

Online Visual Merchandising of Women's Ethnic Apparel – Literature Analysis of Artisan Reference

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ABSTRACT - The world has been witness to the dynamic changes in the retail industry. Moving from In Store to Online to Multi Channel to Omni Channel is a journey that most marketing enthusiasts are abreast with, yet the industry seems to be throwing new and disruptive insights in every innovation that it has made. With a lot of information, options, and refined research tools available at disposal to consumers, apparel retailers have to constantly innovate and make shopping experiences more convenient yet enjoyable for them to keep returning. One such aid or tool that has been instrumental in luring customers in physical stores until the era of online commerce hit hard is visual merchandising.

Online Visual Merchandising includes the elements of display witnessed on the website of the organization for the customer entails the visual merchandising efforts. It becomes the first point of contact that the brand establishes with the customer in order to strike a deal. The inquisitiveness in the area was driven by the fact that 'textile' purchase is authenticated by the 'tactile' senses. The increasing number of women who shop online for apparel applauded the shopping experiences over the challenges of physical shopping.

This research paper seeks to highlight the concepts relevant to online visual merchandising of women's ethnic apparel and analyse through available literature the emphasis on Artisan/Craftsmanship. The endeavour is to help marketers especially Online Visual Merchandisers to understand the value of enhancing the customer experience on the website by highlighting the artisan/craftsmanship story of the garment.

Keywords: *online visual merchandising, women's ethnic apparel, site atmospherics, website design, artisanship, craftsmanship*

I. INTRODUCTION

The retail industry has intrigued researchers from time immemorial and continues to do so till date, the insights have led to addressing issues pertinent to improving systems and structures integral to the retail industry. The evolution of retail has been manifested manifolds thanks to the digital innovations witnessed around the world. India has emerged as the focal point of experimentation with developments in the world of retail, thanks to large customer base and a vibrant economy. E-Commerce has introduced to our nation a plethora of options to engage customers in the chain of events that complete the cycle of product experience.

The spark for investigating this topic was from the book *Making India Work* by William Nanda Bissell. The author argued that the pride of belonging to a great nation like India brings along with it a lot grave realities – poverty and corruption continue to plague our nation in spite of our growth prospects as an economic power in the world.

'Skewed Development and Widespread Discontent' Bissell says are reasons why the lines between the rich and the poor are widening, interpreting that India is a *poorly managed country* not a *poor country*. William Nanda Bissell, Managing Director of the successful FabIndia chain, proposes a radical, new paradigm for development that delinks consumption from quality of life without destroying the natural environment in the process. While we acknowledge that India is a country of contradictions, the diversity and rich heritage adds to the challenge of making this nation a safe haven for both customers and marketers alike.

The contribution of art and culture to the aesthetics of a garment seems to be an area unexplored yet there lies huge potential to make it the most significant touchpoint in selling a piece of garment. The welfare of Artisans and Craftsman has been the focus of a lot of Non-Governmental Organizations and Social Entrepreneurs, the retail industry seems not presently focussed on the cause though stories of



exploitation and capitalistic atrocities abound in public discourse.

The paper explores existential literature material that supports the cause of artisanship or craftsmanship in order to inspire research in this area so more relevant deliberations are driven through the insights which could instigate media to drive policies to further the cause of safeguarding traditional forms of art and craft intrinsic to ethnic garments in India. The tacit knowledge among indigenous skilled artisans has to be protected and furthered both by customers and the state together.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The mention of artisanship in the context of ethnic apparel is scarce, nevertheless there exists some references to art and respect to artisanship in the industrial atmosphere and design studies. (Bettiol & Micelli, 2013) The need to bridge the gap between fashion and marketing was recognized in the early 1990s and thus sustainability became the key word introduced into fashion studies alongside design and culture.

The understanding of how purchases of organic cotton and fair-trade apparel are influenced by social norms and product knowledge helped fashion marketing gain advantage on emphasis of ethical marketing. (Han, T.-I., & Stoel L., 2016) Further, the emphasis on sustainable knowledge sources and knowledge types was also highlighted to decipher consumer's attitude and behavioural intention (Kong, H.-M., Ko, E., Chae, H., & Mattila P., 2016)

Narrowing down on literature that is relevant to textiles and apparel in the context of Ghana as a geography producing fabric products that invoked consumer groups to exhibit socially responsible shopping behaviour. (Miller-Spillman, K., Lee, M.-Y., Graham, M., & Cho, B., 2016) Literature also sheds light on the role of environmental apparel knowledge, environmentalism and materialism and its role in the future of apparel consumption (Sadachar, A., Feng, F., Karpova, E., & Manchiraju, S., 2016) It is also interesting to note that fashion studies are realigning their deliberations to include focus on Fair Trade Organizations who desire to maximise income generation for artisans. Research provides insight into how FTOs can develop viable organisational cultures that focus on support for producers (Littrell & Dickson, 1998)

III. LEARNINGS

The world of fashion was prejudiced against artisan development but recent interest in social responsibility has triggered mainstream enterprises to follow the fair trade route of creating fair exchanges and connecting customers with artisans. There has hardly been any investigation into this space except in geographies like the US, Korea and Ghana – delving into details of fabrics and not precisely the

issue of ethnic apparel. It is also intriguing to note that though the online shopping of ethnic apparel seems challenging at the outset it could also become a means of offering a source of livelihood to artisans and ethnic revitalization. Shopping today is both a therapy and an experience worth valuable exchanges, driven by the millennial movement of Conscious Consumerism it is possible to make a positive impact on the world through decisions that are not limited to brands, prices, styles, materials alone but also through improved focus on the way the products are made.

Artisan-made products are increasingly recognised as a way to imply deeper meaning to conscious consumerism which a large number of ethical shoppers willing to invest. Evidence of this is seen in both non- and for-profit brands that are working with indigenous artists especially in developing countries to source and create products built on social values and deep rooted cultural heritage of the land. Case in Point being LimeRoad (www.limeroad.com): LimeRoad, India's first social commerce platform launched the Indian e-commerce industry's first major step towards promoting the 'Make in India' campaign, by launching its unique platform for Indian manufacturers and artisans. The underlying premise for LimeRoad was that they would "promote home-grown artisans, weavers and all such vendors by providing explosive market exposure by allowing deeply local products to now be available across the country". The USP being their offering of a varied collection of 2,000 plus unique handcrafted saree styles handpicked from the local lanes of Incredible India curated carefully to blend with the customer's style. They also assure selection of retailers carefully done to align with their purpose of serving customers through empowered artisans across a wide range of categories like accessories, home and non-perishable food apart from apparel. Examples abound across the length and breadth of this country with respect to textile artisans saving the day for both the community and the culture that the nation takes pride in. All of which need to be put out in the open discourses of anthropological studies as well as marketing dialogues today.

IV. CONCLUSION

The meaning of an artisan is well ingrained in the minds of many as a skilled worker who carries the knowledge of craft hereditarily, the local knowledge adding to the beauty of the creation. "An artisan (derived from French: artisan, Italian: artigiano) is a skilled craft worker who makes or creates things by hand that may be functional or strictly decorative, for example furniture, decorative arts, sculptures, clothing, jewellery, household items and tools or even mechanical mechanisms such as the handmade clockwork movement of a watchmaker. Artisans practice a craft and may through experience and aptitude reach the expressive levels of an artist." (Source: *Wikipedia*) . Many

of the products turned out by artisans have been handmade traditionally, the origin although was rural or pastoral goods evolved to being automated mechanization made on a larger scale in factories or industrial atmosphere. Before Industrial Revolution, artisans were the dominant producers of consumer products.

Yet today in these progressive times of e-commerce there needs more emphasis on how these indigenous artists can contribute to sustainable marketing of ethnic apparel and the possibilities of marketers enhancing the value of these contributions at the interface touch points on the website. Definitely the challenges for the future and research needs over dominate the dynamics of changes that online shopping has brought into the world of ethnic apparel. And it is imperative to create an atmosphere of inquiry in order to make artisans feel an empowered and integral part of India's growth story.

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