

Is small the new green? Understanding the Indian small business model landscape

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic exposed several layers of the labour situation of fashion production in India. With the sharp decline of demand for fashion products in the beginning of the lockdowns across the country, the migrant labour force (comprising of 50% of the Indian fashion industry, skilled and unskilled) fled to their hometown not understanding what the pandemic meant for their livelihoods (Mehra, 2021). Many skilled artisans in craft clusters spread across various states suffered when their looms and work stations had to be shut down in lieu of the restrictions related to Covid-19 (Manzar, 2021). While the industry is slowly bouncing back, these clusters found a way to reach their customers directly through social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. India is one of the most versatile countries for fashion to thrive. With a rich history of textiles and craftsmanship, there exists a pluralism of sorts for various business models to thrive. The country has had a rich past of recycling practices in clothing (Norris, 2010), but with the advent of globalization and liberalization, Indian fashion landscape took a turn with the proliferation of fast fashion and rapid mass production. The reintroduction of the idea of “slow” (i.e. slow fashion) (Fletcher, 2007) has seen a resurgence of small business specifically involved in sustainable fashion practices (Henninger et al, 2016; Niinimäki, 2013). There is a plethora of activities associated with specific small business and brands that represent the emergence of new business models. Shen et al. (2013) list eight broad criteria that represent sustainable business practices: some of these practices with Indian small businesses include: Recycling (Iro Iro and Doh Tak Keh), Organic (No Nasties and The Summer House), Secondhand/pre-loved/thrifted (Luu Liu and Lulu Thrift), Vegan (Arture and Malai), Artisanal (Swara – Voice of Women and Tamarind Chutney), Locally made (With.N and Bhusattva), Made-to-Order (Bodice and Oshadi) and Ethically made (Nicobar and ka-sha). A movement towards going back to the roots: traditional weaving methods, dyeing and printing processes, regenerative farming, and made-to-measure clothing and footwear and so on is apparent, but academically under researched (Bocken et al, 2014; Pandit et al, 2019).

Purpose: An in-depth understanding of the current state of small businesses related to sustainable fashion in India. To highlight and uncover the meanings of various pluralisms of contemporary slow fashion practices

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adopted by small businesses: from secondhand clothing to fair trade to made-to-measure (Paharia, 2019), in a landscape hugely influenced and managed through the Internet and social media.

Methodology used: Mixed methods will be employed, which will be interpretive and qualitative in nature. Netnography (Kozinets, 2020) of these small business and their social media accounts will be conducted along with a Grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2000) will be deployed through in-depth interviews with key informants from these small businesses, who also happen to be at the juxtaposition of being consumers and producers of sustainable fashion themselves.

Results expected as well as their relevance for theory and practice: This academic research endeavour would strive to bring to light the best practices that small businesses undertake with the goal of uplifting their lived communities and thereby the skilled artisans, the underserved sections of the society through their collaborations and educational initiatives. The study will also seek to develop a framework that may be useful for future business activities with similar aspirations. With the deployment of Grounded Theory this study could result in a middle level theory that explains how small businesses engaging in fashion contribute towards the greening of the industry, while considering the global and local impact throughout the supply chain.

Keywords: made-to-order; sustainable fashion; small business; netnography; slow fashion; alternate small business models; fashion labour

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