

An Inquiry into Marketing and Consumption of Khadi

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Abstract

Khadi as a hand-spun, hand-woven fabric was used as a device to create, represent, facilitate, and transform nationalism in pre-independence India. Past research on khadi has studied it as a symbol of swadeshi (indigenous) and has examined its contribution in the Indian freedom struggle. Scholars have rarely explored modern day selling and consumption of khadi, and its meaning as a brand. My dissertation tries to address this gap through three essays based on my ethnographic work over a period of 22 months.

The first essay traces the institutional history of brand khadi. It explains the political economy of khadi as a brand in India. I make two important contributions in this essay. First, I study the evolution of brand khadi in the first half of the 20th CE. I explain how an ordinary brand of cloth became a significant marker of nationalism. This helps in understanding how brands are immersed in political meanings. Second, a historical analysis of khadi as a brand helps to understand how its brand meaning is situated in India's political economy. I draw linkages among political movements, state interventions, institutions, functioning of an economy, and brand meaning to understand the political economy of khadi. My study contributes by revealing some rarely discussed linkages in the creation of a brand and by developing the idea of political economy of branding.

The second essay examines the creation and sustenance of a utopian consumption community of khadi consumers. Several consumer researchers have studied the idea of utopian consumption communities and how they create alternative ways of living. Utopian consumption is driven by idealistic values and alternative ways of life, such as voluntary simplicity,

uniformity, and self-labor. Such settings often aim to provide alternatives to market dominance and capitalism. I provide answers to two important questions that remain under-examined in the context of utopian consumption communities: first, how do such utopian settings inculcate their alternative values among consumers who do not subscribe to their beliefs; second what happens when utopian norms are forced into social practices. I uncover some of the ambiguities that prevail within utopian consumption communities, and attend to a struggle between market-dominated structuring of life and alternative Gandhian values as anti-structuring influences.

In the third essay I examine marketization of khadi. My essay addresses two inadequately examined issues in the context of marketization in marketing theory: first, how the market imperatives of selling and profits draw upon non-market ideals to mystify these commercial motives; and second, how non-market actors respond when they are forced into marketization. I attend to a struggle between administered production of khadi by conventional khadi institutions and a more marketized version created by corporate houses, private retailers, and fashion designers. The entry of new players has resulted in the transformation of khadi fabric from a simple, coarse fabric to a trendy, elite fabric that is sold at a premium. Khadi as a neoliberal fabric is mediated by money and power, but it remains dependent on Gandhian values of simplicity, participation, equality, and independence.