

Degendering the Crafts:
An Exploration of Brands working on
Gender Neutral Handloom based clothing
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ABSTRACT:

This research paper delves into exploring the possibility of disassociating gender norms from crafts and their subsequent societal acceptance. Crafts have long been associated with gender specific stereotypes, with certain activities or creations often being categorised as “masculine” or “feminine”. However, there is a growing movement towards making crafts more inclusive and gender-neutral. This study uses qualitative research methodologies such as in-person and online interviews, social media analysis and secondary data analysis. This study highlights the proactive approach adopted by various brands towards embracing gender neutrality in craft design and production, driven by a desire for inclusivity and acceptance within society. This study also discusses the shift in the perspectives of the artisans, consumers and other stakeholders involved in production and consumption of these craft based products. It discusses how breaking free from traditional gender norms is making crafts more inclusive and accessible to a diverse range of consumers.

KEYWORDS:

Crafts, Gender, inclusivity, gender neutral clothing, artisans, gender norms.

INTRODUCTION

Crafts encompass a wide range of activities, from woodworking to knitting, painting to pottery. In India, traditional crafts are deeply intertwined with gender roles, with certain crafts historically associated with masculinity and others with femininity. Men typically engage in crafts requiring physical strength, like woodworking and metalworking, while women are traditionally involved in more delicate crafts such as weaving and embroidery. This division of labor is reinforced by societal norms, cultural perceptions, and economic factors, with women often left to carry on craft traditions within rural communities as men migrate for work. By engaging in crafts that are traditionally associated with a specific gender, individuals challenge societal norms and expectations, contributing to the dismantling of gender stereotypes. However, there are movements aimed at challenging these gender norms and empowering women artisans through training, resources, and market access initiatives, fostering greater gender equality within the craft sector. (Ranavaade, 2022).

When individuals participate in crafts traditionally associated with the opposite gender, they challenge traditional gender roles and stereotypes. Through these actions, individuals redefine the boundaries of gendered activities, promoting inclusivity and acceptance. On the other hand, the creation of gender-neutral crafts is influenced by broader societal attitudes towards gender. Craftsmakers who intentionally design gender-neutral products contribute to the creation of environments that are welcoming to people of all genders. These gender-neutral crafts often prioritise functionality and aesthetics over gendered stereotypes. For example, a gender-neutral clothing line may feature designs and colours that appeal to a wide range of preferences without adhering to traditional gender norms (Thomas, 2020).

This study contributes to the ongoing conversation surrounding gender equality and inclusivity. By examining the relationship between crafts and gender neutrality, we gain insights into how everyday activities can be used as tools for social change. Secondly, the study high-

lights the potential of crafts as a platform for promoting diversity and acceptance. By creating gender-neutral products and spaces, crafts-people actively contribute to building more inclusive communities. Finally, the study challenges existing stereotypes and norms, encouraging individuals to embrace their interests and talents regardless of gender expectations.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

A study exploring dynamics of home industries and the role of women within them found a division of labor, decision-making processes concerning resources, and the factors influencing these aspects, with a focus on identifying practical gender needs and reconstructing perceptions of fulfillment among craftswomen (Fatchiya & Susanti, 2023). Another study examined how craft practice shapes expressions of gender identity within both the craftwork itself and the broader community context, including local networks and stakeholders (Dhau-ndiyal & Dangwal, 2023). Another study aimed to assess the socio-economic status of potters in Nohar while examining their awareness of government initiatives such as KSY and PMAY(Sharma, Deb & Manjul, 2023). Fifth study contributes valuable insights into the complex inter-play between class, gender, and social capital, particularly within marginalized communities, offering a nuanced perspective on the dynamics of social networks in disadvantaged settings. (Warr, 2016)

After an extensive review of existing literature, it was found that very few studies explored the idea of gender and crafts from an Indian perspective, thus underlining the importance of this study.

AIM & OBJECTIVES

- » The overarching aim of this study is to explore the possibility of de-gendering the crafts and their subsequent societal acceptance
- » To achieve the desired aim, the specific objectives are listed below
- » To identify the gendered patterns of craft production and consumption

- » To explore the practices needed to disassociate gender from crafts
- » To discover brands that are adopting de-gendering practices from crafts
- » To analysing the brand's marketing strategies and potential customers

METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this research includes a Case Study of existing indian brands dealing with handloom based garments designing and production. The research will also take in-person and online interviews with the brands 'Save As', 'SOLO Studio' and 'Phulkari Forever' and existing online interviews with these brands. Additionally, an analysis of brand's marketing strategies through existing data will also be conducted to delve into their markets and target groups.

DATA ANALYSIS & FINDINGS

Following the steps of the interview analysis led to the discovery of the mentioned results. Challenging the disposable culture perpetuated by fast fashion -'Save As'- the first brand we interviewed utilises 'Katran' or 'Scraps' and crafts patchwork products. According to Ms. Akriti, the CEO of the brand, patchwork being a vivid multicoloured fabric is stereotypically associated to be adorned by the female gender only. The choice of monochrome palettes and incorporation of neutral elements in their designs make their products appealing for every gender.

The popular block printing craft technique of Rajasthan is traditionally printed on feminine silhouettes exclusively. Ms. Aditi, CEO of 'The Solo Studio' voiced how block prints are mostly available in floral patterns which are traditionally not used on masculine or gender-neutral silhouettes. This motivated them to deliver a fresh look of block printing on non-sexist clothing. Similarly, 'Phulkari Forever' is crafting Phulkari shirts for women when conventionally Phulkari is practiced on suits, dupattas and sarees.

Being a NIFT (National Institute of Fashion Technology) pass out, Ms Akriti (CEO of Save As) was exposed to inclusive fashion left and right which motivated her to start a gender-neutral brand of her own. Similarly, the main motivation of the Phulkari Forever team was their desire to birth a new look for Phulkari based apparel. Collectively the main motivation of all three of the aforementioned brands is the rapid increase of the consumer demand for gender-neutral clothing. Also stated by (Lin, Liu, Yang, Zhang in 2022) in their research paper saying that the prospect of non-sexist clothing is quite optimistic with great development potential.

But according to the brands, this knowledge has not yet reached the artisans. The brands shared that when their initial collections were launched, the artisans were confused and they questioned their brand identity. When Phulkari Forever came up with the concept of Phulkari being embroidered on any other silhouette other than the traditional silhouette seemed unusual to the artisans. At the end of the day, they are just involved with the craft and not the designs. Gradually since they are observing a spike in their sales the artisans are starting to realise the consumer demand of gender-neutral craft-based products. The influence of celebrities on artisans is also an important driving factor in de-gendering crafts. It was mentioned by the CEOs that when the artisans noticed their hand made apparel being showcased at high fashion ramp walks or on celebrities' social media, the artisans were understanding that the society is changing and people are becoming more accepting of the change. Also since the grandchildren of most of these artisans are now college going students, their interactions with their refined thoughts is polishing their mindsets into wanting to make more of gender-neutral products.

By doing the analysis of the Instagram accounts of 'Save As', 'The Solo Studio' and 'Phulkari Forever', we observed that gender fluidity is evident in their identity through the usage of meticulously chosen colour schemes, unisex silhouettes and both male and female models wearing similar or the same products in their photoshoots.

To meet the first objective 'to identify the gendered patterns of craft production and consumption', it was discovered that traditional crafts like Phulkari and block printing are practiced with a gender specific consumer base in mind. To meet the second objective 'to explore the practices needed to disassociate gender from crafts' we discovered brands who are working on degendering crafts and found that gender neutral silhouettes and color palettes are needed to disassociate gender from crafts. Also, artisans' awareness through social media and celebrity influence is enlightening them to become accepting of non sexist crafts.

CONCLUSION

Through our research we concluded that brands in the market are trying to be more accepting and inclusive- the designers are exploring new design ideas and techniques incorporating crafts and making crafts more inclusive. Crafts becoming gender neutral is influenced by how artisans work, what people want, and how society views gender. It is discovered that artisans do face difficulty in accepting change to match consumer demand but they are gradually becoming familiar with gender neutrality. The findings suggest that the degenderization of crafts like Phulkari shirts reflects changing societal attitudes towards gender by breaking free from traditional gender norms and making it accessible to a more diverse customer base. Another one of our key findings suggests that the prevalent class divide in our society has formed the mindsets of the artisans into not accepting these changes as quickly as the consumers who were brought up in a much more accepting environment.

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Conflict of interest:

The Authors have no conflict of interest to declare that they are relevant to the content of this article.

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