



# Value-based nudging of ethnic garments: a conjoint study to differentiate the value perception of ethnic products across Indian Markets

Arnab Banerjee 

*NIFT, Shillong, India, and*

Tanusree Dutta  and Aditya Shankar Mishra 

*Indian Institute of Management, Ranchi, India*

## Abstract

**Purpose** - Handloom products often fail to infiltrate the global or mainland market, resulting in small localized markets, limited demand and profitability. Recent times have also witnessed a decline in the weaving population of India. Assam, accounting for a third of all households engaged in the handloom industry in India, has been widely hit by unemployment, migration and demotivation among weavers due to lack of profitability in the sector. This research aims to study the case of Assam as an exemplar to identify the barriers and cognitive biases impacting the sales of such ethnic apparel and propose nudges as interventions to address such concerns.

**Design/methodology/approach** - A conjoint-based experimental study was used to understand and compare the cognitive biases of two study groups: an ethnic group from Assam and a non-ethnic group from various Tier I and Tier II cities of India. The groups were exposed to a variety of ethnic Assamese and ethnic non-Assamese products to understand their value perception using conjoint analysis.

**Findings** - Results indicate a potential lack of cognitive fluency when dealing with Assamese ethnic garments, triggering System II thinking among the non-ethnic (national buyer) group. The underlying cause may be the inability to attribute substitution of the given product for a more familiar product. The results suggest that exposure may lead to priming, which in turn can increase cognitive fluency.

**Originality/value** - Within the limits of the literature reviewed, designing a conjoint-based experiment and proposing the use of nudge to popularize certain ethnic garments are novel contributions of this study.

**Keywords** Conjoint analysis, Nudging, Value perception, Attribute substitution, Ethnic garment

Paper type Research paper

## Introduction

The significance of ethnic handloom products from an economic, social and environmental perspective is globally critical. It has been established that higher-income nations tend to have stronger capital-intensive sectors, while lower-income nations dominate the labour-intensive sectors (Kilduff and Ting, 2006). The apparel and textile sector has predominantly been a labour-intensive sector, which of late has seen a significant amount of mechanization, making it more capital intensive. By definition, the segment of the industry focused on ethnic handloom products is protected from large-scale mechanization. Therefore, lower-income nations continue to generate massive employment through this sector. However, the impact of fast fashion on this sector, especially in developing nations, is rather evident. While low- and middle-income countries have experienced significant economic progress based on fast fashion, it has come at a huge social and environmental cost, making it critical to find a balance between

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the three elements of progress (Khurana and Muthu, 2022). The upside to this is the growing awareness among the millennials about the importance of sustainable apparel products (Su *et al.*, 2019).

In an empirical study designed to investigate the influence of incorporating Chinese elements in global brands on consumer purchase likelihood, it was reported that purchase likelihood increases as the product becomes more culturally compatible (He and Wang, 2017). The consumption of ethnic garments is also positively impacted by an individual's acculturation

to a foreign culture (Rajagopalan and Heitmeyer, 2005). Thus, it is of paramount importance to understand what elements could play a vital role in reinvigorating the demand for ethnic products at a national and an international level, thereby helping to strike a better balance between social, economic and environmental benefits.

Some of the common challenges faced globally by the handloom and handicraft industry are industrialization and mass production challenges (Barber, 2006); unwillingness of the young generation to continue with the profession due to complexity and lengthy production process (Wu *et al.*, 2017); lack of availability of basic infrastructures such as electricity and cost-effective raw materials, resulting in increase of production cost (Sachan *et al.*, 2013; Hassan *et al.*, 2016); lack of innovation and technology to introduce new designs, making it more market-relevant (Pinaisup and Kumpun, 2006; Senko, 2003; Ploydee, 1997) augmented by the Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) risks involved in creating new designs (Amin, 2006) and lack of education and training, making it difficult for an artisan to access various government schemes, obtain market information to bargain with middlemen/traders and manage the business properly (Redzuan and Aref, 2009; Mendozaramírez and Toledo Lopez, 2014; Norasingh and Southammavong, 2017).

The impact of fast fashion, which rides on fast-changing fashion trends, has created an insurmountable dilemma for ethnic garments. The global average number of times a garment is worn has been reduced from close to 200 to about 120 times between 2002 and 2016 (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017). This is much worse for fast fashion items which are worn only about 10 times before being discarded (Sisodia, 2021). The urge to keep up with the ever-changing trends is impossible for ethnic handloom garments since it is in the realm of slow fashion.

The handloom sector of India engages 3.1m households, including 2.7m homes in rural areas (ODCH, 2020). Of late, a consistent decline has been observed in the number of individuals taking up the profession. Over the last decade, this decline has been distinctly conspicuous in the rural sector (ODCH 2020; Development Commissioner (Handloom) 2010). The downstream effect of this trend is the large-scale migration from rural to urban areas. Assam [1] which engages 1.01m households in the handloom sector (ODCH, 2020) has been one of the worst hit. Metropolitan cities that attract a bulk of these individuals for daily wages are thousands of kilometres away; migration means most individuals cannot return to their home towns even in an emergency such as a pandemic. This has caused a significant and stable exodus of the workforce from the state. In addition, the decrease in new-generation weavers and the engagement of weavers is yet another cause of concern. On average, a weaver in Assam spends 171 days a year weaving compared to the 310 days in other leading states (ODCH, 2020). The numbers are even worse in the allied sectors, accounting for the dwindling productivity of the state when it comes to handloom production.

Unlike the handloom products from Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Tamil Nadu (TN) and certain other ethnic products of various states of India, the handloom products of Assam have not been able to infiltrate the Indian or the global market. While only 17 and 46 per cent of the artisans in TN and UP consider the local market as the most important source of sales, 87 per cent of the Assamese artisans consider the local market to be the most important source of sales (ODCH, 2020). Similarly, the proportion

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of households using silk for overall production in handlooms for TN, UP and Assam is 24.2, 16.4 and 5.9 per cent, respectively (ODCH, 2020). This is a significant indication of the lack of profitability among handloom artisans of Assam vis-a-vis those from TN and UP, known for their Kanjeevaram [2] and Banarasi [3] silk products. Due to this lack of infiltration, the availability of ethnic handloom products in Assam is limited, resulting in limited demand and profitability.

The current study attempts to understand the need or lack thereof in the national market for unpopular ethnic garments. It is likely to help the indigenous weavers and designers better adapt their products, sustain in the changing times, increase profitability and create a win-win situation.

The paper begins with a literature review on product ethnicity and consumerism, motivators and factors in ethnic apparel purchase, consumer-perceived value (CPV) model for product valuation and attribute substitution in ethnic apparel purchase behaviour. The literature review is followed by an explanation of the three-stage research design. The Methodology section is followed by findings of the conjoint analysis and discussion based on the same. Here the authors focused on potential nudges that can suitably spike the demand for such traditional garments. The concluding section of the paper highlights the implication and limitations of this study and identifies the scope of future research.

## Literature review

### *Ethnicity and consumerism*

Ethnic minority is a sub-culture present in a dominant culture having a well-defined cultural background (Forney, 1981). It delineates from the dominant culture because of its visible physical or cultural characteristics such as clothing. Further “ensembles and modifications of the body that capture the past of the members of the group, the items of tradition that are worn and displayed to signify cultural heritage” define an ethnic dress (Eicher and Sumberg, 1995, p. 299). Clothing serves two distinct purposes among ethnic subcultures. First, to express membership or affiliation, alternatively, for acculturation or homogenization of external characteristics and values (Chattaraman and Lennon, 2007). The use of ethnic clothing can be associated with a person’s ethnic identity. Ethnic identity is defined as the shared identity of a group of people based on a common historical background, ancestry and knowledge of identifying symbolic elements such as nationality, religious affiliation and language (Solomon, 2004, p. 558). Numerous studies have found a significant impact of ethnic identification on factors like ethnic entertainment (Xu et al., 2004), ethnic soft drinks (Chung and Fischer, 1999), traditional foods (Xu et al., 2004) and ethnic-inspired apparel (Kim and Arthur, 2003) among others. The underlying motivation of such behaviour is highly relevant for apparel retailers and policymakers.

### *Motivators and factors in ethnic apparel purchase*

Using qualitative interviews, O’Neal (1999) reported three primary themes of motivation for the usage of ethnic apparel in African American professional women: first, as a reflection and definition of self, second, as educating others about African culture and finally, as a link to heritage. The first two themes connote a social image, while the third reflects affect. Another study on Asian American consumers suggests that individuals with greater ethnic identification have a more positive attitude toward cultural apparel (Kim and Arthur, 2003). Another study examined the experience of internal emotions and inner meaning regarding ethnic dresses and found that consumption of cultural apparel shared a positive relationship with the emotions and meaning of ethnic consumers (Chattaraman and Lennon, 2007).

A study on the impact of acculturation on involvement with Indian ethnic clothing on the Asian-Indian population staying in the US reported that as individuals become more acculturated to the US culture, they tend to experience a greater need to connect with their own culture, resulting in greater involvement with Indian ethnic clothing among the population (Rajagopalan and Heitmeyer, 2005). Thus, factors like self-identity, acculturation, social needs, emotions and attribution of meanings collectively play an essential role in an individual's involvement with ethnic apparel. For ethnic products,

individuals from a related ethnic group are thus likely to value a given product more significantly than others.

Studies on branded readymade garments in India have found the brand name, store image, promotions, product attributes and reference groups to play an essential role in apparel buying behaviour (Gurunathan *et al.*, 2013). In a review of about 21 articles comparing Indian and Chinese denim consumers, Jin *et al.* (2010) found product attributes such as price, country of origin, quality, design, style, fit, fabric, colour, care, brand name, comfort, durability and fashion being relevant to purchase. However, when purchasing unbranded ethnic apparel from artisans, factors such as brand name, store image, promotions and fit are not too relevant.

People often judge the product's value through reference group word of mouth and product attributes about which limited knowledge is available. Since ethnic products are often one-of-a-kind and not factory-made off-the-shelf products, consumers lack a precise reference point or a price anchor, leaving them with fewer tangible points to draw from while deciding upon the product value. Consequently, the product is evaluated from a more emotional and social perspective to add to the basic look and feel of the fabric. Value perception of an ethnic apparel product is thus a somewhat complex process (Table I).

#### *Consumer-perceived value model for product valuation*

"Value" is the primary currency of all human interactions, and seeking valuable objects is the only reason for consumers' engagement in consumption behaviour (Mittal and Sheth, 2001). Neoclassical economics has used the notion of utility to measure the value of a product, be it in the cardinal, ordinal or revealed preference theory of demand assessment. However, there have been significant concerns associated with this theory. One of the major concerns is that it does not capture the essence of the psychology of consumer behaviour (Barreto, 1994). In marketing, value refers to a cognitive expression of the most fundamental desire and goal that consumers want to obtain (Peter *et al.*, 1999).

Understanding the cognitive aspects of consumer decision-making in the purchase of products and services has gained impetus (Chi and Kilduff, 2011). Models such as the CPV help better understand the cognitive aspects of such decisions (Sweeney and Soutar, 2001), including that in the domain of attires (Inouye *et al.*, 2014). The CPV suggests four critical dimensions, namely, social, emotional, price values and quality. The CPV variables are quite similar to the value driver variables for consumers used in setting prices (Izaret *et al.*, 2021; Table II):

$$\times \text{ value of product} \quad \frac{1}{4} \begin{matrix} \times \\ \times \end{matrix} \begin{matrix} \text{technical value drivers} \\ \text{emotional value drivers} \end{matrix} \quad \text{p} \begin{matrix} \times \\ \times \end{matrix} \text{ functional value drivers}$$

#### *Attribute substitution in ethnic garment purchase*

Due to the numerous attributes, including the intangible ones, individuals often tend to use specific heuristics to decide about the product's actual value. When someone attempts to answer

Topic	Author (year)	Findings
African American women's professional dress as an expression of ethnicity	O'Neal (1999)	Found reflection and definition of self, educating others on African culture, link to heritage to be the key motivation for the <i>usage</i> of ethnic apparel in African American professional women
Asian American consumers in Hawai'i: the effects of ethnic identification on attitudes toward and ownership of ethnic apparel, importance of product and store-display attributes and purchase intention	Kim and Arthur (2003)	Ethnic identification towards a given culture correlates to a positive <i>attitude</i> towards cultural apparel
Ethnic identity, consumption of cultural apparel and self-perceptions of ethnic consumers	Chattaraman and Lennon (2007)	Experience of internal emotions and inner meaning regarding ethnic or ethnic-inspired dresses and consumption of cultural apparel shared a positive relationship with the emotions and meaning of ethnic consumers
Ethnicity and consumer choice: a study of consumer levels of involvement in Indian ethnic apparel and contemporary American clothing	Rajagopalan and Heitmeyer (2005)	Greater acculturation of the Asian-Indian population staying in the US show greater involvement with Indian ethnic clothing among the population with greater acculturation
A study on growth of human body measurements and its implication on clothing consumption in Tamil Nadu, India	Gurunathan <i>et al.</i> (2013)	Brand name, store image, promotions, product attributes and reference groups play a significant role in <i>apparel buying behaviour</i> for branded readymade garments in India
identifying apparel consumption behaviour and its association with underlying variables	Comparison of Chinese and Indian consumers' evaluative criteria when selecting denim jeans: a conjoint analysis Jin <i>et al.</i> (2010)	Price, country of origin, quality, design, style, fit, fabric, colour, care, brand name, comfort, durability and fashion are relevant variables for denim purchase in India and China

Table I.  
List of studies

Table II.  
Ethnic product value drivers

Value drivers of product	Meaning	Ethnic apparel attributes
Technical value drivers	Product features that provide technical benefits	Quality and fabric
Functional value drivers	Customers' experience of a product during purchase, setup and usage	
Emotional value drivers	Customers' feeling about the product based on its perception, reputation, etc.	
		Country of origin, style, motif and familiarity to or association with an ethnic group

a complex question, he/she may answer a related but different question that is easier to answer, without being aware that they have substituted one question for the other (Kahnemann and Frederick, 2002; Shah and Oppenheimer, 2008). Attribute substitution primarily occurs as a result of intuitive cognitive systems rather than reflective cognitive systems. Kahnemann and Frederick (2002) reported three underlying mechanisms working simultaneously to result in

attribute substitution, i.e. inaccessibility of target attribute, high accessibility of associated attribute and lack of correction of substitution by the reflective system. Hence, attribute substitution is likely to play a significant role in the purchase of ethnic apparel due to the probable presence of the three reported mechanisms by [Kahnemann and Frederick \(2002\)](#). A failure among the consumers to attribute substitution is likely to result in product devaluation. This may imply that for garments that are very dissimilar to the evoked set of the consumer, he/she may exhibit greater hesitance, which in turn is cognitively justified by a reduced value perception or rating of the product ([Figure 1](#)).

To summarize, past research has established a strong relationship between variables such as reflection and definition of self, educating others about their own culture, link to heritage ([O'Neal, 1999](#)), ethnic identification ([Kim and Arthur, 2003](#)), experience of internal emotions and inner meaning regarding ethnic or ethnic-inspired dresses ([Chattaraman and Lennon, 2007](#)), acculturation of population to a foreign culture ([Rajagopalan and Heitmeyer, 2005](#)), brand name, store image, promotions, product attributes and reference groups ([Gurunathan et al.,](#)

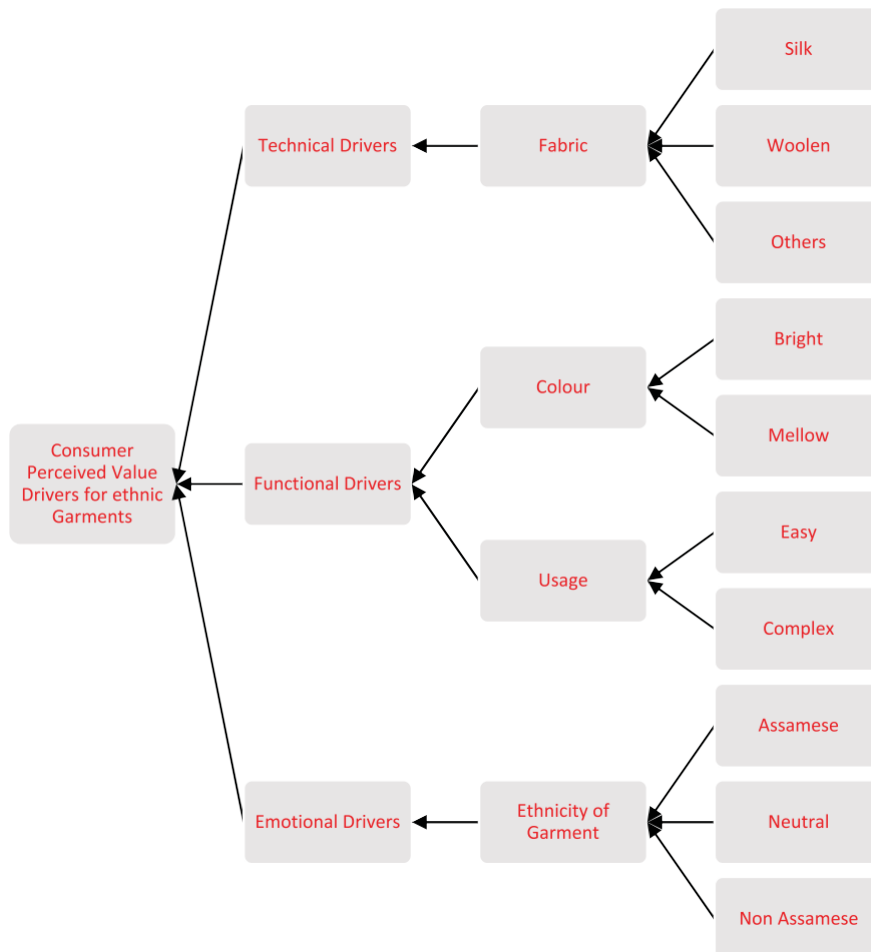


Figure 1. Theoretical framework developed based on literature review

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2013) and price, country of origin, quality, design, style, fit, fabric, colour, care, brand name, comfort, durability and fashion (Jin *et al.*, 2010) with behaviours such as usage of ethnic apparel, attitude towards cultural apparel, consumption of cultural apparel, involvement with ethnic clothing, apparel buying behaviour of readymade garments and denim purchase behaviour, respectively. Similarly, studies based on CPV and related models have shown significant promise in explaining what drives consumer value across product lines. However, the authors have not come across any research that has focused on comparing two market segments in gaining a holistic understanding of what drives consumer value for ethnic garments. In addition, there is limited evidence of evaluating the effect of underlying cognitive forces that may cause the different customer segments to value the same product differently.

### Methodology

The research can be divided into an exploratory stage, three conclusive stages and a final validation stage. In the qualitative stage, the research design was developed based on interviews with experts. In stage II sub-stage A, the various attributes identified during the literature review were categorized into four major categories based on stage I, often used for attribute substitution by buyers, through expert panel interviews. In stage II sub-stage B, each of the identified garments was classified on the attributes by a panel of experts. Finally, in stage II sub-stage C, preference rating was collected for each of the garments from two groups representing the national and local markets each. Finally, in stage III, the findings were checked for validity on an independent sample.

#### *Stage I: qualitative stage*

An expert panel comprising professors and researchers in the field of handloom and ethnic garments from one of India's leading fashion colleges was interviewed. Since the research focused on comparing commercially successful ethnic garments (control) with the one that is struggling (target), the expert panel was asked to suggest the same. Based on the interviews, it was clear that the ethnic garments of Assam and its handloom industry as a whole were found to be a very relevant subject of a struggling sector. On the contrary, ethnic products from Banaras (UP) and Kanchipuram (TN) among others were good comparisons to identify the key success factors.

#### *Stage II: sub-stage A*

Interviews were conducted with experts and faculty members from the design and fashion marketing background from a leading fashion education Institute in India. Ten interviews were conducted, where the experts were asked questions such as "What do you look for, while deciding to buy ethnic garments?", "What draws you most towards an ethnic garment?", "Here are some variables (presenting some common preference variables such as fabric, place of origin, etc.), how do you classify these variables under the attributes you find relevant?". Based on the above, key attributes and their levels were identified for the purpose of conjoint analysis. Thus, fabric, colour, ethnicity and ease of usage were identified as the four key attributes. Fabric level, garment colour, garment ethnicity and ease of use were subdivided into three, two, three and two levels, respectively. Out of the total 36 possible combinations, the orthogonal design implemented using SPSS resulted in 13 relevant combinations.

#### *Stage*

#### *II:*

#### *sub-stage*

#### *B*

In this stage, an expert panel of 20 postgraduate fashion management students was selected as respondents. All the students had completed courses on fashion material and quality,

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fashion concepts, consumer behaviour and cluster studies on ethnic garments. The group was well educated in the domain of ethnic garment identification and classification. They were provided with 22 preselected popular and relevant ethnic garments and were asked to classify the garments based on the attributes and levels identified in stage I into one of the 13 groups created by the orthogonal design. For ethnicity, the respondent panels were asked to classify the garments as *Assamese ethnic garments (AEGs)*, *neutral ethnic garments (NEGs)* and *Non-Assamese ethnic garments (NAEGs)*. AEGs are garments that

are very similar to AEGs. NEGs are adorned by people from all places and, although traditional, do not belong to any particular ethnicity. NAEGs are products that are distinctly dissimilar to AEGs and represent a vastly different ethnicity. The ethnicity classification was based on variables such as place of origin, motif, style, design and familiarity to or association with an ethnic group. Similarly, for ease of use, the classification was based on variables such as durability, care, fashion and comfort. The levels in ease of use were *easy* and *difficult*. *Fabric* and *colour* were kept as separate factors with three levels, i.e. silk, woollen and others (mainly cotton), for fabric and two levels, i.e. bright and mellow, for colour. The classification of the garments was based on the modal class the garment was assigned to by the panel of experts.

#### *Stage II: sub-stage C*

In the final stage of the research, two groups of respondents were carefully selected. The first group (referred to as local group (LG)) comprised 26 respondents from the ethnic Assamese district of Majuli. This group had a strong ethnic affiliation with Mishing and other Assamese tribes. The respondents were identified to match the profile of a common Assamese ethnic group who greatly indulge in ethnic handloom products. This group represented an unadulterated group of buyers who often buy their ethnic garments from the local markets of Assam. Eighteen of the 26 respondents were artisans themselves, with good knowledge of the craft.

The second group comprised 30 individuals. These individuals were selected carefully out of a pool of 300 students, such that each of them had prior experience of at least three years in the domain of buying or merchandising. Their choices are expected to be a good representation of what sells in the major metropolitan markets. The control group did not belong to any specific ethnic group and represented a heterogeneous group from various parts of India. The group was carefully chosen to ensure that they form a good representation of people who regularly engage in the purchase of ethnic garments from metropolitan markets, often offering a much larger assortment choices compared to local markets (referred to as national groups (NG)).

The 22 garments were folded and put in identical display boxes under identical lighting. These were subsequently organized in a random sequence on the edge of an oval table, such that no two similar garments were kept next to each other.

Both the LG and NG were instructed to begin the evaluation process from any random location on the oval table displaying the garments and move clockwise. This ensured that the respondents did not start at any specific location and the response fatigue did not affect the ranking of any particular garment. Participants had to rank the products from most to least preferred. The same rank could be given to two products, in which case the next rank was skipped.

The respondent's ranking of the product was expected to provide a reasonable estimate of the comparative value of the item to them. To avoid non-response errors, the respondents were asked to rank each of the garments. To control the influence of one respondent's ranking on the other, the respondents were prevented from interacting with each other in any way during the experiment.



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The data for local market buyers and national market buyers were separately analysed. The preference ranking data and the attribute data sheet were imported into SPSS. All the attributes and their levels were considered discrete. The conjoint analysis operation was conducted by coding. First, the diagnostics such as attribute reversals and correlations were analysed to understand the quality of the data. Subsequently, the relative importance scores of the four attributes were calculated, which quantified the relative importance of each attribute in product selection and provided information about the importance of one attribute in product selection relative to all other attributes. Next, the part-worth utility values of the attribute levels were calculated to quantify the positive or negative impact of the attribute levels on product selection and the extent of the impact. Finally, the garment preferences of respondents belonging to the two groups were compared and analysed.

#### *Conjoint analysis in apparel evaluation*

Conjoint (trade-off) analysis is a multi-attribute analysis method that can be used to measure the joint effects of a set of independent variables on the ordering of a dependent variable. It can be used when the goal of the research is to measure preferences for product features, to learn how changes to price, etc., affect demand for products or services and to forecast the likely acceptance of a product if brought to market (Bryan, 2013). In the retail and apparel sector, conjoint-based research has been performed to compare evaluative attributes that Chinese and Indian consumers utilize when purchasing denim jeans (Jin et al., 2010), to discover which design elements influence dress purchases and how age affects consumers' choices with regard to these elements (Zhou and Xu, 2019), to examine consumer preference for ethical fashion products by focusing on the importance of animal welfare attribute (Mohamed et al., 2020), to provide an analytical framework for designing apparel considering both consumers' opinions and fashion designers' views (Saha and Roy, 2012), to explore and examine the relative impact of product and channel attributes on luxury product shopping in the multichannel environment (Lee et al., 2020) and to measure the extent to which sustainable attributes can be used to characterize different clusters of consumers in an emerging market (De Abreu et al., 2022). In similar lines, it has also been recently used to estimate the consumer utility of the packaging design of yoghurt (Wang et al., 2022), to study the influence of product lifetime labelling on purchase decisions (Jacobs and Hörisch, 2022) or to understand the relative importance of ethical attributes when consumers in the US make wool apparel purchase decisions (Sneddon et al., 2014).

#### *Stage III: result cross-validation*

Based on the findings of stage II, six separate garments belonging to different groups were identified and shown to a different NG. Subsequently, they were asked to preference rank the six products to cross-check the findings of the research (Table III).

### Results and analysis

#### *Stage II: sub-stage A*

The qualitative study in stage I enabled the identification of four key attributes that is ethnicity, fabric, colour and ease of use (refer to the Methodology section of stage II).

#### *Stage II: sub-stage B*

Table IV depicts the results of Stage II. Here all 22 garments are presented along with the four attribute classifications.

Research stage	Research questions	Methodology	Key variables	Background	
I	Identify commercially successful and struggling ethnic products	Exploratory/ qualitative: Expert Interviews in the field of handloom and ethnic garments	Commercially successful and struggling ethnic garments in India	Development Commissioner (Handloom) (2010); ODCH (2020)	<p style="text-align: right;">garments</p> <hr/> <p style="text-align: right;">Table III Correlating the objective across various stages of research with the methodology adopted using key underlying variables and background literature</p>
IIA	Identify key variables/ attributes relevant to ethnic garment purchase	Expert Interview: Attributes identified for orthogonal design development professors and researchers in the field of handloom and ethnic garments	Price, country of origin, quality, design, style, fit, fabric, colour, care, brand name, comfort, durability and fashion, brand name, store image, promotions, product attributes and reference groups	Gurunathan <i>et al.</i> (2013); Jin <i>et al.</i> (2010)	
IIB	Classify identified garments based on various attributes and its level (identified in IIA) to set up the conjoint analysis	Structured data collection tool given to expert panel of 20 postgraduate fashion management students with relevant expertise	Fabric (silk, woollen and others), colour (bright and mellow), usage (easy and complex), garment ethnicity (Assamese, neutral and non-Assamese)	Izaret <i>et al.</i> (2021), Sweeney and Soutar (2001), Chi and Kilduff (2011), O'Neal (1999), Kim and Arthur (2003), Chattaraman and Lennon (2007)	
IIC	Quantify the difference in utility of identified product attributes (value drivers) in value perception of selected consumer segments	Experimental setup; conjoint-based utility derivation of key value drivers; national buyer group comprising mainly of buyers/industry personnel associated with purchase of garments; local buyer group comprising mainly of local artisans involved in the manufacture of ethnic garments (also the primary users of ethnic garments)	Fabric (silk, woollen and others), colour (bright and mellow), usage (easy and complex), garment ethnicity (Assamese, neutral and non-Assamese)	Izaret <i>et al.</i> (2021), Sweeney and Soutar (2001), Chi and Kilduff (2011), O'Neal (1999), Kim and Arthur (2003), Chattaraman and Lennon (2007), Jin <i>et al.</i> (2010)	
III	Cross-validate results in IIC	Six garments from different product groups shown to group of national buyers	Fabric (silk, woollen and others), colour (bright and mellow), usage (easy and complex), garment ethnicity (Assamese, neutral, non-Assamese)	Izaret <i>et al.</i> (2021), Sweeney and Soutar (2001), Chi and Kilduff (2011), O'Neal (1999), Kim and Arthur (2003), Chattaraman and Lennon (2007), Jin <i>et al.</i> (2010)	

Garment	Ethnicity	Fabric	Colour	Usage	Orthogonal design combination
1	Neutral	Others	Bright	Easy	2
2	Non-Assamese	Others	Bright	Easy	3
3	Assamese	Others	Mellow	Complex	12
4	Assamese	Others	Mellow	Easy	13
5	Neutral	Others	Bright	Easy	2
6	Neutral	Others	Mellow	Easy	8
7	Neutral	Others	Mellow	Complex	7
8	Assamese	Others	Bright	Easy	1
9	Neutral	Others	Mellow	Easy	8
10	Neutral	Others	Mellow	Complex	7
11	Non-Assamese	Silk	Mellow	Easy	9
12	Non-Assamese	Others	Bright	Complex	3
13	Assamese	Woollen	Bright	Easy	4
14	Neutral	Silk	Mellow	Complex	8
15	Neutral	Others	Bright	Complex	2
16	Neutral	Others	Mellow	Complex	7
17	Neutral	Woollen	Bright	Easy	6
18	Assamese	Woollen	Mellow	Easy	5
19	Non-Assamese	Others	Bright	Complex	3
20	Non-Assamese	Silk	Bright	Complex	10
21	Non-Assamese	Silk	Bright	Easy	11
22	Neutral	Others	Mellow	Complex	7

Table IV.  
The results of Stage II B

### Stage II: sub-stage C

No reversals were observed for either group (LG or NG), indicating the reliability of the data collected. The correlation between the predicted score and the actual measured preference for both groups was high and significant (LG: Kendall's Tau = 0.689\*\*; NG: Kendall's Tau = 0.768\*\*). Therefore, the fitting accuracy of the model is high and the result of the data analysis is reliable, accurately explaining the participants' attribute preference structure during the selection process of ethnic garments (Zhou and Xu, 2019).

*Importance analysis.* For both LG and NG, *usage* or *ease of use* (LG = 44 per cent and NG = 48 per cent) was reported as the most important attribute. It was followed by ethnicity (LG = 23.9 per cent and NG = 26.7 per cent) for both groups. Fabric was the third most important variable (LG = 19.69 per cent and NG = 13.9 per cent) followed by colour (LG = 12.33 per cent and NG = 10.54 per cent).

While the importance of the variables for the two groups has the same sequence, fabric is comparatively a more important variable for the LG, whereas usage is more important for the NG (Figure 2).

*Utility analysis.* Table V shows the utility analysis results of all attribute levels for both groups. If a participant prefers one level over another, this level will have a greater utility value. Based on utility estimates, for the most important variable, usage, garments that are hard to use and have occasion-specific usage, tends to be preferred more, for both types of buyers. For fabric types, the local market buyers depict greater utility towards "other" types of garments comprising primarily of cotton-based garments. On the contrary, the national market buyers lean significantly towards silk when it comes to traditional garments. Woollen products are not preferred by the local buyers; however, national buyers are not as averse as local buyers towards woollen ethnic garments.

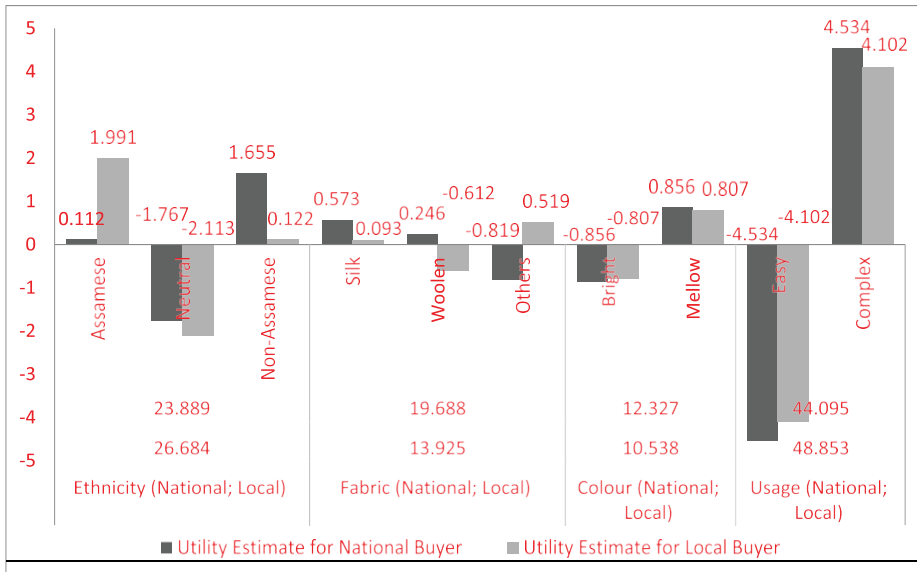


Figure 2. Utility estimate and importance of various attributes for national and local buyer group

Critical attributes	Local market buyers			National market buyers		
	Importance	Levels of attribute	Utility estimate	Importance	Levels of attribute	Utility estimate
Ethnicity	23.889	Assamese	1.991	26.684	Assamese	0.112
		Neutral	-2.113		Neutral	-1.767
		Non-Assamese	0.122		Non-Assamese	1.655
Fabric	19.688	Silk	0.093	13.925	Silk	0.573
		Woollen	-0.612		Woollen	0.246
		Others	0.519		Others	-0.819
		Bright	-0.807		Bright	-0.856
Colour	12.327	Mellow	0.807	10.538	Mellow	0.856
		Easy	-4.102		Easy	-4.534
Usage	44.095	Complex	4.102	48.853	Complex	4.534

Table V. Variable utility and importance for both LG and NG

As can be expected, the local buyers (comprising of Assamese ethnic population) show greater utility when it comes to AEGs and lower utility for NAEs. The reverse is true for non-Assamese group. As far as colour is concerned, both groups lean towards mellow colours for ethnic garments.

*Product ranking based on utility*

The total utility from each of the 22 products for both the LG and the NG is shown in Table VI. The total utility of each product is merely the sum of its part utility. Based on the total utility, ranks were calculated for each of the products, for a given buyer group. The rank correlation for the 22 products was very high and significant ( $r_s = 0.95^{**}$ ). This indicated a similar preference across the two segments.

Garment	Ethnicity	Fabric	Colour	Usage	Local buyers		National buyers	
					Total utility	Rank	Total utility	Rank
1	Neutral	Others	Bright	Easy	-6.503	20	-7.976	21
2	Non-Assamese	Others	Bright	Easy	-4.268	16	-4.554	15
3	Assamese	Others	Mellow	Complex	7.419	1	4.683	2
4	Assamese	Others	Mellow	Easy	-0.785	11	-4.385	14
5	Neutral	Others	Bright	Easy	-6.503	20	-7.976	21
6	Neutral	Others	Mellow	Easy	-4.889	18	-6.264	18
7	Neutral	Others	Mellow	Complex	3.315	5	2.804	6
8	Assamese	Others	Bright	Easy	-2.399	13	-6.097	17
9	Neutral	Others	Mellow	Easy	-4.889	18	-6.264	18
10	Neutral	Others	Mellow	Complex	3.315	5	2.804	6
11	Non-Assamese	Silk	Mellow	Easy	-3.08	14	-1.45	11
12	Non-Assamese	Others	Bright	Complex	3.936	2	4.514	3
13	Assamese	Woollen	Bright	Easy	-3.53	15	-5.032	16
14	Neutral	Silk	Mellow	Complex	2.889	9	4.196	5
15	Neutral	Others	Bright	Complex	1.701	10	1.092	10
16	Neutral	Others	Mellow	Complex	3.315	5	2.804	6
17	Neutral	Woollen	Bright	Easy	-7.634	22	-6.911	20
18	Assamese	Woollen	Mellow	Easy	-1.916	12	-3.32	13
19	Non-Assamese	Others	Bright	Complex	3.936	2	4.514	3
20	Non-Assamese	Silk	Bright	Complex	3.51	4	5.906	1
21	Non-Assamese	Silk	Bright	Easy	-4.694	17	-3.162	12
22	Neutral	Others	Mellow	Complex	3.315	5	2.804	6

Table VI.  
The utility value of various garments along with preference ranking for local and national buyers

However, there was a marked difference in the ranking observed for the following garments between LG and NG: 4, 8, 11,14 and 21. For the above five garments, the ranks varied by atleast three points or more. For the remaining 17 garments, the difference in rank was up to two points.

*Potential cognitive biases among the national and local buyers*

*Attribute substitution.* Results demonstrate an expected and consistent preference of the ethnic population (local buyers) towards local garments. Garment ethnicity supersedes all other variables in terms of distinguishing the two types of buyers. For the local buyer group, one can attribute the same to *ethnocentricity*. However, the above analysis also demonstrates that while the national buyer sample does not belong to any ethnic population, yet there is an obvious preference towards NAEs. This certainly cannot be attributed towards ethnocentricity. It can be argued that since the national buyers (non-ethnic sample) have been exposed more to the NAEs, even if through mere exposure, they are primed to prefer NAEs. *Priming* can lead people to pick a certain option over the other, especially under a fixed set of scenarios discussed in the literature review (inaccessibility of target attribute, high accessibility of associated attribute and lack of correction of substitution by the reflective system). When respondents are asked to rank their preference under limited time, they draw from their limited resources of past experiences. Since the national buyers are not as well exposed to features associated with AEGs (Assamese motifs, style, design, etc.), their preferential ranking is weighed heavily by attributes associated with garments that they are often exposed to in the national market (Banarasi and Kanjeevaram products). This is further supported by the preference for silk products among the national buyers, which shows a stark difference in

comparison to the local buyers. Thus, *attribute substitution* is probably the cognitive bias that is at the heart of the other cognitive biases in the above study.

Another counter-intuitive finding of the study was the importance of usage of the garment and the role it played in the preferential ranking. Although usage demonstrated the greatest utility, counter-intuitively, buyers from both the markets preferred products that are more difficult to use and maintain. It can be argued here that, when individuals decide to buy traditional ethnic products, they enjoy them more and perhaps are willing to

pay more if the product requires greater effort in maintenance and care. It brings in two other types of cognitive biases. First, the *endowment effect* that results in greater sense of ownership and consumer engagement as the effort from the consumer increases. Second, the phenomenon of *mental accounting* that results in consumers creating a very different account for ethnic garments compared to other generic garments. As a result, the variables based on which they evaluate other garments are quite different from ethnic garments.

### *Stage III: cross-validation of results*

The results of cross-validation based on the above findings are shown in [Table VII](#). The preference ranks given by the respondent were averaged and ranked accordingly.

As given by the conjoint research, garment usage and ethnicity play a pivotal role in the preference ranking of garment among the national buyers. The same is observed in the cross-validation test, where the top-ranked garment is both complex and non-Assamese. The garment that is complex and Assamese is preferred next. Similarly, silk is preferred over cotton and mellow over bright, and neutral is the least preferred as far as ethnicity is concerned. The above table was thus found to be in complete agreement with the expected preference ranking as demonstrated by the conjoint analysis. Hence, the findings of the descriptive research stand validated.

The objective of the study was to understand the reason why certain ethnic products that do reasonably well locally fail at a national or international level. The current result focuses on the Indian market, with a special focus on one such struggling industry in the Assamese ethnic products. The findings demonstrate that the national segment significantly differs in its product preference compared to the local market. One of the key areas of difference is the importance given to the fabric used. National buyers consider the fabric used to be a key determinant in choosing an ethnic product and prefer silk fabric over other types, while the local market is more inclined towards other fabrics, especially cotton. Another key area of difference in preference is the ethnicity of the garment, as national buyers seem to find it difficult to emotionally connect with the AEGs, which is not necessarily the case with other products such as Banarasi or Kanjeevaram. This requires a deeper understanding of the cognitive biases of consumers, presented subsequently in the Discussion section.

Garment rank	Ethnicity	Fabric	Colour	Usage
1	Non-Assamese	Silk	Mellow	Complex
2	Assamese	Silk	Mellow	Complex
3	Assamese	Silk	Mellow	Easy
4	Neutral	Silk	Mellow	Easy
5	Neutral	Others (cotton)	Mellow	Easy
6	Neutral	Others (cotton)	Bright	Easy

**Table VII.**  
Cross-validation of six  
selected garments for  
cross-validation of  
findings

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## Discussion

The above study indicates that the intuitive evaluation of an ethnic garment is primarily based on the following questions for the two groups:

(1) For local buyers:

- Does the ethnic garment reflect the identity of the person in the manner in which he would like to be perceived by his peers?
- Is it truly traditional in all its purity and complexity?

(2) For national buyers:

- Is it truly traditional in all its purity and complexity?
- Are the various elements of the product somewhat familiar?

The inadequacy of AEGs to address the second question proves to be a barrier to the nationalization of AEGs. While the smaller adaptable garments such as stoles (*gamosa*) have been recognized and used nationally, the more expensive non-adaptable garments such as the *Mekhela Sador* have failed to compete with the likes of the Banarasi or Kanjeevaram saree. Findings suggest that lack of familiarity with Assamese garments among the national consumer could be the key reason for such behaviour. Individuals usually prefer familiar over unfamiliar products in any given random situation ([Gigerenzer and Goldstein, 2011](#)). Familiarity can be achieved by reducing the cognitive distance from the target segment with the product, endorsing a previous study on perception analogy ([Scholz, 2017](#)). [Scholz \(2017\)](#) suggested that things are perceived to be physically distant from the observer if their edges or boundaries are not visible. Lack of physical or cognitive clarity increases the physical and cognitive distance from the observer. Lack of knowledge about an object also enhances cognitive distance. Thus, creating awareness about AEGs may have a positive influence on the value perception of a product.

Representation and availability heuristics have been studied widely as some of the key sources of several other biases, including attribute substitution ([Kahnemann and Frederick, 2002](#)). The key product attributes that affect attribute substitution include the physical properties of the product such as size, distance and similarity ([Tversky and Kahneman, 1983](#)). This has yet another implication for the ethnic products of Assam. While silk products from non-North Eastern (NE) Indian states, be it the famous Banarasi or Kanjeevaram sarees, tend to have a more lustrous finish, the Assamese silk products (mainly made up of Eri or Muga) have a more matte-like finish both in terms of colour and texture. Moreover, the draping style of the traditional Assamese *Mekhela Sador* is unfamiliar when compared to other non-NE products. This lack of familiarity results in a lack of cognitive fluency in memory and perception ([Jacoby and Dallas, 1981](#)). It has an impact on cognition, System II thinking or reflexive decision-making. Hence, while buyers are likely to engage in intuitive decision-making for non-NE products, for the AEGs, they are likely to deliberate more. In the absence of an anchor to evaluate such products, the likelihood of not purchasing an expensive Assamese ethnic product increases. The fact that this effect is not found in the purchase of *gamosa*, which has a lower cost, helps substantiate this proposition. Individuals usually do not engage in reflective decision-making for *gamosa* as it is easily available, commonly used and costs less. Thus, increased awareness, knowledge and familiarity have an increased likelihood to have a positive impact on the nationalization of the AEGs.

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### *Managerial Implication*

From a policy design and managerial perspective, the study reveals that the idea of “one-size-fits-all” strategy in terms of carrying the same product line across different markets may not be efficient. Market penetration needs significant product adaptation. To enhance the purchase process, stakeholders may look to incorporate behavioural nudges such as subliminal priming, anchoring and default choices among others. Marketers, artisans and individuals desirous of promoting the popularity, demand and sales of ethnic garments would

benefit from the findings of this study. Creating greater familiarity through marketing initiatives and appropriate nudging may do wonders for the underexposed ethnic garments.

Nudges can be presented to non-ethnic buyers at three levels to enhance their adoption of such traditional garments. First, subliminal priming, a phenomenon where an individual is exposed to a stimulus below the threshold of conscious perception, may be used to influence the potential consumer. Subliminal priming in terms of repeated exposure to the type of product in question may help generate familiarity. From a manufacturer’s perspective, the inclusion of elements of a given ethnic garment (AEG) in popular non-ethnic garments would help reduce the psychological distance of the product from the consumer, nudging the consumer to make a purchase decision. Marketers can use fashion shows, television shows and other events as conducive platforms for such subliminal priming. The same can be achieved digitally, by push notifications or lock screen notifications, where these designs are subtly and subliminally presented to the consumer.

Another relevant nudge to improve product familiarity would be product anchoring. Anchoring results in the individual relying largely on a reference point or the “anchor” to make a decision. Anchoring in the given scenario can be achieved by placing and presenting AEGs in the same overall brackets with the popular Banarasi or Kanjeevaram products. It can be easily done on digital platforms. Often when consumers exhibit bottom-up browsing behaviour, within certain price brackets, AEG may be presented to them along with Banarasi and Kanjeevaram silk products. Thus, product anchoring would enable a more fluid transition from one product to another by increasing familiarity, both in terms of price range and quality expectations.

Finally, when sufficient familiarity is gained by the consumer, it may then be presented to the consumer as default choices, adding inferior alternatives (decoy) and just-in-time prompts. The default option means that the agent chooses a preset course of action. It works especially well when the agent is indifferent between the various options or when the non-default option is complex. These nudges tend to encourage mindless behaviour. Mindless behaviour tends to make people pick familiar products over the unfamiliar ones without reflective evaluations. Thus, the implementation of a three-stage nudge to make the product familiar resulting in mindless consumption can play a significant role in increasing the purchase of ethnic garments, where attribute substitution is prominent. In addition, the role of the endowment effect and mental accounting in the purchase of ethnic garments can also be used by entrepreneurs to maximize benefits to consumers and optimize pricing.

### *Academic implication*

From an academic perspective, the understanding of purchase motivation for ethnic garments is still underdeveloped. Existing literature states that across all sets of

consumers for ethnic garments, emotional and social factors play a major role in the consumption of ethnic garments. However, the current paper differentiates between the motivation of the nationalised market and the localised markets for such consumption. While the national market is more familiarity-driven, the latter is identity-driven. Further research may be conducted in similar lines for garments from other states. Studies on factors driving utility, emotions and social affiliations for ethnic garments may be



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conducted in the future. Similarly, pricing and distribution strategy studies may help improve the penetration of such products.

Among the other key variables affecting attribute substitution are the causal propensity, surprisingness, affective valence, mood and recently evoked or primed stimulus (Kahnemann, 2003). The findings of this study suggest that there is no negative valence for ethnic Assamese garments among national buyers (AEG utility = +0.112). Thus, product familiarity would help enhance value perception through affect heuristics or the affective valence of one's experience for the product. However, future research may help gain a better understanding of factors such as ethnocentricity/xenocentricity and emotions on the valuation of ethnic products. The current research is restricted to the comparison between Assamese/Mishing traditional garments to traditional garments outside of the North-Eastern states of India. Further comparison of ethnic and non-ethnic garments as well as comparison of various types of ethnic garments from various geographic locations can give further insights into the perceived value of traditional garments. Similarly, the impact of the aforementioned nudges on the product perception among the non-ethnic consumer base may also be examined by designing appropriate research experiments. The use of neuromarketing tools to further investigate the attention, emotion and cognition of consumers when exposed to such ethnic products may significantly improve the understanding of consumer preference dynamics.

### Conclusion, implication and limitation

The current paper focuses on the common concern associated with artisan dropout from the handloom sector in India. One of the major causes is the limited demand for the industry to sustainably support the livelihoods of artisan families. The study looks into the motivations causing individuals to purchase such ethnic garments. The present study was undertaken to empirically compare the national market buyers with the local market buyers for ethnic garments. This was done with special reference to AEGs. One of the key focuses was to understand the relationship between the choices of the two groups and the underlying cognitive biases. Such biases often cast a barrier to the popularity of ethnic products from reaching markets beyond the related ethnic population.

Results highlight the role of attribute substitution as a major factor inhibiting the popularity of AEGs. The most visible attribute that substitutes product valuation is the ethnicity of the product. It was observed that the relative similarity of a garment with one's ethnicity has a significant impact on its perceived evaluation by the local buyer representing the localised market. For national buyers, mere familiarity is an important value determinant. In addition, the complexity associated with usage and maintenance of the garment also played an important role in its preference for both groups.

The present study has certain limitations. The first limitation of the study is the use of cross-sectional data. Cross-sectional data fail to provide information about the stimulus exposure and temporal link. A longitudinal study would help substantiate the finding. Second, this is an empirical study. Using both qualitative and quantitative techniques would help provide meaningful insight into consumer behaviour. Third, the use of the nudging technique proposed in the study is based on the review of available literature and has not been empirically tested. Future research designed to measure the impact of the use of nudges would help increase the robustness of the findings.

### ORCID iDs

Arnab Banerjee  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5849-2245>

Tanusree Dutta  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4862-2338>

Aditya Shankar Mishra  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9438-8282>

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## Notes

1. Assam is one of the 28 states/provinces in India with a population of 30 million people.
2. Products woven from pure mulberry silk, primarily in the Kancheepuram district of Tamil Nadu, India. It is known for its intricate designs depicting scenes from religious epics. It is often used as bridal wear in southern India and also for certain other special occasions.
3. Fine silk products made in the ancient city of Varanasi, India, known for its golden and silver brocade. These are mostly characterized by floral and foliate motifs.

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Corresponding author

Arnab Banerjee can be contacted at: [arnab.banerjee07@gmail.com](mailto:arnab.banerjee07@gmail.com)

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