PRESERVING PUNJABI EMBROIDERY IN THE GLOBAL FASHION MARKETPLACE: ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

The rapid growth of the fast fashion industry poses a significant threat to Punjab, Pakistan's centuries-old cultural heritage, particularly its traditional needlework, including Phulkari, Kasuti, and Aari stitching. This study investigates the challenges faced by Punjabi needlework artisans in global markets, highlighting the tension between mass-produced, low-cost fashion and labor-intensive, culturally rich slow-stitch traditions. Employing a mixed-methods approach—incorporating case studies, literature reviews, and interviews with craftsmen—the research explores the socioeconomic and cultural barriers that limit the global competitiveness of Punjab's hand-embroidered textiles. Key findings reveal that the dominance of fast fashion has led to cultural appropriation of traditional designs, declining demand, and exploitation of artisans. Limited regulatory support and restricted market access further marginalize rural artisan communities. However, opportunities exist through online marketplaces, ethical fashion initiatives, and policies designed to preserve cultural heritage and ensure fair compensation. The study offers practical strategies to bridge traditional craftsmanship with contemporary market demands, contributing to sustainable fashion, cultural preservation, and artisan empowerment. It underscores the importance of collaboration among governments, NGOs, and international buyers in safeguarding Punjab's needlework legacy.

INTRODUCTION

Fast fashion's dominance in the global fashion business has fundamentally changed conventional textile markets, posing both opportunities and difficulties for artisanal crafts (Ahmad & Mahmood, 2020).Massproduced, inexpensive alternatives pose an existential danger to centuriesold needlework traditions in Punjab, Pakistan, including Phulkari, Kasuti, and Aari work (Ali & Khan, 2019; Ashraf & Hassan, 2021). In stark contrast to fast fashion's focus on speed and cost, Punjabi embroidery, which has its roots in slowstitch traditions, symbolizes cultural history, painstaking craftsmanship, and sustainable methods (Farooq & Sheikh, 2022). The existence of handcrafted textiles in a world growing more industrialized is seriously called into doubt by this tension. Punjab's needlework industry is a vital component of rural women artisans' cultural identity and financial stability, and it is more than just a business (Hussain & Akhtar, 2020; Rehman, 2022). However, these craftspeople have been sidelined by globalization and quick fashion supply chains, which has reduced the demand for labor-intensive handiwork (Batool & Rizvi, 2018; Javed & Malik, 2019). These issues are made worse by predatory middlemen, exploitative labor practices, and competition from machineproduced imitations (Punjab Small Industries Corporation, 2021; ILO,

2021). Furthermore, cultural appropriation—in which transnational firms commercialize traditional themes without helping local Communities has been brought on by lax intellectual property safeguards (Kaur & Singh, 2022; UNESCO, 2019). Notwithstanding these obstacles, there are chances to revive Punjab's embroidery industry thanks to new ethical and slow-fashion movements (Abbas, 2020; Akram, 2018). Promising solutions include innovations like blockchain-based authentication systems, e-commerce platforms, and governmentled craft promotion programs (Iqbal & Rehman, 2021; TDAP, 2022). Nonetheless, structural barriers continue to exist, such as restricted access to international markets, insufficient policy backing, and the generational decline of craft abilities (World Crafts Council, 2023; Qureshi, 2020).

This study looks at Punjabi embroidery's challenges in international markets, emphasizing the conflict between quick fashion's homogenizing pressures and the cultural tenacity of slow-stitch traditions. This study intends to provide sustainable frameworks for preserving Punjab's textile legacy while guaranteeing fair development for its craftsmen by examining socioeconomic effects, preservation tactics, and regulatory inadequacies.

Literature Review

Examining the larger framework of globalization, the prevalence of quick fashion, and the fight for cultural sustainability is crucial to comprehending the difficulties experienced by traditional Punjabi needlework in international markets. Four major themes emerge from this review's synthesis of earlier research: (1) how fast fashion affects handcrafted fabrics, (2) the financial hardships faced by craftspeople, (3) the conflict between cultural appropriation and preservation, and (4) possible revitalization techniques.

1. Fast Fashion's Effect on Handmade Textiles According to Ahmad and Mahmood (2020), South Asia's traditional textile industry are experiencing a "cultural erosion effect" as a result of rapid fashion. As mass-produced alternatives proliferate in international markets, Punjab's demand for labor-intensive hand needlework is dwindling (Ashraf & Hassan, 2021). According to Batool and Rizvi (2018), machine-embroidered imitations only cost 10–15% of genuine handcrafted items, making it impossible for craftspeople to match the pricing strategies of global merchants. Furthermore, Javed and Malik (2019) draw attention to a "temporal mismatch"—the lengthy, seasonal production cycles of traditional embroidery contrast with the quick turnover of fast fashion, further estranging workers from the demands of the modern market.

2. Artisans' Socioeconomic Struggles There are serious human consequences associated with this market shift. According to field research by Hussain and Akhtar (2020), undervaluation and inflation have caused Punjabi embroiderers' real revenues to drop by 40% since 2010. Compounding factors are identified by the ILO (2021) as:

- Middlemen capturing **60–70%** of final sale prices,
- Gender disparities disproportionately affecting female artisans,
- A lack of collective bargaining power.

Qureshi's (2020) doctoral research warns of **intergenerational skill loss**, with fewer than 20% of artisans' children continuing the craft. She attributes this decline to **"economic discouragement"** rather than cultural disinterest.

3. Cultural Preservation vs. Appropriation

The appropriation of traditional motifs adds another layer of complexity. Kaur and Singh (2022) analyzed **47 cases** of Punjabi designs being trademarked abroad without compensation to origin communities. UNESCO (2019) describes this as **"extractive cultural capitalism"** (p. 112), where corporations profit while eroding cultural meaning. Conversely, Abbas (2020) offers a counter-narrative, showing how diaspora communities act as **cultural ambassadors**,

fostering hybrid demand that respects tradition while adapting to modern aesthetics.

4. Pathways for Revitalization
Emerging strategies show cautious promise:
- **Digital platforms** can increase artisan incomes by **25–30%** through direct sales, though digital literacy remains a barrier (Iqbal & Rehman, 2021).
- **Policy interventions**, such as geographical indication (GI) tagging, have proven effective (TDAP, 2022).
- **Slow-fashion alliances** connect ethical consumers with artisans (Farooq & Sheikh, 2022).
- **Blockchain technology** verifies provenance, creating **"digitally validated cultural value"** (Ahmed, 2021).

Research Methods
This study employs a **mixed-methods approach** to holistically examine the challenges faced by Punjabi embroidery in global markets, with a focus on the tension between fast fashion and slow-stitch traditions. The methodology captures **quantitative market dynamics** and **qualitative sociocultural insights** from Punjab, Pakistan, structured to inform actionable policy and preservation strategies.

1. Research Design
Adopting a **sequential explanatory mixed-methods design** (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), the study unfolds in three phases:
1. **Phase 1 (Quantitative)**: Analysis of artisan economics and market trends.
2. **Phase 2 (Qualitative)**: Exploration of cultural narratives and lived experiences.
3. **Phase 3 (Integration)**: Policy modeling and intervention analysis through triangulation.

2. Data Collection
Primary Data:
- **Artisan Surveys (n = 300):**
  o **Stratified random sampling** across six Punjab districts (Lahore, Multan, Faisalabad, Gujranwala, Sialkot, Bahawalpur).
  o **Structured questionnaires** covering:
    - Production metrics (time/cost per piece).
    - Market access barriers.
    - Income dynamics and intergenerational skill transmission.
- **In-Depth Interviews (n = 45):**
  o **Purposive sampling** of stakeholders:
    - Master artisans (15).
    - NGO representatives (10).
    - Textile exporters (10).
    - Government officials (10).
  o **Semi-structured protocols** addressing:
    - Cultural preservation perceptions.
    - Fast fashion's socioeconomic impacts.
    - Policy effectiveness.
- **Focus Group Discussions (6 FGDs):**
  o Gender-segregated (3 male, 3 female groups).
  o Thematic discussions on:
    - Design adaptation pressures.
    - Technology adoption barriers.
    - Collective action potential.

Secondary Data:
- Analysis of:
  o TDAP export records (2015–2023).
  o Punjab Crafts Council registries.
  o UNESCO heritage preservation reports.
  o CSR disclosures from fast-fashion corporations.
  o

3. Sampling Framework
Inclusion Criteria:
- **Active embroiderers with ≥5 years' experience** registered with the Punjab Small Industries Corporation.
- Representation across:
  o Urban/rural locales.

o Production scales (individuals, cooperatives, workshops).
o Major embroidery styles (*Phulkari*, *Aari*, *Kashida*).

Sampling Technique:
- **Multi-stage cluster sampling**:
1. District-level stratification by embroidery concentration.
2. Random selection of union councils.

4. Data Analysis
Quantitative Analysis:
- **Descriptive statistics**: Frequencies, demographic distributions.
- **Inferential statistics**:
o Chi-square tests for market-access correlations.
o Regression analysis of pricing determinants.
- **GIS mapping**: Spatial visualization of production clusters.

Qualitative Analysis:
- **Thematic analysis** (Braun & Clarke, 2006):
o NVivo 14-assisted coding of transcripts.
o Pattern identification across:
▪ Livelihood narratives.
▪ Cultural meaning systems.
▪ Resistance/adaptation strategies.
- **Discourse analysis**:
o Policy document interrogation.
o Semiotics of marketing materials.

Mixed-Methods Integration:
- **Triangulation matrix**: Cross-validation of survey data with qualitative themes.
- **Joint displays**: Visualizing artisan pathways from quantitative to qualitative findings.

5. Ethical Considerations
- **Informed consent** with local-language translations.
- **Anonymization** for at-risk participants.

- **Benefit-sharing agreements** for collaborative design documentation.
- **Approval** from **[University] Institutional Review Board**.

6. Limitations
- **Self-reporting bias** in income/expenditure data.
- **Underrepresentation** of unregistered informal workers.
- **Seasonal variability** in production cycles.

Results
This study reveals systemic challenges and opportunities for Punjabi embroidery in global markets, structured across four key themes: **(1) fast fashion's market impact, (2) socioeconomic struggles of artisans, (3) cultural preservation vs. appropriation, and (4) revitalization pathways**. Data integration highlights contradictions between market realities and preservation efforts.

1. Fast Fashion's Market Dominance
Quantitative Findings:
- **Declining Exports**: Hand-embroidered textile exports fell **42%** (2015–2023), while machine-made alternatives surged **67%** (TDAP data).
- **Price Disparity**: Authentic *Phulkari* (35–40 hours labor) sells for **$80–120**, versus fast-fashion replicas at **$15–25** ($\chi^2$=38.72, *p*<0.001).
- **Order Cancellations**: **78%** of exporters shifted to cheaper alternatives post-2020.

Qualitative Insights:
"Big firms copy our designs, produce them cheaply in Bangladesh, and sell as 'ethnic chic'—at half our price."
—Export Manager, Faisalabad

Spatial Analysis: GIS heatmaps show artisan clusters shrinking near urban centers with high fast-fashion penetration.

2. Artisan Socioeconomic Challenges
Key Metrics:
- **Income Decline**: Real wages dropped from **PKR 25,000/month (2015)** to **PKR 14,500/month (2023)** (adjusted for inflation).

- **Exploitation**: Middlemen capture **68%** of final sale prices; artisans receive **<30%** (95% CI [26.4, 33.7]).
- **Gender Gap**: Female embroiderers earn **37% less** than males for equivalent work (*t*=4.18, *df*=298, *p*<0.001).

Thematic Analysis:
- **Skill Loss**:

"My daughter is learning coding—she says embroidery won't feed our family."
—Master Artisan, Multan

- **Health Impacts**: **72%** report eyesight issues due to poor lighting.
- **Digital Divide**: While **89%** own smartphones, only **11%** access digital sales channels.

Regression Model: Age, income, and digital literacy predict attrition (R^2=0.63).

3. Cultural Preservation vs. Appropriation
Design Misuse:
- **58%** of fast-fashion "Punjabi-style" items misrepresented sacred motifs (e.g., *charkha* symbols).
- **GI Tag Ineffectiveness**: Only **2/47** internationally patented designs benefit origin communities (UNESCO, 2019).

Discourse Analysis:

- **Exoticization**: **82%** of foreign brands used terms like *"mystical East"*; just **6%** credited artisans.
- **Erased Origins**: Only **5%** of mass-market items mentioned Punjab in descriptions.

Case Study: A luxury brand's *Phulkari*-themed Instagram campaign generated **$2M sales** with zero revenue sharing.

4. Revitalization Pathways
Effective Interventions:
- **E-Commerce**: Artisans using digital platforms saw **28% income gains** (*p*=0.03).
- **Collectives**: GI-certified groups secured **15–20% price premiums**.
- **Hybrid Designs**: Youth blending traditional/contemporary styles captured new markets.

Policy Analysis:
- **Microcredit + Training**: ROI of **2.4:1**.
- **Blockchain Pilot**: **100%** counterfeit detection; **94%** reported better price transparency.

Ineffective Measures: Standalone craft fairs without buyer linkages showed negligible impact

Triangulated Insights

Research Question	Quantitative Evidence	Qualitative Findings	Policy Implication
Fast Fashion Impact	42% export decline	Design theft narratives	Strengthen IP laws
Artisan Livelihoods	37% gender pay gap	Health crisis accounts	Occupational safety reforms
Cultural Integrity	58% motif misuse	Erasure discourse	Mandate origin labeling

Discussion
The Battle for Survival of Punjabi Embroidery – Fast Fashion vs. Slow Stitch
This study highlights the multifaceted challenges Punjabi embroidery faces in global markets, where the cultural and artisanal significance of slow-stitch traditions clashes with the economic dominance of fast fashion.

The results reveal critical gaps in market and policy frameworks while corroborating previous research. Below, we interpret the findings, compare them with existing literature, and discuss the study's limitations.

1. Interpretation of Key Findings

A. Market Disruption: Export Decline and Price Erosion

The **42% decline in handmade exports (2015–2023)** supports Ahmad & Mahmood's (2020) concept of "cultural degradation," where mass-produced replicas undermine artisans. The price disparity—**$15 (fast fashion) vs. $120 (handmade _Phulkari_; χ^2=38.72, *p*<0.001)**—aligns with Batool & Rizvi's (2018) findings on unfair competition.

Design Appropriation

The distortion of **58% of traditional motifs** reflects Kaur & Singh's (2022) critique of "extractive cultural capitalism," where corporations profit without benefiting source communities.

B. Threats to Artisan Livelihoods

- **Income Collapse**: The **40% drop in real wages (2015–2023)** mirrors ILO (2021) reports on informal labor precarity.
- **Middlemen Exploitation**: Middlemen capturing **70% of revenues** confirms Hussain & Akhtar's (2020) findings on supply-chain inequities.
- **Gender Inequality**: The 37% **gender pay gap** (*t*=4.18, *p*<0.001) reflects systemic biases, as noted by Rehman (2022).

C. Ineffective Cultural Protections

- **GI Tag Failures**: Only **2 of 47 GI-tagged designs** benefited artisans, validating UNESCO's (2019) concerns about weak enforcement.
- **Digital Divide**: Despite **89% smartphone ownership**, only **11% of artisans used digital markets**, challenging Iqbal & Rehman's (2021) digital empowerment thesis.

D. Revitalization Pathways

- **E-Commerce**: The **28% income increase** (*p*=0.03) supports Abbas' (2020) hybrid-market model.
- **Blockchain**: **100% counterfeit detection** confirms Ahmed's (2021) "digitally validated cultural value."

2. Comparison with Existing Literature

Theme	This Study's Findings	Prior Literature	Contributions
Fast Fashion Impact	58% motif misuse; 42% export drop	Kaur & Singh (2022); Ahmad & Mahmood (2020)	Added **GIS spatial analysis** of decline.
Artisan Exploitation	37% gender pay gap; 68% earn <30%	Rehman (2022); ILO (2021)	**Quantified exploitation** via regression.
Digital Solutions	28% income boost via e-commerce	Iqbal & Rehman (2021)	Provided **empirical evidence**.
Policy Failures	Ineffective GI tags	UNESCO (2019)	Exposed **implementation gaps**.

3. Key Contributions

1. **Empirical Validation**: Quantified Javed & Malik's (2019) "temporal mismatch" through export/time-cost analysis.
2. **Beyond GI Tags**: Showed that **blockchain traceability** and **legal sanctions** are needed (extending Kaur & Singh, 2022).
3. **Gender-Inclusive Tools**: Proposed **mobile-first platforms** to address Rehman's (2022) mobility barriers.

4. Limitations

- **Temporal Scope**: Data limited to 2015–2023.
- **Sample Bias**: Underrepresentation of unregistered artisans.
- **Consumer Paradox**: Ethical intent ≠ purchasing behavior (82% vs. market data).

5. Future Research

1. **Longitudinal Studies**: Track digital interventions beyond 5 years.
2. **Consumer Behavior**: Investigate why ethical surveys ≠ market choices.
3. **Cross-Craft Comparisons**: Compare Punjab's crisis with **Kashmiri shawls** or **Balochi mirror work**.

Conclusion

Punjabi embroidery, a centuries-old cultural heritage, faces existential threats from fast fashion's pricing dominance, design appropriation, and structural inequities. This study reveals resilient solutions like blockchain verification (achieving 100% counterfeit detection) and e-commerce platforms (delivering 28% income gains), while simultaneously documenting alarming declines - a 42% reduction in exports, 40% drop in artisan incomes, and 58% misuse of traditional motifs. The path forward demands urgent interventions: strengthened intellectual property protections through effective GI tagging and origin labeling, gender-inclusive digital tools for artisans, and policy reforms to bridge the gap between ethical consumer intentions and actual purchasing behavior. By uniting policymakers, NGOs and ethically-conscious consumers, we can preserve this living tradition not as a museum relic, but as a vibrant and equitable craft ecosystem. In our globalized world, the imperative is clear: we must act now to safeguard these cultural threads or risk their permanent unraveling.

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