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Rethinking Imported Prestige to The Rise of Indian Craft Luxury: Understanding Consumer Perceptions of Handmade Indian Textile

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ABSTRACT

Indian handlooms and handicrafts carry a long history of skilled craftsmanship and cultural identity. Yet within India itself domestic consumers often undervalue these handmade goods, treating imported brands as the true markers of status and luxury. This study examines the gap and argues that Indian handcrafted textiles already prized in international market carry the authenticity, craftsmanship, and cultural depth needed to compete directly with global luxury brands. Using a mixed-methods approach based on secondary data, consumer surveys, and artisan interviews. The paper argues that current and future design professionals play a crucial role in elevating these crafts. By using social media and other digital platforms to share the stories, skills, and effort behind these products, the next generation of designers can help reposition Indian handlooms as genuine contemporary luxury items, closing the gap between local perception and global success.

Keywords : Indian Handicraft, Textile, Consumer Perceptions, Emerging Designer, Craftsmanship

Scope of the study

This research explores the domestic luxury market for traditional Indian handlooms, with a focus on urban consumers. The primary data draws on interviews with artisans, shoppers, vendors and design graduates. The study specifically examines how modern storytelling and social media can be used to market these crafts as contemporary luxury.

Introduction

India is one of the most diverse and culturally rich countries in the world. Each region has its own traditions, languages, cuisines, festivals, and importantly, its own textiles and crafts. A city's craft tradition works almost like a map of its culture, memory, and identity. These are



not just fabrics or decorative object but living expression of history, geography, and community.

The scale of this is considerable : India is a home to more than 30 distinct fabric crafts spread across 28 states and 8 union territories. With each shaped by generations of regional practice (Fabriclore, 2019). Together, these traditional form one of the richest and most varied textile heritage in the world

The Government of India has formally recognized many of these crafts through Geographical Indication (GI) tags, which protect the uniqueness of products such as Kanchipuram silk Sarees, Banarasi brocade, Pashmina shawls (Indian Ministry of Textiles, 2023).

Research Gap

Existing research has looked separately at consumer ethnocentrism in Indian markets (Kumar, 2011), structural challenges within the handloom sector and the potential of designer-artisan collaboration (Mamidipudi, 2018). Few studies, however connect these three strands specifically through the lens of digital storytelling as a repositioning strategy for Indian handlooms as domestic luxury goods. This paper addresses that gap by combining qualitative insight from consumers, artisans, and vendors with an analysis of the role emerging designers can play in closing the perception gap between global recognition and domestic undervaluation.

Cultural importance

Regional climate and geography have historically shaped which fibres and technique took root where, giving rise to distinct, place specific crafts. The Banarasi saree is often treated as a bridal essential. Paithani sarees in Maharashtra are passed down as family heirlooms. Pashmina shawls are gifted on special occasions in Kashmir. Madhubani paintings are traditionally made during festivals such as Holi and Diwali. Historically, handlooms were woven into everyday life families kept and passed down textiles across decades, which was itself a quite proof their durability. Today that relationship has weakened. Younger, urban consumers increasingly treat these crafts as traditional clothing meant only for weddings or festivals. At the same time, foreign luxury brands have successfully positioned themselves as the default symbol of status and exclusivity, and domestic buyers have followed, placing far more social and financial value on important labels than on India's own textile traditions.

Methodology

1. Research Design



To understand the domestic textile market, this study gathered data directly from these groups: consumer artisan and vendors. Research held informal conversations with everyday shoppers, traditional artisans, wholesale and emerging design professionals while they were actively shopping in retail setting allowing for observation of real purchasing decisions and price negotiations as they happen, rather than reconstructed after the fact.

Interviews with traditional artisans focused on the physical demands of their work and the growing difficulty of sourcing authentic raw materials. Beyond production itself, artisans repeatedly raised a business level problem: the difficulty of finding buyers who genuinely understand and value the original craft.

Conversation with wholesale vendors, in turn offered a view of business side supply chain pressure and the gap between what it costs an artisan to make a piece and what a consumer is ultimately willing to pay.

2. Participant Groups & Selection Criteria

To build a realistic picture of the handloom ecosystem, the study focused on these groups: buyers, makers, and middlemen, along a fourth group representing the industry's future design graduates. Active consumers were on urban shoppers actively purchasing sarees in retail stores rather than surveyed hypothetically after the mid decision made it possible to see how they actually reacted to price tags, brand names, and claims of authenticity in the real time.

Traditional Artisans (The Makers):

The study focused on skilled Artisan who works every day. The selection specifically targeted individuals who are actively facing today's most pressing industry challenges, particularly the growing shortage of pure raw materials and the ongoing struggle to find genuine buyers who truly value the original craft.

Vendors (The Middlemen)

To understand what happens between the artisan's and the retail buyer's wardrobe, wholesale vendors were included in the study. Operating right in the middle of the textile markets, these vendors offered a much-needed reality check. They explained the everyday pressures of the supply chain, how wholesale pricing actually works, and just how difficult it is to sell handcrafted goods in a market built around mass production.

Primary Data: This consists of retail observation across 15 stores in three cities (5 in Mumbai, 4 in Jaipur, 6 in Jodhpur), spanning both local and high-end outlets; interviews with 3 artisans in Jaipur; interviews with 5 vendors across Jaipur and Surat and interviews with fashion design

graduates. All artisan and vendor interview were conducted with verbal consent, and responses have been anonymized in this paper. This primary data forms the empirical core of the study's findings on d rounconsumer bias, artisan trust, and vendor-level pricing pressure.

Secondary Data: This was used to place these findings within broader industry trends—specifically, handicraft export figures and references to Geographical Indication (GI) tags. Where possible, these claims are drawn from authoritative sources, including the Indian Ministry of Textiles and published export data. One background claim regarding the diversity of Indian textile crafts (30+ crafts across 28 states and 8 union territories) is sourced from Fabriclore (2019), a textile industry/e-commerce content platform rather than a government or peer-reviewed source. This source is retained only for a general, non-contested descriptive fact and is not used to support any statistical or evaluative claim in this paper. **A Note on the 78% Figure:** This statistic reflects patterns of shopper behavior observed by the researchers during unstructured, non-randomized retail visits across the three cities, rather than a structured survey with a defined sampling method and response rate. It is reported as a descriptive, indicative figure—not a statistically validated finding.

3. Results

The Luxury Gap and Consumer Bias

Observing shoppers in retail spaces revealed a strong consistent preference for foreign tags. Roughly [78%] of the buyers observed instinctively associated the idea of "luxury" with imported brands rather than homegrown crafts. Bias consumer who would spend 10000 rupees without hesitation on a factory produced imported item would frequently hesitate and bargain hard over a handwoven Indian piece carrying the exact same price tag.

The Ground Reality for Artisans

Conversations with the artisans in Jaipur made clear how wide the gap is between maker and buyer. Artisans described that local shoppers largely unaware of how much time, physical efforts and costly raw material goes into a single piece along with the heritage behind it. Because that labour is invisible to the buyer it gets bargained away and the constant pressure to discount does more than reduce income artisan described it as stripping craft itself

This constant lack of local respect has also created a huge trust issue. Artisans admitted they are very hesitant to work with upcoming Indian

designers who claim they want to "support" the craft. Over the years, international fashion brands are the ones who have actually paid them fairly and treated them as professionals.



Because of this, weavers are naturally suspicious of new local designers, making it really hard for young Indian graduates to team up with them.

The Global Irony of Indian Craftsmanship

Looking at global market reports As per handicraft export data, the entire value of handicraft exports between April and September 2023 was Rs. 14,791 crore (US\$1.77 billion).

While domestic buyers frequently overlook these textiles, major European fashion houses actively rely on Indian weavers and embroiderers to create their highest-end collections. This truly demonstrates that Indian textiles are already at the pinnacle of quality, skill and beauty, solidifying their status as a global luxury. It's just that they aren't getting the recognition they deserve right here in India.

4. Discussion

The Perception vs. Reality Gap

Data gathered from shoppers, artisans and vendors directly answers the study's core question: the undervaluation of Indian handlooms is a marketing failure, not a product failure. This research highlights a contrast between domestic and international market perspectives. Global luxury markets highly value the authenticity and craftsmanship of Indian textiles, While local urban consumers remain heavily conditioned to view imported brands as ultimate status symbols, Consequently, the domestic market has lost touch with the cultural significance and effort behind these handmade goods.

The Power of Modern Storytelling

As established in the scope of this study, the solution does not require altering the physical textiles or the traditional weaving techniques themselves. The product already meets a luxury standard. Instead, the focus should be on marketing these authentic crafts. True luxury in this modern era is driven by exclusivity and heritage. Indian handlooms already possess these qualities, but they currently lack the story behind the craft needed to convey their value to a status-conscious urban consumer.

The Crucial Role of Emerging Designers and Educators

Interviews with fashion design graduates revealed the most viable path forward. Current and future design professionals hold the key to elevating these crafts. By strategically using social media and other digital platforms, emerging designers can share the real stories, deep knowledge, and immense physical effort behind each product. When designers use digital



spaces to visually break down the labor-intensive process of handweaving, they educate the consumer. This transparency successfully repositions the handloom from a standard "local" garment into a highly desirable, luxury item.

Design educators play a crucial role in shaping future designer's perceptions of traditional crafts. They must therefore possess a deep appreciation for the craft and economic significance of the culture they originate from and respect for the artisans who preserve these crafts. Young designers may sometimes form judgements based on artisan's living conditions or social economic status, so educators have a responsibility to challenge these biases. By fostering empathy, ethical engagement and professional respect, design educators can inspire future designers to recognise artisans as skilled knowledge holders and valued collaborators, rather than simply craft workers.

Conclusion: Reclaiming the Value of Indian Handlooms - This study highlights a striking irony: the very same Indian handlooms that command admiration and high prices from European luxury houses are consistently undervalued in their own country. The research makes one thing abundantly clear—this is not, and has never been, an issue of physical quality.

For a long time, many domestic buyers have believed that luxury only comes from imported brands. Because of that, they often fail to appreciate the skill and artistry behind locally made textiles and see them as simple products instead of handcrafted works.

This mindset also encourages harsh bargaining, which does more than reduce a weaver's income — it undermines their respect as a skilled artisan. As a result, the bond between traditional weavers and the domestic market has badly weakened.

The Path Forward

To save these heritage crafts from fading into obscurity, the domestic fashion industry requires a total overhaul in how it communicates value. This transformation must happen in three crucial stages

Unlearning in the Classroom: Change starts with educators. Before a young designer even touches a loom, they must be taught to dismantle their own social biases. Educators must actively cultivate a deep, professional respect for artisans in the next generation.

This means valuing artisans as respected partners in the work, not just as hired workers who do manual labour.

In the industry, emerging designers must leverage digital platforms to showcase their craft and engage with a wider audience. By sharing raw, behind-the-scenes stories, designers can



visually translate the sheer physical sweat, time, and generational knowledge poured into a single yard of fabric. When consumers finally see the effort, they begin to understand the price tag.

Changing the language around craft Words carry weight Calling something "local" or "regional" can unintentionally signal that it's negotiable, even disposable. Reframing these textiles as export-quality luxury — which, by international demand, they already are — could help close the perception gap this study set out to explore.

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