignment Inspires Brand Advocacy

Employees who felt connected to both their company's culture and the brand's identity often became informal brand ambassadors. They didn't just do their jobs—they shared brand stories, promoted its values, and built meaningful relationships with customers. This shows how powerful it can be when brand culture is woven into the larger organizational environment. When employees feel that alignment, they represent the brand in a way that's authentic, passionate, and deeply engaging.

Implications

1) Theoretical Implications

a) Reinforces branding as a cultural and symbolic system, not just a marketing tool
b) Validates Consumer Culture Theory by showing how employees interpret and enact brand meaning through clothing
c) Extends internal branding literature by linking employee attire to brand loyalty and customer perception
d) Supports leadership theory by demonstrating that participative styles enhance brand culture awareness

2) Practical Implications

a) Apparel brands should treat employee clothing as a strategic branding asset
b) HR and brand managers must integrate brand culture training into onboarding and daily rituals
c) Leadership teams should adopt inclusive communication styles to reinforce brand values
d) Brands with cultural heritage (e.g., FabIndia, Peter England) should leverage traditional aesthetics to deepen employee and customer loyalty
e) Rituals, themed collections, and seasonal campaigns should be used to anchor brand identity internally and externally
f) Digital platforms should be used to amplify employee-led brand storytelling, ensuring symbolic coherence across online and offline channels
g) Generational differences in brand perception should be considered when designing training and engagement strategies.

CONTRIBUTION TO LITERATURE

This study has several distinct contributions to the branding and consumer culture literature.

Extending consumer culture theory – CCT has traditionally emphasized how consumers derive meaning from products and consumption practices, this research demonstrates that employees are equally critical in the meaning transfer process. By showing how employees embody cultural values through clothing, rituals, and customer interaction, the study expands CCT to include employee-mediate pathways of cultural meaning transfer.

Integrating Organizational Culture and Symbolic Branding – existing scholarship often treats organizational culture and symbolic branding as separate domains. This study bridges the two by demonstrating how participatory leadership styles and organizational stability enable employees to personalize and enact brand values. It highlights the interplay between managerial constructs and symbolic resources, offering a more holistic view of brand culture formation.

Shifting the Focus to Employee Representation - Much of the branding literature has focused on consumer perception as the primary site of cultural meaning-making, where study repositions employees as active cultural carriers, showing that their representation is interpretative rather than passive. By emphasing employee agency, the research adds depth to internal branding scholarship and highlights the symbolic role of employees in tradition-rich sectors like apparel.

Practical Relevance for Emerging Markets – contributes context- specific insights by examining apparel organizations in India, a market where cultural symbolism and heritage are central to consumer engagement.

This adds to the limited body of work on branding in non-western contexts provide a foundation for comparative studies across diverse cultural setting.

Together, these contributions position the study as both a theoretical extension and a practical resource, advancing the understating of how brand culture is sustained through employee representation and symbolic mediation.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how brand clothing culture awareness among employees influences their ability to represent brand values in customer-facing roles. Drawing on survey data from five major Indian apparel brands—Van Heusen, Allen Solly, Peter England, FabIndia, and Park Avenue—the research revealed several key insights:

- Employees who perceive a strong alignment between clothing and brand culture are more confident and consistent in portraying brand values to customers.
- When employees clearly understand the brand's culture, they tend to be more engaged, motivated, and focused on delivering customer-centered experiences.
- Leadership style is a key driver in building brand culture awareness—especially democratic and coaching approaches, which encourage stronger alignment between employees and the brand.
- Culturally symbolic clothing—especially in heritage-rich brands like FabIndia and Peter England—strengthens emotional loyalty and brand advocacy.
- Rituals, themed collections, and seasonal campaigns serve as cultural anchors, reinforcing brand identity and storytelling.
- Employees who feel aligned with both organizational culture and brand identity demonstrate higher confidence and pride in customer interactions.

These findings contribute to branding theory by positioning employee attire as a symbolic bridge between internal brand values and external brand image. They also offer practical insights for apparel companies seeking to build stronger brand culture through employee engagement, leadership, and cultural symbolism.

Recommendations

1) For Apparel Companies
   a) Design culturally aligned clothing guidelines that reflect brand identity, heritage, and regional aesthetics. Uniforms and styling should serve as visual expressions of brand values.
   b) Conduct brand culture workshops to help employees understand the symbolic meaning behind products, designs, and campaigns.
   c) Encourage employee participation in brand rituals, product launches, and themed collections to foster emotional connection and shared ownership.
   d) Establish feedback mechanisms to regularly assess employee perceptions of brand culture and clothing alignment, ensuring continuous improvement.
2) For Leadership and HR
   a) Adopt participative leadership styles—such as democratic and coaching approaches—to promote brand clarity and employee involvement.
   b) Integrate brand culture into performance reviews, recognition programs, and onboarding processes to reinforce its strategic importance.
   c) Facilitate collaboration between branding, HR, and retail teams to ensure consistent cultural messaging across departments and customer touchpoints.
   d) Support employee storytelling, encouraging staff to share brand-related experiences and cultural insights that resonate with customers.

3) For Future Research
   a) Explore consumer perception of employee attire and its influence on brand trust, authenticity, and emotional engagement.
   b) Conduct longitudinal studies to track how brand culture awareness evolves over time and across different employee roles.
   c) Compare regional and global branding strategies, especially in culturally diverse markets, to understand how local symbolism enhances brand loyalty.
   d) Investigate digital brand representation, examining how online platforms and virtual retail environments affect employee-led brand portrayal.

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