

A Study Exploring the Facets of Visual Elements in Ethnic Products: Case Study of Sarees from West Bengal

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Abstract. Indian handicraft and handloom industry is vast and has tremendous potential in terms of product conceptualization and employment generation to artisans. The products are traditionally done by artisans through ages and has a unique identity associated to every style of products. Such ethnic products or traditional products can be identified by the consumers through its visual elements. To establish this concept of visual identification of ethnic products, the present research was carried out comprising ethnic dresses, different sarees of West Bengal, India. The visual features consisting of color, texture, motifs etc. were considered and identified through detailed observations. For implementation and checking validity of the concept, the parameters were tested by consumers in identification of the ethnic products i.e. sarees. Analysis based on this research will be useful for the consumers to identify ethnic products and also provide assistance in developing such ethnic or traditional products.

Keywords: Traditional products · Visual elements · User perception · Visual identification · Ethnic product development

1 Introduction

Ethnic identity has been 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 affiliations and language [1]. The concept of ethnicity extended to products refers to its stereotypical association with the particular place of origin. The ethnicity aspect of a product is related to a country (or several countries) that is (are) a legitimate place(s) for the design, manufacturing or consumption of this product [2]. Product ethnicity may be defined as a form of typicality and the outcome of categorization processes occurring in two directions, namely ‘countries being typical origins of products’, and ‘products being typical for countries’ [3].

India being a diverse country with rich heritage and culture has numerous ethnic products. The handicrafts industry in India is traditionally known to be an industry localized in specific regions of certain states. This sector is predominately producing decorative and gifts items with the traditional designs and the colours. Though down the years handicrafts have been altered according to the market demands, these products have still retained their ethnic identity.

Ethnic products in India can be broadly classified as handloom and handicraft. Handloom based product includes dress materials, soft furnishings etc. Considering both the categories, India contributes 1.2% to the world market for handicrafts. The sectors contribute nearly 1.5% of the country's overall exports. India's handicraft exports have shown an increase of 20.8% in rupee terms in financial year 2011 over 2010, primarily due to the increased demand for them in traditional western markets as well as new markets. These Industries have made tremendous progress during the last decade or so [4]. Each of the aforesaid category consists of characteristics of a particular origin. Dress is one such externally visible characteristic. These characteristics, can serve two functions in the case of members of ethnic subcultures. Firstly, it helps to visually indicate subcultural ethnic affiliation or membership; and secondly, it visually integrates the individual to the mainstream culture, thus reflecting acculturation or homogenization of values and of external characteristics [5].

In the current context of understanding of visual elements in ethnic products, the sarees of West Bengal have been considered. Sarees are the ethnic dress for the stated region, West Bengal in India. It is approximately between 5.5 to 8 m in length and 0.5 to 1.2 m in width. Since time immemorial, sarees are being worn by the natives of West Bengal. There have been many varieties but few are major or notable ones. These sarees are extremely popular across the world and are easily identified by people. The visual appeal initiates the identification process. The identification is done through visual cues which the user or consumer perceives from the sarees. Hence, researchers of the current paper have tried to address the visual cues which allow the consumers to identify the ethnic sarees.

2 Methodology

To achieve the targeted goal, the most distinct varieties were identified amongst the sarees of West Bengal. The major varieties under study included (a) Tant, (b) DhakaiJamdani, (c) Baluchuri, (d) Murshidabad Silk and (e) Garad Sarees [6]. Following initial observations and applying the principles and elements of design the parameters for visual cues were identified [7]. These visual cues of the sarees encompassed Line, Shape, Size, Space, Colour, Texture, Emphasis, Balance, Contrast, Repetition and Movement. The sarees were then mapped as per these visual cues.

For this purpose, 25 sarees of each varieties were collected. Each of these sarees were analyzed for their visual elements of the sarees by a small group (07 persons) of Post Graduate students of Fashion Design under the guidance of a teacher from a premier design school in Kolkata, West Bengal. The analysis were then summarized and tabulated. Followed by tabulation, the analyzed data were subjected to verification by 3 sets of people: (a) manufacturers of such ethnic products ($n = 30$), (b) consumers ($n = 100$) and (c) sellers ($n = 30$). Manufacturers of ethnic products included designers, artists and artisans/weavers. These people are experts and has been associated with the craft for quite some time (more than 2 years) and has an in-depth knowledge about the variety of sarees. Consumers group consisted of people who regularly procure dress materials for himself/herself and has the purchasing capacity. Such people might or might not have an in-depth knowledge about sarees. The third group of users were the

sellers and their knowledge was rated from medium to expert in understanding sarees. All the volunteers (persons selected through purposive sampling) were then given random samples of the 5 varieties of ethnic sarees and assigned them with the task of identifying the exact variety based on the visual elements. In this research process, the observation method has been followed in identification of the visual attributes. The user feedback were recorded on five-point Likert-type scale [8] [Strongly Agree = 5 and Strongly Disagree = 1].

3 Observations of the Study

On observing all the variety of sarees based on the visual cues, marked visual differences were noticed by the designers. These identified differences were shared with the volunteers (manufacturers, buyers and sellers) to identify/categorize the sarees from the random samples. The observations of the sarees with respect to its visual elements have been mentioned in Tables 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 (Figs. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6).



Fig. 1. Visuals of ‘TantSarees’

The expert user group comprising the manufacturers and sellers were able to identify the ethnic sarees successfully based on the visual cues. Most of the consumers (79%) from the set comprising people who did not have much knowledge about the sarees could also identify them.

Based on the observation and analysis of the responses (on Likert scale) provided by volunteers it was found that visual cues played a determining role in identifying ethnic products. It is also applicable for people having low to expert level of understanding of the products.

As the ethnic dresses (sarees) under study were specifically associated with the state of West Bengal, it can be inferred that ethnic dress formed a medium of differentiation

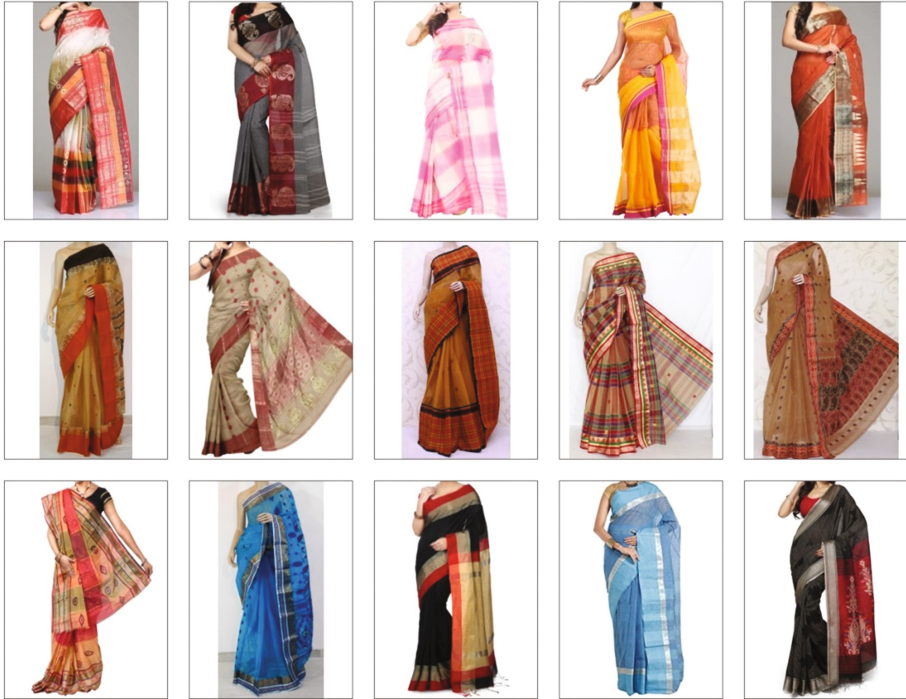


Fig. 2. Visuals of ‘TantSarees’

Table 1. Observations for ‘TantSarees’

Visual elements	Observations
Line	Aligned in vertical and horizontal Thick stitch line (continuous broken lines) on borders Border as line, atleast 2" thickness
Shape - motif	Geometric, Floral or both
Size - motif	1 cm to 4"
Space - motif	Background distinctly empty. Translucent look
Colour	Mostly contrasting colours at the border
Texture	Soft and smooth. Relief of motif creates texture
Emphasis	Motifs or patterns are emphasized
Balance	Both linear and symmetrical
Contrast	Highly contrasting
Repetition	Sequential
Movement	Majorly horizontal and vertical. Occasionally diagonal

among categories of sarees by providing different visual cues [5]. Alternatively, if a consumer is self-appraised and motivated to purchase ethnic sarees they can follow the visual elements and procure the same.

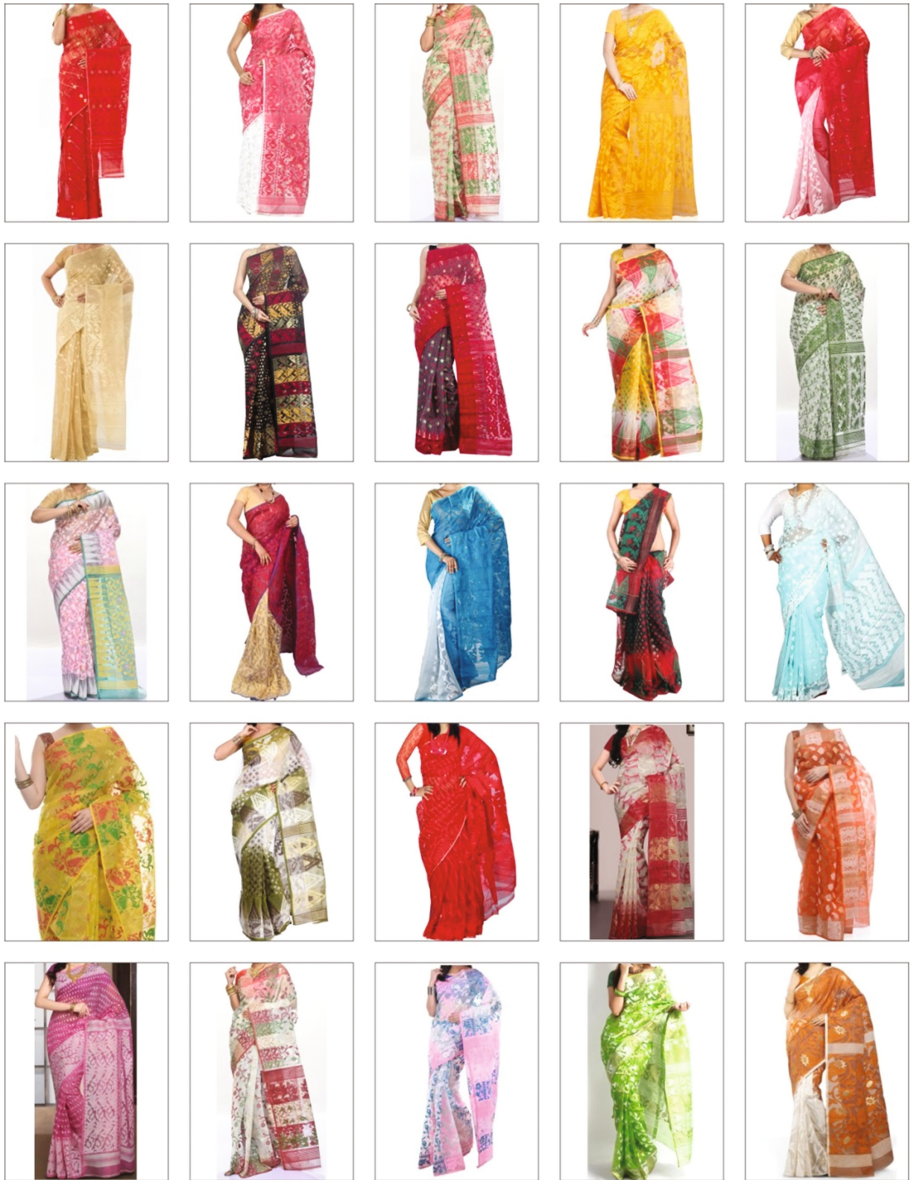


Fig. 3. Visuals of ‘DhakaiJamdaniSarees’

Table 2. Observations for ‘DhakaiJamdani’Sarees

Visual elements	Observations
Line	Aligned in vertical and horizontal Continuous border lines Border as line, usually 1" to 2"
Shape - motif	Mostly floral and occasionally geometric
Size - motif	Min 0.5" to 6" (approx.)
Space - motif	Background with extreme sheer look. Motifs are patterned.
Colour	Multi coloured. Usually soft pastels
Texture	Extremely smooth. Relief of motifs creates mild texture.
Emphasis	Motifs or patterns are emphasized
Balance	Majorly linear. Occasionally symmetrical
Contrast	Usually subtle contrast
Repetition	Sequential
Movement	Majorly horizontal and vertical. Occasionally diagonal

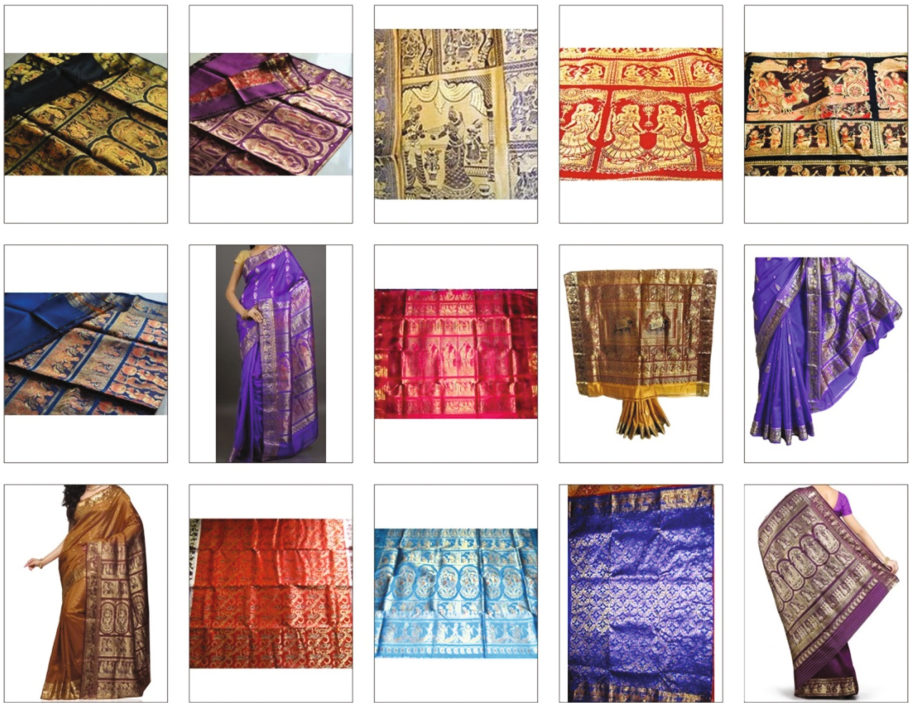


Fig. 4. Visuals of ‘Baluchuri Sarees’



Fig. 5. Visuals of 'Baluchuri Sarees'

Table 3. Observations for 'Baluchari Sarees'

Visual elements	Observations
Line	Aligned in vertical and horizontal Continuous border lines Border as line, usually more than 2"
Shape - motif	Mythological characters. Human, animal or flora figurines
Size - motif	1" or more
Space - motif	Detailed motifs across border and body
Colour	Highly colourful
Texture	Smooth. Relief on the motifs
Emphasis	Motifs or patterns are emphasized
Balance	Both linear and symmetrical
Contrast	Highly contrasting
Repetition	Sequential
Movement	Horizontal or vertical

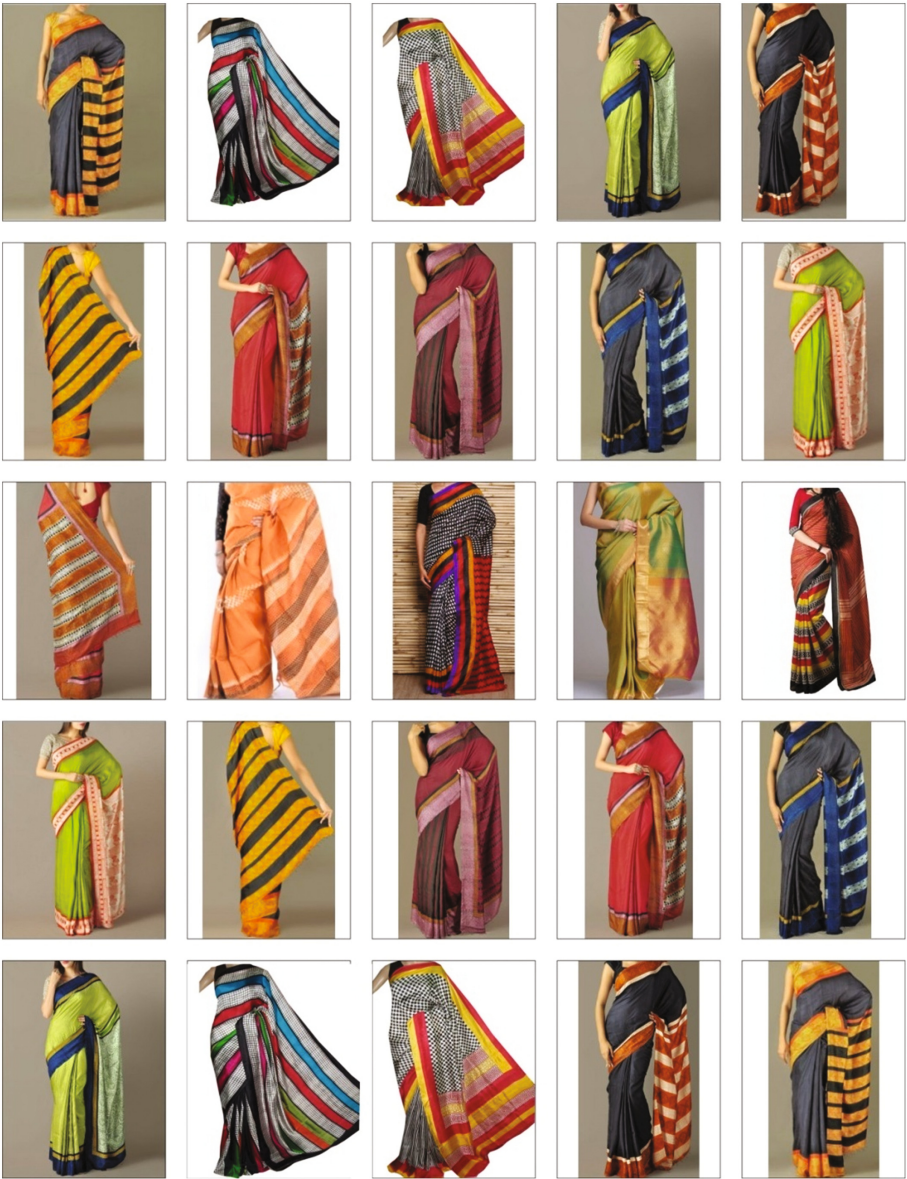


Fig. 6. Visuals of 'Murshidabad Silk Sarees'

Table 4. Observations for ‘Murshidabad Silk Saree’

Visual elements	Observations
Line	Aligned in vertical and horizontal Continuous border lines Border as line, usually 1" or more
Shape - motif	Predominantly floral or paisley. Occasionally geometric or abstract
Size - motif	1 cm to 4"
Space - motif	Motif patterned
Colour	Highly colourful with gloss
Texture	Soft and smooth. Relief of motif creates texture
Emphasis	Motifs or patterns are emphasized
Balance	Both linear and symmetrical
Contrast	Highly contrasting
Repetition	Sequential
Movement	Majorly horizontal and vertical

Table 5. Observations for ‘Garad Saree’

Visual elements	Observations
Line	Aligned in vertical and horizontal Continuous border lines Border as line, usually 1" or more
Shape - motif	Mainly paisley or floral
Size - motif	0.5" or more
Space - motif	Background mostly empty. Motif mostly on borders
Colour	White, red or maroon and golden
Texture	Extremely smooth. Relief of motif creates mild texture
Emphasis	Motifs or patterns are emphasized
Balance	Linear
Contrast	Medium
Repetition	Sequential
Movement	Horizontal or vertical

4 Discussion and Conclusion

People, especially with less knowledge on ethnic sarees, who intend to buy or manufacture ethnic sarees can now refer to visual cues (as depicted in present paper) for assistance. The findings of current research can now also be extended to products in other categories for identifying its ethnicity. It can also act as guideline for designers or manufacturers to develop ethnic sarees. Adding such visual elements will influence the consumer behaviour which might motivate to purchase ethnic sarees.

Ethnic consumer's internal motivations and attributions are related to the consumption of cultural products [9]. It can now be concluded that visual elements plays an indispensable role in identifying ethnic products. The concept can be extended in

developing products with such visual elements to influence consumer behaviour positively who are inclined towards ethnic products. The growth of global trade and the evolution of global consumer segments have increased awareness of and interest in the effects of ethnic product labels on consumer evaluations [10]. In line with common attitude models [11], a consumer can be favourable towards a product from a foreign country (i.e., have a positive attitude toward it) but still decide not to buy it due to normative reasons such as a feeling that purchasing foreign products is immoral or otherwise inappropriate. Due to globalisation, people have access to different kind of products wherein one can choose between ethnic origin and products from other regions. Researchers have shown that globalisation provides a cultural identity [12] and may be one of the major factors that influence the consumption behaviours [13].

Ethnic products are usually developed through traditional techniques. It becomes a challenge when the products are intended to cater masses following traditional techniques. Huge quantities are difficult to produce as such products are extremely labour intensive. This limitation which is only achieved by manual work of artisans creates ethnic extrinsic visual attributes that influences purchase intention of consumers. Consumers' strength of ethnic identification significantly influences their consumption of ethnic and ethnic-inspired apparel [14]. There is a significant positive relationship between strength of ethnic identification and consumption of ethnic inspired contemporary apparel [15].

It has also been found that there are globally concerned consumers who value the integrity and authenticity of cultural products [16]. While this consumer segment prefers culture-specific apparel, researchers have also identified another segment with preferences for pan-cultural apparel, integrating aesthetic elements from multiple cultures [17].

Future research needs to be conducted in detail considering other extrinsic factors that influences ethnicity and its impact on consumer purchase intentions. It also needs to be inferred the impact of pan cultural dresses on consumers considering the impact of globalization.

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