

Wellness Tourism As A Driver Of Cultural Identity: Examining Purchase Intentions For Indian Handloom And Handicraft Apparel

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the role of wellness tourism in enhancing cultural identity and its impact on tourists' purchase intentions for Indian handloom and handicraft apparel, employing a mixed-methods approach with data from 300 wellness tourists and 20 stakeholders, including artisans and tourism professionals. Findings reveal that wellness tourism significantly boosts cultural awareness, which in turn positively influences tourists' intention to buy traditional crafts, with sustainability perceptions moderating this relationship. Tourists with a heightened sense of sustainability show a stronger preference for eco-friendly, ethically produced goods, emphasizing the demand for sustainable practices in artisanal production. The research offers practical recommendations for stakeholders, advocating the integration of cultural experiences into wellness tourism to drive economic growth for artisanal communities. It highlights the potential for wellness tourism to foster deeper consumer engagement with cultural heritage while promoting the sustainable development of rural economies. Future research should assess the long-term economic effects of wellness tourism on the handloom sector and explore the role of digital wellness tourism in shaping consumer behaviour.

1. Introduction

Wellness tourism, a sector focused on enhancing both physical and mental well-being, has witnessed remarkable growth in India in recent years (Smith & Kelly, 2006). This rise is largely attributed to a shift in consumer preferences, where travellers increasingly seek holistic experiences that not only offer relaxation but also provide cultural immersion (Kazakov & Oyner, 2021). Wellness retreats that incorporate traditional Indian practices such as Ayurveda, yoga, and meditation have become particularly popular. These practices are deeply embedded in India's cultural and spiritual fabric, offering a unique blend of relaxation and self-improvement (Smith & Puczkó, 2008). Moreover, such wellness experiences often extend beyond the body and mind, offering travellers a gateway to explore local traditions, crafts, and products that are intricately tied to the region's identity (Andreu, Font-Barnet, & Roca, 2021; Yadav, Tripathi, & Tripathi, 2022).

Among the most prominent manifestations of India's cultural heritage are its handloom and handicraft industries. For centuries, these crafts have played a pivotal role in both the socio-economic and cultural landscapes of the country (Sharma, Kanwar, & Rekha, 2008). Each region in India boasts its own unique handloom and handicraft traditions, reflective of local histories, climates, and cultural values (Mishra & Mohapatra, 2020). Products such as handwoven textiles and intricately crafted apparel are not merely functional or aesthetic commodities but are symbolic of India's rich artisanal traditions. They embody the skill and creativity of generations of artisans and serve as living representations of cultural continuity (Agrawal, 2021). Despite their cultural significance, however, India's handloom and handicraft sectors face numerous challenges in today's globalized market (Prathap & CC, 2022).

The advent of mass-produced goods, shifts in consumer preferences towards modern, mechanized alternatives, and the limited global exposure of these artisanal products have created significant obstacles for the sector (Grace Annappoorani, 2021). Furthermore, the disconnect between the value these products represent and their perceived utility or desirability in a rapidly modernizing society has contributed to the marginalization of traditional crafts (Yadav, Tripathi, & Tripathi, 2020). In this context, wellness tourism emerges as a potential

catalyst for revitalizing interest in Indian handloom and handicrafts, particularly among tourists seeking authentic cultural experiences (Singh, A. R., Jha, & Kumar, 2024). Wellness tourists, typically driven by a desire for genuine engagement with local cultures, are more inclined to value products that are imbued with historical and cultural significance.

This study examines the potential for wellness tourism to promote cultural identity and its impact on the purchase intentions of tourists concerning Indian handloom and handicraft apparel. Cultural identity, in this context, refers to the connection between individuals and the cultural expressions of the region they are visiting, expressed through customs, traditions, and, crucially, artisanal products (Prathap & CC, 2022). The research aims to understand how participation in wellness tourism fosters cultural engagement, which subsequently drives consumer interest in and support for traditional crafts. By engaging deeply with local cultural practices, tourists may not only develop a greater appreciation for these artisanal products but also be inclined to contribute to their preservation through purchase (Bilal, Kumari, & Rani, 2021).

In addition to examining the role of cultural identity, the study also investigates the moderating influence of sustainability perceptions on the relationship between cultural engagement and purchase behavior. In recent years, sustainability has become an increasingly important factor in tourism and consumer behavior (Yadav, Tripathi, & Tripathi, 2020). Travelers are progressively prioritizing eco-friendly and ethically produced goods, particularly in sectors like wellness tourism, where the ideals of harmony with nature and ethical consumption are prominent (Grace Annapoorani, 2021). Indian handloom and handicrafts, often made using traditional, sustainable techniques such as hand weaving, natural dyeing, and minimal waste production, align well with these eco-conscious values (Shrivastava, 2020). This study aims to explore how these perceptions of sustainability further shape tourists' purchase decisions.

By promoting traditional crafts through wellness tourism, there is not only an opportunity to preserve cultural heritage but also to empower rural economies. This alignment can create sustainable business models for artisans, providing them with a steady source of income while promoting eco-friendly production methods (Mishra & Mohapatra, 2020). Additionally, such initiatives would position local artisanal communities as critical contributors to the broader wellness tourism ecosystem, fostering a mutually beneficial relationship that sustains both cultural and economic development (Singh & Bhatti, 2023).

1.1 Wellness Tourism and Its Cultural Impacts

The growth of wellness tourism, particularly in India, is intrinsically linked to the country's cultural and spiritual heritage. Practices such as Ayurveda and yoga are more than just wellness techniques; they are expressions of centuries-old traditions that reflect the philosophical underpinnings of Indian civilization (Huang & Xu, 2014). The holistic nature of wellness tourism allows travelers to immerse themselves in these practices, offering a deeper understanding of the culture and its values (Patel & Sharma, 2022). This cultural immersion is not limited to health and spirituality but extends to various facets of local life, including food, architecture, and traditional crafts (Csirmaz & Pető, 2015).

Wellness tourism, therefore, serves as a powerful medium for fostering cultural engagement. Tourists who partake in wellness retreats are typically more open to exploring the region's traditions and are often motivated by a desire to experience authenticity (Munne, Hasan, & Bhowmik, 2021). This authenticity is often found in the tangible representations of culture, such as handicrafts and handloom products. Through wellness tourism, travelers encounter local customs and artisanal products in a context that emphasizes mindfulness and appreciation for the intricacies of craftsmanship (Han, Kiatkawsin, Koo, & Kim, 2020). This engagement with local culture helps bridge the gap between modern consumers and traditional artisans, fostering a greater awareness and appreciation of cultural identity (Luo et al., 2018).

Cultural identity, in this context, refers to the set of values, traditions, and practices that define a community or region. Artisanal crafts, such as handloom and handicrafts, are among the most visible and tangible expressions of cultural identity. When wellness tourists engage with these products, they are not merely purchasing souvenirs; they are participating in a cultural exchange that reinforces the significance of these traditions (Nath, Singh, & Deb, 2024). By fostering this connection, wellness tourism has the potential to elevate the cultural value of Indian handloom and handicraft products in the eyes of tourists, enhancing their purchase intentions.

1.2 Challenges Facing the Indian Handloom and Handicraft Sector

Despite the cultural richness of Indian handloom and handicraft products, the sector faces several challenges that have impeded its growth. One of the most significant challenges is the rise of mass-produced, machine-made goods, which are often cheaper and more readily available than handmade products (Shah & Patel, 2017). These modern alternatives have contributed to a decline in demand for traditional crafts, particularly among younger consumers who may prioritize convenience and modern aesthetics over cultural authenticity (Ghosal, Prasad, & Behera, 2020).

Additionally, the globalization of fashion and textile industries has exposed Indian handloom and handicrafts to intense competition from international markets (Upadhyay & Jain, 2019). Many traditional artisans lack the resources and infrastructure to market their products on a global scale, leading to limited exposure and declining sales (Karmakar, 2022). The erosion of traditional markets, coupled with the lack of modern marketing strategies, has further marginalized the handloom and handicraft sector.

These challenges are compounded by shifts in consumer preferences, which increasingly favor mechanized and mass-produced goods. In urban areas, where modern lifestyles often dominate, the demand for traditional handmade products has waned (Mukhopadhyay, 2022). As a result, many artisans are forced to adapt to changing market conditions, often at the expense of cultural authenticity. This trend threatens the survival of India's rich artisanal heritage, as traditional crafts are increasingly displaced by modern alternatives (Pande, 2022; Mishra, Srivastava, & Shariff, 2016).

1.3 The Role of Sustainability in Wellness Tourism

Sustainability has emerged as a key consideration in modern tourism, particularly among wellness tourists who often prioritize eco-friendly and ethically produced goods (Wray & Weiler, 2013). The ideals of wellness tourism, which emphasize balance, mindfulness, and harmony with nature, align closely with the principles of sustainability (Garjan, Paydar, & Divsalar, 2023). As such, wellness tourists are more likely to seek out products that reflect these values, including handloom and handicraft items made using traditional, sustainable techniques.

Indian handloom and handicrafts are inherently sustainable, as many of these products are made using eco-friendly practices such as natural dyeing, hand weaving, and minimal waste production (Wray & Weiler, 2013). However, despite their sustainability credentials, these products are often not marketed as such, limiting their appeal to eco-conscious consumers. By highlighting the sustainable aspects of handloom and handicraft production, wellness tourism can help position these products as desirable alternatives to mass-produced goods, particularly among tourists who are motivated by environmental concerns (Zeng, Li, & Huang, 2021). Sustainability perceptions may also influence tourists' purchase intentions. Wellness tourists who perceive handloom and handicraft products as environmentally friendly and ethically produced are more likely to purchase these items. This aligns with research emphasizing how wellness tourism creates opportunities to cater to eco-conscious consumers while promoting sustainable regional development (Andreu, Font-Barnet, & Roca, 2021). Additionally, sustainable supply chain considerations in wellness tourism, such as discount incentives and service quality, can enhance the appeal of these eco-friendly products (Garjan, Paydar, & Divsalar, 2023).

1.4 Study Objectives

This study seeks to explore the relationship between wellness tourism, cultural identity, and purchase intentions for Indian handloom and handicraft apparel. The primary objectives of the research are as follows:

1. To examine how wellness tourism impacts tourists' awareness of cultural identity.
2. To investigate the relationship between cultural identity and purchase intentions for Indian handloom and handicraft apparel.
3. To analyze the moderating effect of sustainability perceptions on this relationship.

By addressing these objectives, the study aims to contribute to the growing body of literature on wellness tourism and cultural heritage, offering insights into how tourism can be leveraged to support traditional industries and promote sustainable consumption. The findings of this research will have practical implications for artisans, tourism operators, and policymakers, highlighting the potential of wellness tourism to promote cultural identity and drive economic development in artisanal communities.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Wellness Tourism and Cultural Identity

Wellness tourism is defined as travel that promotes personal health and well-being through physical, mental, or spiritual activities. In India, this often includes Ayurveda, yoga, and meditation, practices deeply rooted in the cultural traditions of the country. Pande (2024) suggests that wellness tourism provides tourists with an immersive experience that connects them with the local culture, facilitating an appreciation for artisanal products such as handloom textiles.

Butler & Thompson-Carr (2024) explore how wellness tourism acts as a gateway to cultural engagement, with tourists seeking meaningful connections to the local culture through traditional practices and products. Gandhi & Garg (2023) further emphasize that tourism can be a tool for preserving cultural heritage by promoting the unique craftsmanship of local artisans, particularly in rural areas where handloom and handicrafts are produced.

2.2 Indian Handloom and Handicraft Apparel

Indian handloom and handicraft apparel is a vital representation of the country's cultural diversity, with each region showcasing unique styles and techniques passed down through generations. Dash & Sharma (2021) argue that promoting these products through tourism can serve as a strategy for revitalizing the sector, particularly in regions where artisans struggle to compete with mass-produced goods.

The global appeal of Indian handloom is growing, as consumers become more interested in sustainable and ethically produced products. Chauhan, Jain & Verma (2023) note that tourists who are exposed to the cultural

significance of these products through wellness tourism are more likely to purchase them, as they view these products as more than just souvenirs, but as pieces of cultural identity.

2.3 Consumer Behavior and Cultural Identity

The Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) and the Experience Economy model (Pine & Gilmore, 1999) suggest that consumer behavior in tourism is influenced by attitudes, perceived behavioral control, and the perceived value of experiences. In the context of wellness tourism, these models indicate that tourists who develop a stronger sense of cultural identity during their travels are more likely to purchase products that reflect that culture, such as Indian handloom and handicraft apparel.

Raja et al. (2023) explore how cultural identity influences consumer satisfaction and purchase intentions, finding that tourists who feel a strong connection to the culture of the destination are more likely to engage in repeat visits and purchase culturally significant products.

2.4 Sustainability and Ethical Consumption

Sustainability has become a major factor in consumer decision-making, especially in tourism. Dsouza et al. (2024) and Lakshmypriya & Varghese (2024) argue that eco-conscious tourists are more likely to purchase products that are produced using traditional, environmentally friendly methods. Indian handloom and handicrafts, which are often made using sustainable practices such as natural dyeing and manual weaving, resonate with these tourists, who prioritize products that align with their values of environmental and social responsibility.

3. Hypothesis Development

Based on the literature review, the following hypotheses were developed to guide the research:

H1: Wellness tourism experiences positively impact tourists' cultural identity awareness.

H2: Cultural identity awareness has a significant positive effect on purchase intentions for Indian handloom and handicraft apparel.

H3: Cultural identity mediates the relationship between wellness tourism experiences and purchase intentions.

H4: Sustainability perceptions positively moderate the relationship between cultural identity awareness and purchase intentions.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative methods to examine the relationships between wellness tourism, cultural identity, and purchase intentions for Indian handloom and handicraft apparel. The quantitative component includes a cross-sectional survey, while the qualitative component involves semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders in the wellness tourism and handloom sectors.

4.2 Sampling

A purposive sampling method was used to collect data from 300 wellness tourists who had participated in wellness retreats in India. Additionally, 20 stakeholders, including artisans, wellness retreat operators, and policymakers, were interviewed to gain insights into how wellness tourism promotes cultural identity and traditional crafts.

4.3 Data Collection

The quantitative survey was designed to measure constructs such as wellness tourism experience, cultural identity, and purchase intentions using a 5-point Likert scale. Qualitative data were collected through interviews, focusing on the integration of handloom apparel in wellness tourism and the role of cultural identity in shaping consumer behavior.

4.4 Data Analysis

Smart PLS was used for Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to test the hypothesized relationships between the variables. Qualitative data were analyzed using NVivo to identify recurring themes related to cultural identity, sustainability, and consumer behavior.

4.5 Questionnaire Design and Sources

The questionnaire items were adapted from validated sources to ensure reliability and relevance. The constructs for Wellness Tourism and Cultural Identity were adapted from Pande (2024) and Butler & Thompson-Carr (2024), while the Purchase Intention items were adapted from consumer behavior studies such as Ajzen (1991). Sustainability Perception items were adapted from research by Dsouza et al. (2024) and Chauhan et al. (2023). The final questionnaire was pre-tested with 30 respondents for clarity and content validity.

5. Analysis and Findings

5.1 Quantitative Data Analysis

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of the Sample (N = 300)

Variable	Mean	SD	Range
Age	35.4	7.2	25-55
Gender (Female: 60%)			
Education (Bachelor's %)	65%		
Previous Visits to India	2.3	1.1	1-6

Source: Author's Data Analysis (2024)

Table 2: Reliability and Validity Results

Construct	Composite Reliability	Cronbach Alpha	AVE
Wellness Tourism	0.91	0.89	0.68
Cultural Identity	0.88	0.84	0.65
Purchase Intention	0.93	0.90	0.70

Source: Smart PLS Output (2024)

Table 3: Path Coefficients and Significance

Path	Coefficient	t-Value	p-Value
Wellness Tourism → Cultural Identity	0.57	10.23	< 0.001
Cultural Identity → Purchase Intention	0.68	13.45	< 0.001
Cultural Identity × Sustainability → Purchase Intention	0.21	3.45	0.002

Source: Smart PLS Output (2024)

5.2 Qualitative Data Analysis

The qualitative interviews conducted with 20 key stakeholders, including artisans, wellness tourism operators, and policymakers, revealed several significant themes related to the integration of wellness tourism and cultural identity, particularly in the promotion of Indian handloom and handicraft apparel. These themes highlight the deep connection between cultural preservation, consumer behavior, and sustainability, as perceived by the stakeholders.

Theme 1: Interest in Cultural Significance and Heritage

Many respondents noted that wellness tourists often express a strong interest in the cultural heritage associated with the products they encounter during their stay. Stakeholders emphasized that the cultural narrative surrounding handloom products—such as their historical significance, traditional craftsmanship, and regional uniqueness—resonates deeply with wellness tourists.

Wellness tourists, who seek experiences that foster a sense of connection and self-discovery, often view the purchase of handloom products as a way to immerse themselves further into the local culture. One wellness retreat operator explained:

“Wellness tourists are not just looking for relaxation, they want to connect with the soul of the place. Handloom fabrics and handicrafts represent that connection—they symbolize the essence of local culture and tradition, which is exactly what these tourists are seeking.”

Several artisans echoed this sentiment, noting that tourists frequently ask questions about the history and meaning behind the designs. This demonstrates that the purchase of handloom products is not just a transactional activity for these tourists; it is an extension of their cultural exploration.

Theme 2: Artisans' Perception of Sustainability and Ethical Consumption

Artisans participating in the interviews highlighted the importance of promoting handloom products as sustainable and environmentally friendly. They reported that wellness tourists are particularly interested in products that align with their values of ethical consumption and sustainability. Many wellness tourists

prioritize purchasing items that are handmade, locally sourced, and produced with minimal environmental impact. An artisan remarked:

“Tourists ask about how the fabrics are made, whether natural dyes are used, and if the process is environmentally friendly. They are very conscious of sustainability and want to ensure that what they buy is not harmful to the planet.”

This growing demand for eco-friendly products has led many artisans to adapt their marketing strategies to highlight the sustainability of their production methods. For example, some artisans have started labeling their products as “organic” or “eco-friendly,” emphasizing the use of natural dyes and traditional, non-mechanized weaving techniques. This shift has made their products more appealing to wellness tourists, who often choose these items as a reflection of their commitment to environmental and ethical practices.

Theme 3: The Role of Storytelling in Driving Purchase Intentions

Another key theme that emerged from the interviews was the role of storytelling in enhancing the appeal of handloom products. Stakeholders stressed that tourists are more likely to purchase handloom apparel when they understand the story behind it. Artisans and tourism operators have found that telling the stories of the artisans—their craftsmanship, the challenges they face, and the significance of their work—greatly influences tourists' decisions to buy. A wellness tourism operator shared:

“When we tell tourists about the time and effort that goes into making each piece, and the centuries-old traditions these crafts represent, they feel a personal connection to the products. It makes the purchase more meaningful.”

This sense of connection through storytelling not only increases the perceived value of the handloom products but also supports local artisans by creating an emotional bond between the tourists and the cultural heritage embedded in the crafts. As a result, storytelling has become a powerful tool for driving purchase intentions, as tourists see their purchase as a way to support cultural preservation and sustain local communities.

Theme 4: Wellness Tourism as a Platform for Cultural Preservation

Both artisans and tourism operators view wellness tourism as a crucial platform for preserving and promoting local cultural practices. The integration of cultural activities—such as visits to weaving centers, artisan workshops, and cultural demonstrations—into wellness retreats provides tourists with direct exposure to traditional crafts, which enhances their understanding and appreciation of the local culture.

Policymakers interviewed during the study acknowledged the potential of wellness tourism to support cultural heritage preservation. They emphasized the need for greater collaboration between tourism operators, artisans, and government bodies to create tourism packages that highlight cultural experiences alongside wellness activities. One policymaker stated:

“Wellness tourism is not just about yoga or Ayurveda; it's about immersing tourists in the local culture. By incorporating visits to artisan villages and workshops, we are preserving cultural heritage while also providing an economic boost to these communities.”

This collaboration between the tourism and artisan sectors is seen as mutually beneficial. Wellness tourists gain a richer, more immersive experience, while artisans benefit from increased visibility and sales.

Theme 5: Economic Empowerment and Sustainability

Several stakeholders emphasized the economic benefits of aligning handloom products with the values of wellness tourists, particularly sustainability and ethical consumption. Artisans reported that the demand for eco-friendly products has resulted in increased sales, which has contributed to the economic empowerment of rural and indigenous communities. By positioning their products as both culturally significant and environmentally sustainable, artisans have been able to tap into a growing market of eco-conscious tourists.

Moreover, policymakers highlighted the importance of supporting artisans in adopting sustainable practices, such as the use of natural dyes and organic materials, to meet the expectations of wellness tourists. This shift towards sustainability not only benefits the environment but also enhances the marketability of handloom products to a global audience. A policymaker commented:

“We are encouraging artisans to adopt sustainable practices because that's what the modern tourist values. This shift is essential for both environmental preservation and the long-term success of the handloom industry.”

By aligning handloom production with the values of wellness tourists, the industry is better positioned to capitalize on the growing trend of ethical consumption, which in turn supports the sustainability of both the environment and local economies.

6. Discussion

6.1 Wellness Tourism and Cultural Identity

The results confirm that wellness tourism significantly enhances tourists' cultural identity awareness. As tourists engage in wellness activities that integrate local traditions, they develop a stronger connection to the cultural products of the region, such as Indian handloom apparel. This finding aligns with Gandhi & Garg

(2023), who highlight that wellness tourism promotes cultural preservation and consumer engagement with local crafts.

6.2 Cultural Identity as a Mediator

Cultural identity mediates the relationship between wellness tourism and purchase intentions, supporting H3. Tourists who feel a stronger connection to the local culture are more likely to purchase products that reflect that culture, such as handloom apparel. This is consistent with Raja et al. (2023), who found that cultural identity significantly influences purchasing behaviour.

6.3 The Moderating Role of Sustainability

Sustainability perceptions were found to moderate the relationship between cultural identity and purchase intentions, with eco-conscious tourists being more likely to purchase handloom products that align with their values. This finding supports H4 and aligns with Lakshmypriya & Varghese (2024), who argue that sustainability is becoming a key consideration in tourism decision-making.

6.4 Economic and Policy Implications

The findings suggest that promoting wellness tourism that highlights cultural identity and sustainability can drive demand for traditional crafts and support the economic growth of rural and indigenous artisans. Government initiatives that integrate wellness tourism with cultural preservation could enhance the visibility and value of Indian handloom and handicrafts.

7. Conclusion

This research demonstrates the critical role that wellness tourism plays in promoting cultural identity and driving consumer demand for Indian handloom and handicraft apparel. Wellness tourists, who are seeking physical and mental rejuvenation, also develop a deep connection to local culture, which influences their purchasing behavior. By integrating cultural and sustainability factors into wellness tourism experiences, artisans and tourism operators can appeal to the growing market of eco-conscious tourists. The economic potential of this approach is significant, particularly for rural and indigenous communities where handloom production is a vital source of income.

Future research should explore the long-term impacts of wellness tourism on the economic sustainability of the handloom sector, as well as the potential for digital wellness tourism to further promote cultural identity and ethical consumption.

8. Future Research

Opportunities for future research include:

1. Longitudinal Studies: Track the long-term effects of wellness tourism on cultural identity and purchase behavior.
2. Comparative Studies: Examine the role of wellness tourism in different cultural contexts.
3. Digital Wellness Tourism: Explore the impact of virtual wellness tourism on promoting traditional crafts.
4. Economic Impact Assessments: Quantify the economic impact of wellness tourism on the handloom and handicraft sectors.
5. Social Media Influence: Investigate how social media shapes tourists' perceptions of cultural identity and sustainability.

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