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## Power Dressing and its Importance in Modern Democracy

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## Power Dressing and its Importance in Modern Democracy

### Cover Page Footnote

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### **Abstract**

This research aimed to study the significance of Power Dressing in a modern democracy, by exploring the dynamics of clothing concerning the power it portrays for women holding influential positions in public office in a variety of countries throughout the world. This research accomplished its motive by collecting, reviewing, and analyzing scholarly articles, academic journals, newspapers, and current events which formed the foundation for data collection using a survey developed by the researchers. The analysis provided a platform for procuring knowledge of the association between Fashion and Politics, the concept of Women's Power Dressing, and its significance in a modern democracy from an international perspective. With the changing dynamics of society, this study forms the base for a better understanding of the intersection of fashion, gender, and the latest events happening worldwide.

### **Power Dressing and its Importance in Modern Democracy**

"What you wear is how you present yourself to the world, especially today when human contacts go so quick. Fashion is an instant language." —Miuccia Prada (NIA, 2016).

#### **Introduction - Fashion: A Visual Language**

A way of communication and sharing thoughts defines a language. The same concept expressed using material components in a visual context can be termed, fashion. Over time, fashion has become a major player in society, especially as a silent communicator (Kaiser, 2015). Those in power, especially women, take the visual interpretation of their wardrobe very seriously. Throughout history Power Dressing has supported women in challenging underrepresentation in politics and government. From issues like gender inequality to racism, fashion succeeded in important conversations. Power Dressing is not new to the fashion or politics and is often equated with the "Power Suit." Yet, Power Dressing has a wide variety of expressions worldwide, especially in different cultures with the integration of various traditions.

In many recent incidents, the evolving concept of women's Power Dressing has re-emerged with a fresh form emphasizing elements of democracy. One accurate example of fashion as a communication tool was the white dress code followed by Democratic congresswomen at the 2019 and 2020 State of the Union, as seen in Figures 1 and 2. The style statement was to show solidarity with suffragists during their fight for women's right to vote a century ago (Lang, 2020).



Figure 1: Feb 5<sup>th</sup>, 2019, State of the Union address (Lang C. , 2020)



Figure 2: Feb 4<sup>th</sup>, 2020, State of the Union address (Lang C. , 2020)

Fashion has increasingly attracted attention to social and political issues in non-governmental settings. One of the most influential events in U.S. fashion is the Met Gala, held annually at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. Its red carpet has become a conversing medium in recent years. Figure 3 represents fashion as a visual language and firm political art, especially when worn or photographed in high-profile settings. "That the clothes we wear hold political significance feels like a given now, but what a celebrity chooses to be seen when the spotlight is turned on them can still bring attention to overlooked social and political issues that may be close to their heart" (Hess, 2022).



Figure 3: Political Statements at the Met Gala (Hess, 2022)

While not as blatant as the Met Gala, and in a more governmental environment, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis was an influential woman in the modern era (Figure 4). The former First Lady of the United States was known for her simple yet elegant fashion looks. She was not just dressing up for a community but was looked up to by millions of women and men worldwide of her time and generations after her (Young, 2011).



Figure 4: Jackie Kennedy (Photographer/AP, 2020)

### **Power Dressing: A constant evolving concept**

Women's fashion in the twentieth century signaled further opportunities in women's workwear. According to (Paula, 2019), the fashion of the 1920s expressed the oncoming feminist wave. The Chanel suit from the 1920s was one of the early instances of the power suit. These simple coats and skirts were the ideal mix of masculinity and femininity.

Coco Chanel favored the feminine silhouette, incorporating fabrics and styles usually reserved for men (Figure 5). Yves Saint Laurent debuted the Le Smoking suit, which resembled a tuxedo, in 1966 as seen in Figure 6 (Shardlow, 2011). With more women breaking through the glass ceiling in the 1980s, Giorgio Armani was motivated and pushed by his sister to expand his women's collection to include suits (Figure 7). The boxy jacket with wide shoulders and a skirt or pants became known as the "Power Suit" (Paula, 2019). The power suit emphasized what a woman might accomplish while wearing it rather than the gender role.



Figure 5: Actress Ina Claire in Chanel, 1924 (Errico, 2020)



Figure 6: Le Smoking by YSL, 1966 (Paula, 2019)



Figure 7: Power Suit by Georgia Armani (Paula, 2019)





Figure 8: Margaret Thatcher, Former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom (Elle UK, 2013)



Figure 9: Hillary Clinton, Former First Lady, Former Secretary of State and U.S Senator (Algoo, 2016)

The two prominent women who harnessed the power suit in the late 1980s and early 1990s were Margaret Thatcher and Hillary Clinton as seen in Figures 8 and 9. Their suits included key elements that made bold and empowering statements. As more women entered the business arena and became seen as powerful television characters, ideal wear for professional women transformed. The Former UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's power suit preference was a tailored skirt with pearl accessories and heels (Elle UK, 2013). The former United States Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton's unique choice of monochrome suits communicated classic yet relatable attire for working women.

In the 21st century, women demonstrated their new idea of Power Dressing. Former First Lady of the United States Michelle Obama (Figure 10) made an impact with her fashion and became a synonym for the "Art of Power Dressing" for the current generation. She is known for

choosing bright colors and bold shoulders on the U.S. political platform. As described by Michelle Obama's stylist Meredith Koop, "The legacy is her. Clothing is that extra element that is transcendent in nonverbal communication (Davis, 2021)."



Figure 10: Michelle Obama, Former First Lady of the United States and U.S attorney (Davis, 2021),



Figure 11: Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, House Representative of the U.S. (Gibson, 2019)

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is another woman who made her way to the House of Representatives (Figure 11). She is famous for wearing suits, big ear hoops, and bright red lipstick. Although the public has viewed her style positively and negatively, her uncompromising individuality is what sets her apart. While there is room for variance, in most of these examples, Power Dressing is equated with a suit or dress. When looking worldwide, Power Dressing takes many different forms. The basic idea is the same everywhere, but the presentation shows how the spectrum changes from west to east.

The beauty of the African continent's cultural diversity can be seen in the vibrant and traditional clothing that most leaders prefer. As shown in Figure 12, former Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf chose a four-piece skirt and suit made of a local fabric called *lapas*, along with a headscarf, which Liberians call "Gentle" (Young, 2011). Another example is the Former Finance Minister of Nigeria (Figure 13), Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, whose style was admired by the public and represented her straightforward yet distinctive personality (Figure 13).



Figure 12: Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Former Prime Minister of Liberia (O'Brian, 2020)

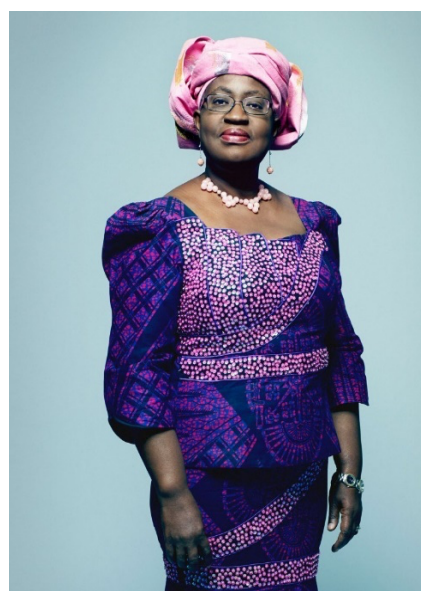


Figure 13: Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, Former Finance Minister, Nigeria (Hapak, 2014)

Traveling farther east, one can find more deeply rooted significance of cultural clothing and its power. In India and Bangladesh, the *sari* (woven cloth draped around the body) is the routine form of dressing. A notable example is former Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi (Figure 14), who celebrated her powerful image by choosing a khadi sari and voluminous short hair with a grey stripe. Sheikh Hasina, Prime Minister of Bangladesh (Figure 15), regularly

donned the sari as a power dress. Another form of dressing, the *salwar-kameez*, worn by Benazir Bhutto, the former Prime Minister of Pakistan (Figure 16), was widely admired and politically popular among the public (The Tribune Time, 2018).



Figure 14: Indira Gandhi, Former Prime Minister of India (Getty Images, n.d.)



Figure 15: Sheikh Hasina, Prime Minister of Bangladesh (UNEP, n.d.)



Figure 16: Benazir Bhutto, Former Prime Minister of Pakistan (Tribune Time, 2018)

These dress forms were not created as Power Dresses, but certain styles became iconic with time. These ensembles are the most democratic piece of clothing on the subcontinent, which travels across classes, castes, religions, and regions. Sushma Swaraj, the former Indian Foreign Affairs Minister, established the narrative of "*Sari Politics*" (Figure 17), which has persisted throughout the current generation of South Asian politicians (Tamang, 2019; Wikibio, n.d). Another prominent female leader in the eastern world is Aung San Suu Kyi, who serves as the State Counsellor of Myanmar (Figure 18) and is adored for sporting traditional attire and Burmese textiles (Makenzie, 2012).



Figure 17: Sushma Swaraj, Former Minister of External Affairs, India (Tamang, 2019)



Figure 18: Aung San Sun Kyi, State Counsellor of Myanmar (Aserud, 2012)



Figure 19: Ilhan Omar, U.S House representative (McCausland, 2019)



Figure 20: Yingluck Shinawatra, Former Prime Minister of Thailand (Wenin, 2012)

Some women leaders incorporated their cultural elements into western silhouettes. For instance, U.S. Representative Ilhan Omar (Figure 19) is known for her headscarf /turban, representing her authenticity and culture in the U.S. Capitol (Calvert, 2019). The Former Prime Minister of Thailand, Yingluck Shinawatra (Figure 20), is known as Thailand's fashion Icon for choosing strong, bright colors in skirt suits or formal dresses (Wenin, 2012).

All in all, Power Dressing has its exceptionality, showing alterations over time and across the globe. The beauty of powerful women lies in work created by the people who understand that fashion is communication, be it the designers, the stylists, or the woman who makes a visual statement. The impact of fashion on society and society over fashion has a prolonged association.

### Method: Conducted Survey

To better understand the role of Power Dressing in the lives of young adults in a modern democracy, after a literature review, a nine-item survey was developed. This instrument enabled the researcher to collect data to explore Power Dressing and gain input from a population with a diverse background in education and culture. The survey protocol was approved by the IRB Board and distributed digitally using Qualtrics. Potential participants were contacted using a recruitment script through the professional and social media networks of the researcher, an international student at a large university in the Midwest. Following the initial distribution, recruitment was done through snowball sampling with data collection for fourteen days in April 2021. All participants were provided with a consent form before beginning the survey.

### Survey data - Results

#### Demographics

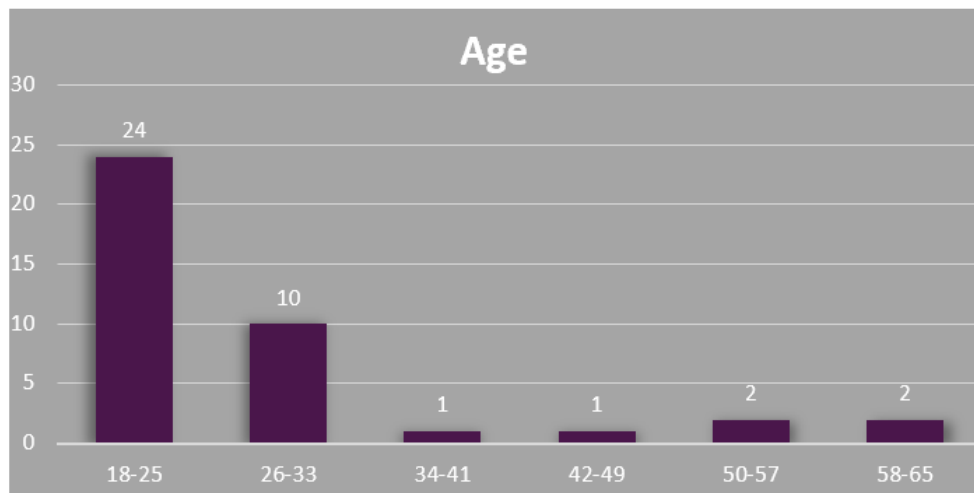


Figure 1: Bar Graph – Spread of age among participants (N=42)

A total of 42 volunteers completed the survey with findings for each item described with statistical and qualitative analysis using Qualtrics. Figure 1 above shows the range of age of the responders. Even with a wide range of age groups, the sample was skewed towards college students (18-25), with 85% concentrated under 34. The participant group was enriched with a blend of individuals born inside (42%) and outside the United States (58%). The diversity of background helped the research in gaining global perspective insights.

### Personal experience with clothing and accessories

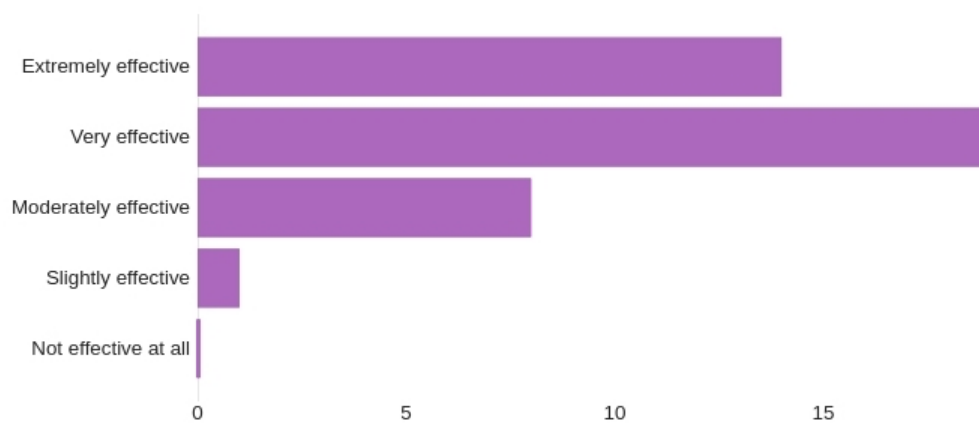


Figure 2: How would you describe the effectiveness of clothing in expressing your identity?

The first question was, “How would you describe the effectiveness of clothing in expressing your identity?”. As shown above, in Figure 2, 33 out of 42 participants believed clothing to be either extremely effective or very effective in expressing identity. Additionally, based on another survey question (below Figure 3), nearly 95% of respondents indicated clothing contributes to their confidence and power.

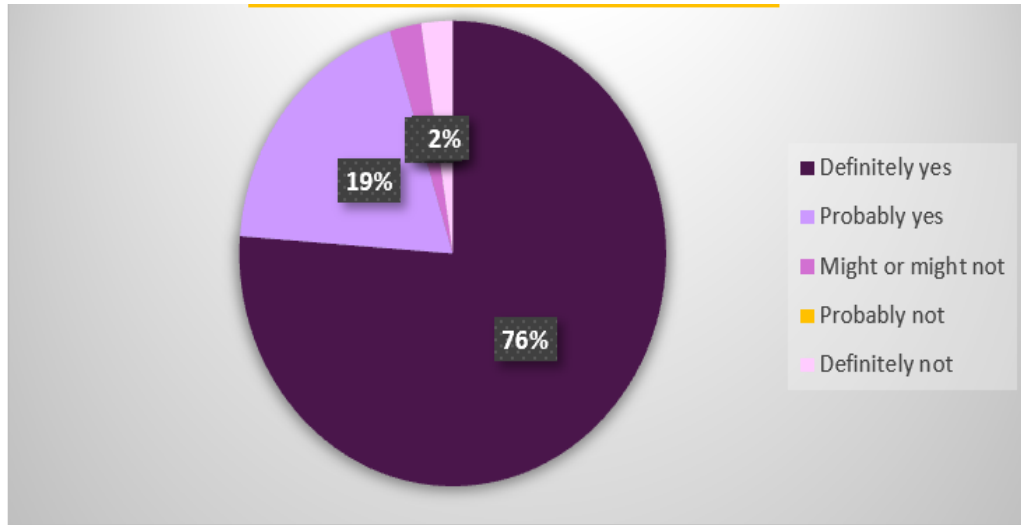


Figure 3: Pie chart illustrate the distribution of the answers by survey responder for the question, “Does clothing gives you more power and confidence?”

Participants were then asked to select accessories that they believed added personality to their outfits. Below, Table 1 demonstrates the responses. With the most votes, watch and belts stood out with 70% and 50%, while collar, necklaces, brooches, and hats followed.

*(Table 1 next page)*





### View on Female leaders

There were few questions in the survey directed to understand respondent's opinions about female politician's clothing. Based on collected data, as shown in Figure 4, nearly 85% of the responders thought that "Power Dressing" is a tool for female representatives to show their strength and power.

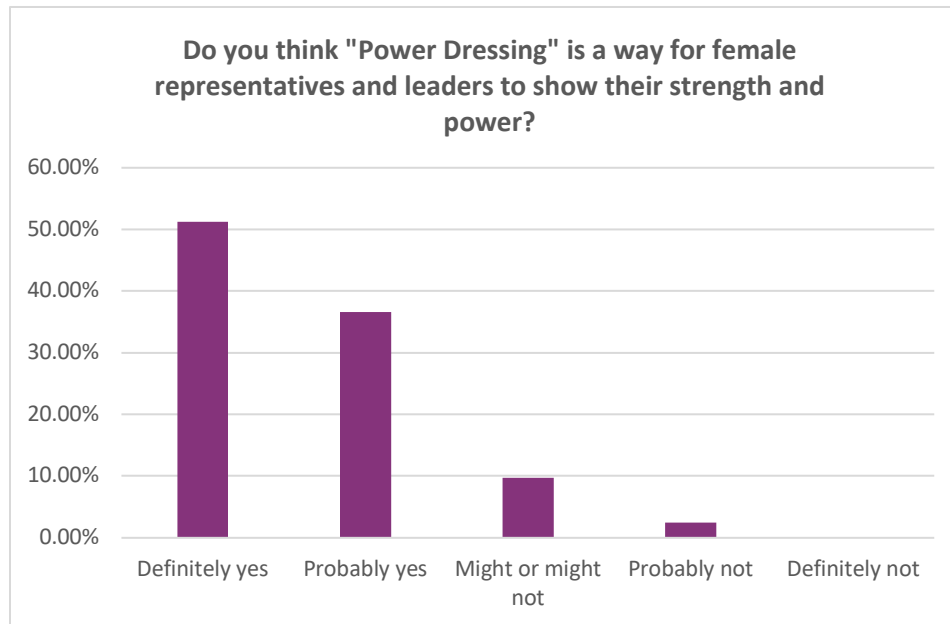








Figure 4: "Is Power Dressing a tool for female representative to show their strength and power?"

Six powerful female leaders were pictured in iconic outfits throughout the survey. Participants were required to rank the leaders based on their Power Dressing style, and Table 2 below reflects the results. Former First Lady of the United States Michelle Obama's received the most positive responses, followed by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and Ilhan Omar. According to participants, all three leaders portrayed a powerful image through their outfits.

*(Table 2 next page)*

**Table 2**

*Percentage communicating Power Dressing of global women leaders based on participant’s view and response*

IMAGE							
Name		Michelle Obama	Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez	Ilhan Omar	Indira Gandhi	Hillary Clinton	Yingluck Shinawatra
<b>Not at all</b>	%	0%	2.38%	2.38%	2.38%	9.5%	2.38%
	No	0	1	1	1	4	1
<b>To some extent</b>	%	11.90%	4.76%	7.14%	21.43%	7.14%	7.14%
	No	5	2	3	9	3	3
<b>To moderate extent</b>	%	21.43	30.95%	30.95%	14.28%	26.19%	38.10%
	No	9	13	13	6	11	16
<b>To great extent</b>	%	38.10	35.71	40.47%	38.10%	33.33%	33.33%
	No	16	15	17	16	14	14
<b>To very great extent</b>	%	28.57%	26.19%	19.04%	23.80%	23.80%	19.04%
	No	12	11	8	10	10	8
<b>Total</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>42</b>

The former Prime Minister of India made a significant impact with her unique style and stood in fourth place, with nearly 62% believing her style to be “great to a very great extent” in terms of Power Dressing. Next on the board, we had Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and the Former Prime Minister of Thailand, Yingluck Shinawatra’s defining “Power Dressing” for more than 50% of the respondents.

Based on the responses for the last question, more than half of the volunteers believed that fashion has too much influence on social justice issues, while only a handful (~11%) felt that it contributed too little (Figure 5).

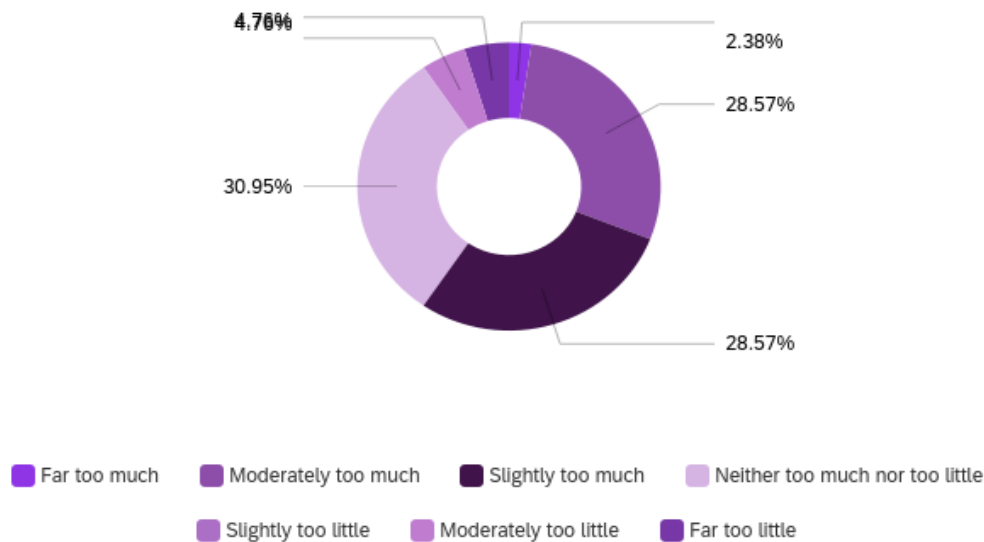


Figure 5: To what extent do you believe that fashion contributes to social justice issues? (e.g. Gender equality, Culture, Race, and power dynamics in society)

### Results: Analysis based on survey results

The purpose of this study was successfully achieved through literature review, journal articles, books, news media articles and, most importantly, research investigation and analysis. Questions surrounding perceptions of fashion and power distribution in modern democracies were largely explained with the help of collected information and statistics. In the process of gathering information and analyzing it, a narrative is built. Most results indicate that fashion has a positive impact on politics and society. Thus, this study validates the notion that fashion is a visual language for the exchange of ideas and opinions.

Furthermore, if not always, women in high public offices use power attire to demonstrate their dominance, strength, and power. The study also revealed that the term Power Dressing, while mostly associated with pantsuits, was not unique to the style. The connection of fashion to ideas and the exchange of culture is closely related to dressing around the world.

The responses to various accessories that help enhance an individual's attire show that belts, scarves/collars, watches, and necklaces are admired. This is seen as a trend that many female leaders worldwide follow. The best example of the accessory trend is the “Power Pearls” worn by leaders like Hillary Clinton and Kamala Harris as seen in Figure 21 and 22 (DeMarco, 2020; Reeve, 2015). Accessories like belts are known to add structure to an outfit, which is also meant to convey an authoritative stance. The best example is former First Lady Michelle Obama, who used different belt styles to add glamor to her outfits.



Figure 21. Kamala Harris, Vice-President (Parker, 2021)



Figure 22. Hillary Clinton, Former Secretary of State (Reeve, 2015)

In the east, various components make up the symbolic representation with accessories. For instance, many people like to wear eye-catching, bright-colored "Bindi" (*a dot worn in the middle of the forehead*). Another popular fashion in Asian countries is to wear a jacket or a shawl (*a piece of cloth wrapped around their bodies*). A good example will be the most celebrated

female leaders from India for her style, Sushma Swaraj (Figure 23). This study found that both leaders and participants use fashion accessories as tools to express themselves and show a unique identity.



Figure 23. Sushma Swaraj, Former Minister of Foreign Affairs (Giridharadas, 2019)  
Picture credit: Flickr/MEAIndia

## Conclusion

In terms of Power Dressing, female leads have preferred to stick with minimalism, whether in the monochromatic looks of Hillary Clinton or the sari that Indira Gandhi wore made of locally produced khadi fabric. As was mentioned at the beginning of this study, the idea of Power Dressing has remained constant, but its presentation and perception continue to change. Consequently, will the preference for monochrome, the pantsuit trend, and the sophisticated dress code evolve?



Figure 24. Billy Porter, American Actor and Singer (Getty Images, n.d)



Figure 25 Stitch Fix X Phoebe English (Theodosi, 2021)

The recent events associated with LGBTQ+ activism and the notion of blurring the gender lines have picked up the pace. It begs the question: Will society observe a change in the mainstream political trend? In the entertainment industry, the power dressing concept has already advanced. In 2019, American actor and singer Billy Porter (Figure 24) wore a gown to the Oscars, skipping the normal Tuxedo. He pushed the boundaries of gender-specific clothing by experimenting with his style (Allaire, 2019). Working from home became the norm due to the pandemic, and the fashion industry suffered a setback regarding workwear. This social shift emerged a new concept of athletic power dressing (Figure 25). “Athleisure brands are looking at ways to upgrade sporty clothing for the office. In an interview, Julia Straus, the chief executive officer of Sweaty Betty, said the company has been preparing for a new world of work, sport, and play (Theodosi, 2021, para. 28)”. Power dressing is currently considering a new generation

of concepts that subvert societal norms regarding workwear and blur gender lines. This suggests the beginning of a fresh momentum toward catching up to the current generation.

This study laid the groundwork for further research on Power Dressing and gender roles concerning clothing. The findings of this study support the idea that clothing plays a significant role in how female leaders present themselves to the world and demonstrate the prevalence of their power in societies. Fashion and politics have been intertwined for a long time and continue to do so. In the future, the refreshed version of Power Dressing will be rewritten by the subsequent group of designers, politicians, stylists, and we as citizens of this changing world.



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