

Weaving emotions: unraveling the emotional significance of Sri Lankan handloom artistry

Sri Lankan
handloom
artistry

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper examines the socio-emotional identities of handloom artisans in Sri Lanka as a novel technique for new product development.

Design/methodology/approach – Qualitative research methods, including observational research and semi-structured interviews with 27 artisans from different handloom communities in Sri Lanka were conducted and analyzed in thematic approach.

Findings – By highlighting the maker of the craft through their socio-emotional identities in an artisan-oriented approach, this paper provides insight into new product development for handloom in alignment with up-and-coming trends. Ultimately, this can increase the demand for handloom and sustain the sector in both local and international fashion markets.

Originality/value – This research study is one of the first of its kind to propose a novel approach for artisan-oriented product development through the application of artisans' socio-emotional identities.

Keywords Sri Lanka, Crafts, Handloom, New product development, Artisans, Socio-emotional identities

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has caused substantial global changes and continues to influence society as it adjusts to a changed way of life. The fashion industry has also experienced a range of transformations due to the pandemic, including the shutdown of physical stores and the surge in online shopping (Marian, 2020). Additionally, there has been a notable shift in the fashion sector towards emphasizing local production, authenticity, and a greater focus on environmentally friendly product creation. This shift has played a role in driving the adoption of sustainable-social sustainability in particular- and circular practices in the fashion world.

Individuals who have experienced the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are displaying heightened emotional sensitivity. As a result, they are deriving satisfaction from small, simple pleasures. Simultaneously, consumers in the fashion industry are displaying increased awareness regarding the sources of their products. They are developing a newfound respect for the creators of these items. This shift has given rise to a new movement known as localism. This movement emphasizes the celebration, preservation, and protection of traditions, rituals, and crafts that are at risk of disappearing. This trend has gained significant attention, pushing traditional crafts into the spotlight and effectively connecting age-old practices with the globalized world (WGSN, 2018). These parallel developments provide the foundational context

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for the central themes explored in this study titled “Weaving Emotions: Unraveling the Emotional Significance of Sri Lankan Handloom Artistry”.

For many years, Sri Lanka (SL) has been a crucial manufacturing center for numerous high-end international fashion brands. During this time, it has also cultivated a promising local fashion industry that includes both local designers and manufacturers, as reported by the Export Development Board in 2021. As the global fashion industry progressively emphasizes sustainability and circular practices, Sri Lanka’s fashion sector has undergone a transformation. It now revolves around local craftsmanship, with particular prominence given to the handloom industry. The handloom textile sector in SL possesses a distinct identity and serves as a heritage industry, deeply rooted in historical and cultural values. Artisans from multiple generations contribute to this industry, enriching it with their skills and traditions. Despite existing in the shadows of the dominant export apparel industry, the handloom sector has demonstrated its ability to fulfill a wide range of demands – from small-scale to large-scale – as indicated by the Export Development Board in 2021. However, this sector has also been impacted by the economic shifts within the country, leading to noticeable repercussions. As a response to these challenges, there is a pressing need for innovative concepts to be integrated into the development of the handloom sector. This helps it adapt to the changing economic landscape and continue its growth trajectory.

Further, despite its traditional and cultural significance, the handloom industry lags behind in incorporating modern trends and approaches to product development that are in line with global fashion. In this study we seek innovative methods for conceptualizing handloom textiles keeping the modern trends in mind. Some unique methods we investigated are rooted in the identities of the artisans. We defined them as socio-emotional identities of artisans, aiming to showcase the individuality through narratives and invaluable contributions of these frequently overlooked craftspeople. Thus, associate them in the new product development (NPD) process.

Emphasizing the significance of intangible aspects of artisans’ identities, such as their tacit knowledge, accumulated experience and unspoken expertise, creative abilities, and socio-cultural values, this study focuses on artisans within the Sri Lankan Handloom sector. We defined those as their socio-emotional identities through which this study examines a new means of associating the same in the development of new products. As [McInnis and Medvedev \(2021\)](#) highlights, the survival of fashion companies relies on nurturing intergenerational knowledge transfer. This becomes especially essential in the fashion industry particularly in the craft sector, where the professional wisdom that accompanies years of experience holds immense value. Consequently, this study takes proactive measures to offer empirical evidence that contributes to ongoing dialogues concerning the tacit knowledge, accumulated experience and unspoken expertise, creative abilities, and socio-cultural values which ultimately draw insightful conclusions regarding innovative pathways to associate with the NPD in the textile industry.

In the status of the Sri Lankan handloom industry, the artisans are collaborating with their immediate instructors as they develop products in which product decision are made. There is no intermediation from expert professionals in design or creative direction. However, in this study, we emphasize that crafting is as important as design, and considered similar process is happening even without formal nature of design practice. Thus, explore the process with a focus of artisans.

Literature review

Social and emotional identity of individuals

From a theoretical standpoint, the study conducted by [Burke and Stets \(2009\)](#) defines identity as the state of being associated with a specific role within society, a particular group

membership, or the ownership of distinct characteristics that set an individual apart. The authors suggest that people attribute varying meanings to their own identities based on the social context they find themselves in. For example, someone might perceive themselves differently when functioning as a student, employee, spouse, or parent, showcasing how a person can embody multiple identities while taking on different roles within a community. In this research study, the investigators specifically define the concept of identity as the “distinct individuality of a targeted group.” This pertains to the artisans employed in the Sri Lankan handloom sector, highlighting their individuality - unique sense of self within that profession. [Tajfel \(2010\)](#) defines social identity as “an individual’s perception of their relationship with the external world and their group affiliations,” while [Leaper \(2011\)](#) notes that social identity refers to how individuals’ self-perceptions are shaped by their membership in social groups. However, [Jenkins \(2014\)](#) argues that all human identities are inherently social, a proposition that is agreeable, given that a society comprises a group of humans. Above stand points are vital in this study, as we aim to identify the social identities of Sri Lankan handloom artisans while also considering their emotions.

In order to identify socio-emotional identities, it is important to investigate into the emotion. From psychology to philosophy, sociology, economics, and eventually to design, the study of emotion has broadened in recent years. However, emotional identity can be the way an individual recognizes their own expressions or feelings and responds to the expressions and feelings of others. [Sturkenboom \(2014\)](#) has noted that emotional identity is a distinct phenomenon because it involves both the input of outsiders and insiders. It includes not only how people may define themselves through their handling of emotions but also how others may use emotions as social markers to define a person or group. Although many scholars have produced knowledge on identity, social identity and emotions separately, there is a reasonable lack of sources that provide a definite definition of socio-emotional identity. Therefore, the researchers of this study take novel endeavor in exploring socio-emotional identities through tacit knowledge, accumulated experience and unspoken expertise, creative abilities, and socio-cultural values that are expressed, focusing on artisans engaged in SL craft sector.

Emotions in design practice

Currently, there is a growing preference among individuals for products that possess a compelling story rather than solely focusing on aesthetic appeal. [Crossley \(2015\)](#) suggests that design is more about creating and presenting a new, compelling narrative for people to relate to and experience, rather than merely creating artifacts. The story of a product has become a crucial factor in the decision-making process for consumers, as stories resonate deeply with people’s emotions, which are integral to the design process. However, the emotions in design involve careful attention to how relationships are established and people’s involvement in the design process. In search of emotional we chiefly look at the involvement of artisans as they put their heart and soul into crafting of product through their skills, in this case Handloom.

[Kim and Sullivan \(2019\)](#) concluded that consumers tend to gravitate toward brands that resonate with their emotions. They identified several key areas in their study, including storytelling, empowerment, branding, and authenticity. In this study, the researchers propose a similar notion, suggesting that handloom products can convey compelling stories about artisans in Sri Lanka. Furthermore, [Sas and Zhang \(2010\)](#) reaffirm the intrinsic role of emotions in the design process. Their findings suggest that both positive and negative emotions can coexist during the design process, with negative emotions enhancing the perception of tasks as serious and important. It is also noted that excitement, frustration, and anxiety are the predominant emotions influencing the design process. Additionally, the presence of social emotions like confidence and empathy in the design process underscores the significance of emotions in design.

Ho and Siu (2015) distinguish between the concepts of emotionalize design, emotional design, and emotion design. The authors define emotionalize design as the incorporation of the designer's own emotions into the design process to create a product, while emotional design refers to the outcome of the design process, which elicits an emotional response from the consumer. While many studies in design and emotion focus on emotional design, this article investigates the artisanal skills that make them identical from each other and socio-emotions on the process of crafting. Moody and Kinderman (2019) have demonstrated that designers' personality traits are expressed in their work and serve as factors in moderating the designs of fashion or textile products. As such, the core concepts of this study shift between emotional aspects of design, localism, craftsmanship focusing on artisans-the designers of crafts-in the perspective of their socio-emotional identities.

The Sri Lankan handloom textile sector

The handloom industry in Sri Lanka has an ancient history that dates back to the first Queen of the country, Kuweni, who was a handloom textile weaver, as portrayed in local myths and legends. Traditionally, Sri Lanka's handloom weavers come from two different ancestries: indigenous weaving communities, such as those in Thalagune (a village in SL), and migrants who are often master weavers that migrated from India to serve the royals in the country. Gradually, the local handloom tradition was influenced and enriched by these communities and by waves of other foreign immigrants who came from countries with rich textile cultures, such as the Moor community, who are descendants of Arab traders from the Middle East. Thereafter, the industry has silently played a vital role in preserving cultural identities through craftsmanship (Wanniarchchi *et al.*, 2020).

With the liberalization of the country's economy in the 1970s (Ruwanpura, 2015), the development of the export apparel industry (textile and clothing contract manufacturing for overseas consumers) slowed down the handloom industry, as the attention of many stakeholders was focused on export apparel manufacturing. However, there has always been a niche market for handloom textiles and apparel produced in the country, and the development of the handloom industry has progressed very slowly compared to export apparel manufacturing, which is driven by global fashion trends. With the rise of the export apparel industry, the country's fashion consumers have been exposed to global fashion trends. However, the handloom industry has not been able to keep up with the westernization of clothing behaviors of Sri Lankan consumers while retaining its uniqueness. Over time, this has had an adverse effect on the handloom industry's ability to address the needs of fashion consumers. Moreover, the handloom industry has been severely affected by a deficiency of skilled labor, partly due to labor being absorbed by other production industries that have developed in the country as a result of the open economy (Dissanayake *et al.*, 2017; Wanniarchchi *et al.*, 2020). The industry is concentrated, particularly in the Western, Eastern, North-Western, and Southern provinces, with the Western province having a significant portion, followed by the Eastern and Central provinces. Currently, the handloom industry is predominantly rural, with an aging workforce that requires highly skilled labor. The industry provides employment opportunities to around 15,000 people across over 900 institutions, which include a substantial number of women in the country, most of whom are trained by their families (Export Development Board, 2021). Due to its physically demanding nature and low wages, the younger workforce appears hesitant to pursue employment in this industry, which heavily relies on manual labor.

Among the scholarly work related to Sri Lankan handloom, a reasonable lack of studies focusing on artisans is noticeable. Safna and Nufile (2016) analyzed women's empowerment in the weaving industry, which can be regarded as a study that has focused on artisans. They briefly discuss the emotional benefits, including happiness, confidence, self-respect, and

strengthened social bonds experienced by women in the weaving industry. They conclude that participation in this industry empowers women, fosters social respect and promotes the development of self-confidence and self-respect.

Among the previous research on the Sri Lankan handloom sector, only a few have focused on emotional aspects. This includes research by [Dissanayake et al. \(2017\)](#), who noted the significant potential of the handloom industry to expand and generate employment opportunities, as well as its recognition for modern and innovative trends, premium quality products, and traditional craftsmanship. The study highlights the successful application of sustainable and fair-trade principles to enhance product development. [Wanniarchchi et al. \(2020\)](#) have also assessed sustainability in the Sri Lankan handloom industry and identified new innovations. They revealed that the environmentally friendly production process and social inclusion within the weaving communities are the key driving forces for sustainability. Align to that, this research takes a new approach and seek the most important aspects of the lifestyle of often-overlooked actors – the artisans of this industry placing this study as one of the first research in this kind concentrating on handloom artisans, their emotions and social context.

The new product development

The new product development involves transforming ideas into reality through research, initial idea generation, planning, sampling, testing, and product development suitable for the market. As [Grunert and Trijp \(2006\)](#) have pointed out, NPD is a crucial growth strategy in any sector, and the handloom sector is no exception. Without a strategic approach to development, most new product introductions can result in failures. The process of creating a novel product should begin with ideation. However, making improvements or rectifications at any stage of NPD can enhance market penetration. One significant contribution to NPD is providing creative solutions, which are proposed as a novelty in the process. As shown in [Figure 1](#), the adaptation of the school approach to design thinking ([Samadhiya and Agrawal, 2022](#)) aims to pioneer new paths in product development and consists of four stages. This study adopts a similar approach, where the generation of novel ideas for concepts starts with extensive research on the socio-emotional aspects of artisans in the handloom industry. These findings can be intangible, however this aspect has been underrepresented in discussions about artisan-centered product development, despite many attempts in NPD using materials and methods associated with handloom.

The underlying belief in the craft sector is that craft is cultural heritage, and money is not the ultimate goal of the people involved in the sector ([Mignosa and Priyatej, 2019](#)). However, the decrease in the popularity of the sector is primarily due to the lack of commercialization, at least in the Sri Lankan handloom sector, meeting contemporary needs. In alignment with above theoretical approaches, this study investigates the ways in which unraveling the emotional significance of artisans in the Sri Lankan handloom industry seeking possible associations in NPD through the methods outlined below.

Method

This research study used a qualitative approach in its design and practice, employing semi-structured interviews and observational research ([Creswell, 2014](#); [Patton, 1990](#); [Ritchie and Lewis, 2003](#)) conducted among selected handloom artisans in Sri Lanka. The aim was to identify the artisans' social contexts, emotions, and skills that could inform a novel approach to product development. The researchers focused on the relationship between artisans' socio-emotional identities and their mindful crafting. The identified factors were considered key in the development of new products as the artisans are emotionally engaged in the process.

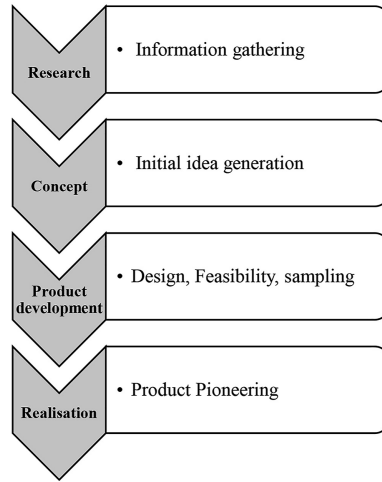


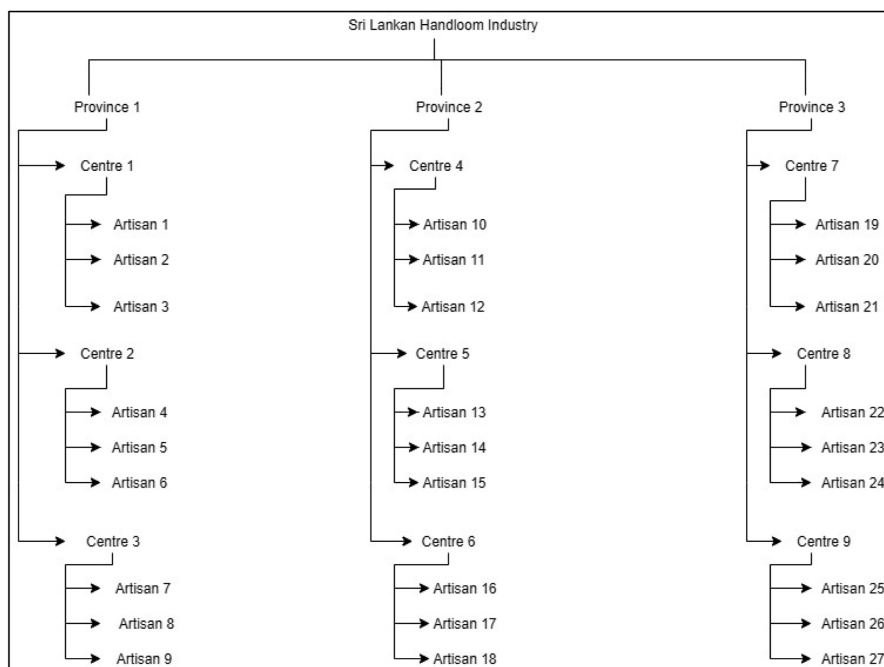
Figure 1.
Formation of new product

Source(s): Figure developed by authors adapting Samadhiya & Agrawal, 2022

Participants and data collection

The sample identification and selection for this research study were based on the expertise of the research team, with assistance from industrial experts in the relevant disciplines to recruit the most suitable participants. Therefore, this study employed a non-probability sampling method, specifically purposive sampling (Berg, 2001; Ritchie and Lewis, 2014), for the identification, selection, and recruitment of participants. The researchers selected participants for this study from the handloom community in SL. Given that it is a predominantly female oriented industry, the participants were all females. As illustrated in Figure 2, three different provinces were initially chosen. Subsequently, three distinct handloom weaving centers were selected from each province. Finally, from each of the selected centers, three participants, or handloom weaving artisans, were purposefully chosen. These participants were selected from each center to represent three categories based on their experience and age, including young (entry level), middle-aged (intermediate), and elderly (senior experts) artisans.

Due to the impact of COVID-19, mobility restrictions were imposed across different provinces during data collection for this study, resulting in a limited participant pool of 27 individuals. Nevertheless, we successfully achieved our goal of identifying, selecting, and recruiting participants representing various segments of the handloom industry. The data collection methods employed in this study included face-to-face semi-structured interviews and observations. These interviews were conducted with participants chosen to represent diverse handloom communities in Sri Lanka. The semi-structured format allowed us to gather emotionally sensitive data using open ended questions related to their backgrounds, careers, and expertise in handloom weaving. The study has taken ethical approach in its design and conduct based on the ethical clearance granted by the university ethics committee (EDN/2020/003). All interviews were conducted with the participants' consent and audio-recorded for analysis. In addition to the interviews, parallel observations were carried out to collect data on participants' work environments while they were actively weaving. These observations were digitally recorded in the form of images. Throughout the interviews, we also made annotations regarding participants' nostalgic and emotional facial expressions and



Source(s): Figure developed by authors

Figure 2.
Sample selection

body language, as these non-verbal cues provide valuable insights. Recognizing the significance of non-verbal communication in our research, we followed the approach recommended by [Neuman \(2014\)](#) to enhance the depth of data collected from our participants.

Data analysis

The study employed an inductive approach for thematic analysis, as thematic analysis is more suitable when exploring people's views, opinions, knowledge, experiences, or values ([Braun and Clarke, 2006](#)). Initially, the audio-recorded interviews were transcribed following the orthographic method described by [Edwards and Lampert \(2014\)](#). These interviews were originally conducted in the first language of the participants, which is Sinhalese, and were carefully translated into English while preserving the rich emotional content. To conduct a comprehensive analysis, the transcribed data was meticulously reviewed, along with detailed notes of corresponding observations and reflections. This process allowed for the identification and categorization of key factors that influenced the study, including participants' age, level of experience, marital status, specialization in weaving, and the sentimental quotes expressed during the sessions. These findings were collaboratively reviewed by the research team, following an analytical approach to the semi-structured interviews as outlined in the protocol. After a thorough examination of the above data, participants' socio-emotional identities were identified and discussed with reflections based on the research team expertise to the socio-cultural experience and handloom industry in SL. Themes derived in the analysis were associated with NPD in enhancing the value of product.

Research findings

The findings of the study, which involve the analysis of qualitative data collected from artisans through semi-structured interviews using a thematic approach, highlight two significant themes: handloom artisans' social identity and handloom artisans' emotional selves. These intangible values of artisans are closely linked to the products they craft and are worth noting in the New Product Development (NPD), as illustrated in [Figure 1](#) enabling new meaning to the product of which is highly appreciated by modern consumers-being more attracted to the stories behind the weaving rather than the artifacts itself that can be developed through material and methods. The sections below discuss the two themes in detail.

Handloom artisans' social identity

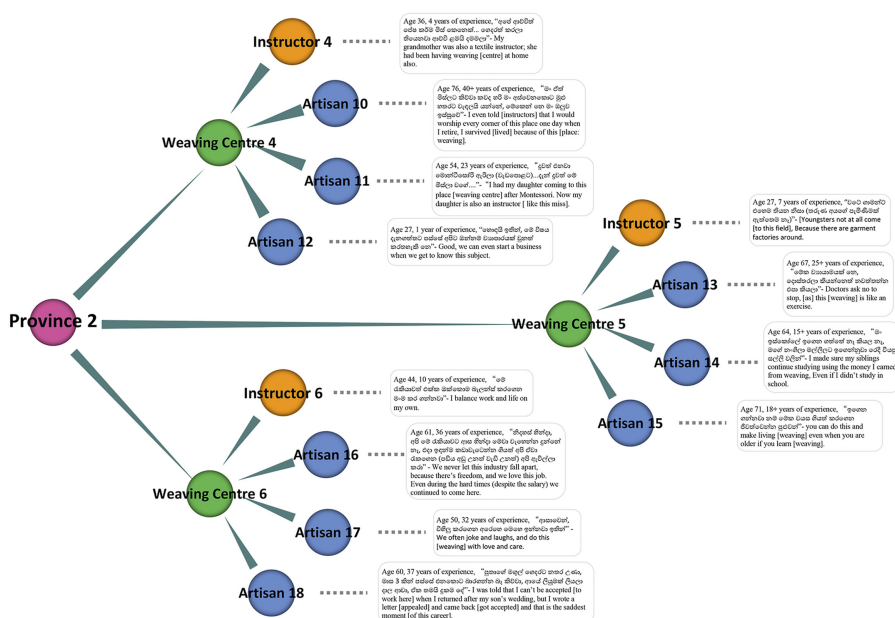
To identify the socio-emotional qualities that may have influenced artisans' careers, the data was systematically organized based on key features, including age, work experience, income, and recurring emotions. This approach allowed for a comprehensive analysis of how these factors interplay in influencing the socio-emotional well-being of artisans in their professional pursuits. The term "socio-emotional" was discussed within social and emotional contexts to recognize their distinct influences. Through the data analysis, the study examines the social profiles of artisans and identifies three major themes that shape their relationship with the products they create: socio-economic status, family engagement in the field, and educational status. Understanding these themes is crucial for appreciating and evaluating the products crafted by artisans, particularly in the context of current trends.

As revealed by the data analysis, fragmented family backgrounds and financial hardships seem to have played a significant role in the lives of handloom artisans, leading them to enter this industry. As shown in [Figure 3](#), a participant from Province 02 shared the following.

I could not study much, and we had many issues at home. My father was a drunkard, and he did not want to spend on my education. So, my mother was also in a state of mental breakdown and one of my cousin sisters introduced me to weaving when I was 12. Then, I made sure that my siblings attended school and studied from the money I earned (Artisan 14).

Similar to Artisan 14, many participants revealed that inevitable family hardships compelled them to enter the industry at a young age. However, this particular participant aimed to support their family through the weaving opportunity, dedicating over 15 years to mastering the loom. This exemplary artisan underscores the deep respect she holds for both the loom and the industry, which have provided her with a means of livelihood.

In addition to economic difficulties, the interview data indicated that one reason artisans are attached to the industry is the social circumstances and societal norms prevalent in their communities. The involvement of artisans' families in this industry has appeared to shape their individual social identities, as many have a family lineage with careers in this heritage industry. Particularly, elderly artisans noted that their attachment and sense of belonging to this industry are intergenerational. Family has been an inevitable reason that has caused many of these young girls to live in deprivation. One artisan revealed that the primary reason for her involvement in the handloom industry was her family members' involvement in the industry: "I also wanted to do this [weaving] because my elder sisters were already doing this" (artisan 04). Additionally, there was a mother-daughter duo (artisan 23 and 24) among the participants who provided one of the best examples of handloom being an intergenerational career path for artisans in SL. The comparison of the work by both artisans affirmed that they were equally competent in technical know-how and creative product realization, using relevant yarn, color, and weaving techniques for the best outcome. No successful outcome can be achieved in handloom without proper planning, as the outcome



Source(s): Figure developed by authors

Figure 3.
Artisans' emotional
expressions in
province 02

only becomes apparent upon completing the sample. Thus, many artisans participating in this study had a clear idea of their desired outcome and could work in reverse when preparing the materials and methods for planning the weaving process (see Figure 4).

Furthermore, the data indicated that the educational background of artisans in this industry had an indirect influence on their social identity, thus playing a significant role in shaping their personal identity. The majority of the participants in this cohort highlighted that their artisanal careers began during their schooling years. One individual even shared her fondest desire to learn to weave, admitting that, "I dropped out of school to learn this . . . I skipped school to learn this" (artisan 05). The responses of these artisans indicate that the majority of them experienced significant disruptions to their formal education. However, their determination to learn was supported by informal learning, most of which was vocational in nature, as well as through self-directed learning (Gopura *et al.*, 2021). Formal education did not hold a mandatory position in the lives of most of these artisans. Nevertheless, their artisanal skills, acquired through experiences ranging from 1 to 54 years (according to the sample), were mostly obtained through informal and vocational-based learning, reflecting the dedication and perseverance of the artisans who constitute a niche segment of Sri Lankan society today.

Handloom artisans' emotional self

The research findings also provide insights into the emotional experiences of artisans. Emotions can be either positive or negative. Positive emotions encompass happiness, associated with enjoyment, satisfaction, and gratitude, while sadness is linked to anger, regret, and fear. In this study, happiness emerged as the most prevalent emotion among the artisans, manifesting in various ways. "Enjoyment" aptly highlights the emotion of happiness. Most artisans in this study revealed that they continue to work in the handloom

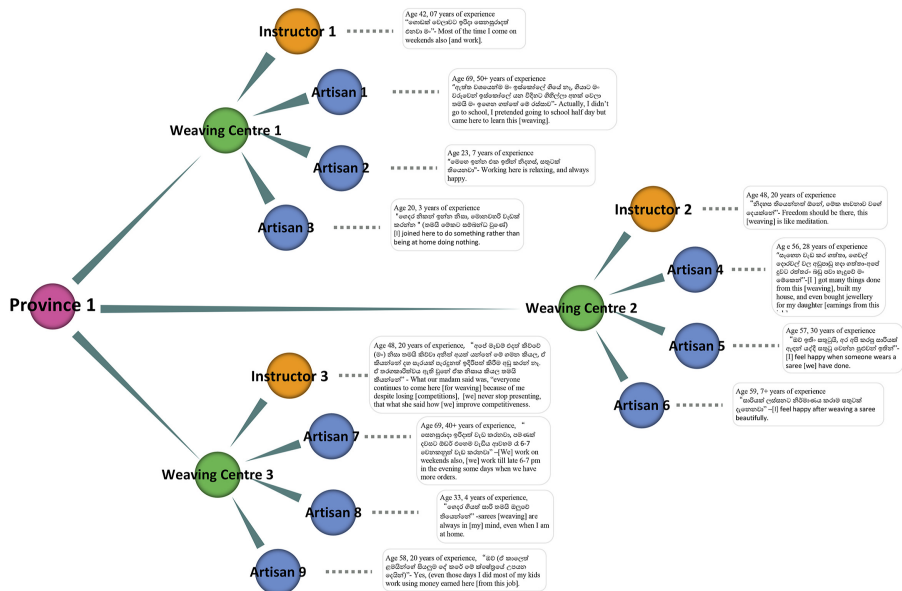
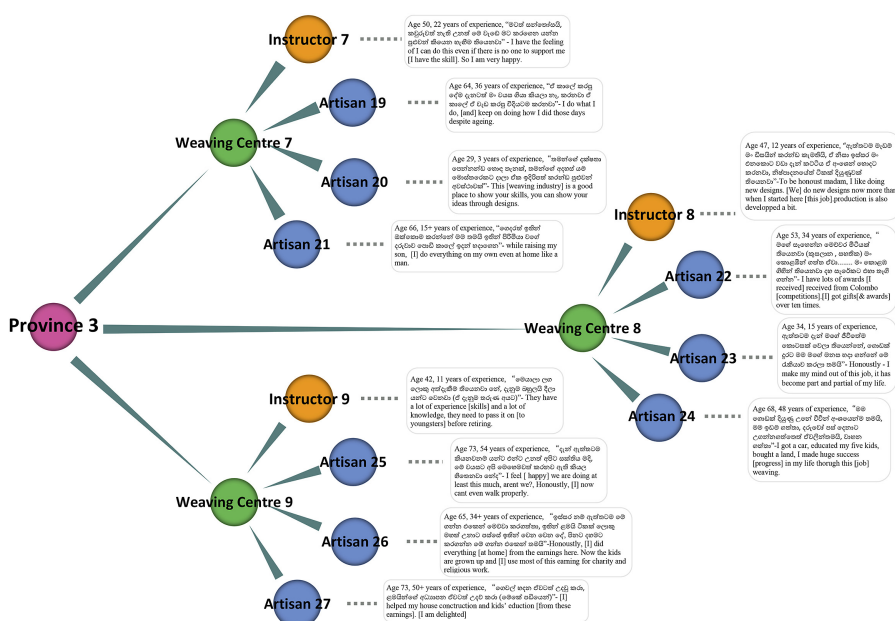


Figure 4. Artisans' emotional expressions in province 1

Source(s): Figure developed by authors

industry by choice and find contentment in their work, despite the challenging social circumstances that may have influenced their career choices. They tend to forget the hardships in their lives when they are weaving, and the fabrics they create with their fine craftsmanship bring them immense satisfaction. Many participants fondly recalled their best weaving moments. One particularly memorable moment for Artisan 06 was seeing a garment crafted using the fabric she had woven. Similarly, Instructor 02, with 20 years of experience at the age of 48, shared that weaving serves as a form of meditation, relaxing the artisans' minds as they intricately craft their designs with intense focus (see Figure 5).

Artisan 02, who, at the age of 23, boasts 7 years of experience (making her the youngest participant in this study) in weaving, highlighted how handloom weaving has become her source of happiness, stating, "Working here is pleasant and liberating." Despite the recreational activities typically enjoyed by girls her age, she chooses to remain close to the loom, finding contentment in the act of weaving. This insight allows researchers to consider how young individuals grappling with depression for various reasons might discover contentment through this mindful artisanal activity if introduced to it. Another artisan, aged 68 with 48 years of experience, revealed, "This brings a lot of happiness. I mean, when I spend time on this, nothing else comes to my mind" (artisan 24), illustrating how handloom weaving has been a consistent source of happiness for her over the years. Similarly, based on the participants' responses, it is clear that they enjoy their careers as handloom artisans regardless of their age or life circumstances. The camaraderie at work has also provided them with a sense of relief, as they share common interests, as reported by multiple participants, ultimately fostering an emotional connection to weaving. The accounts of artisans describing their enjoyment of work and their emotional connection to their craft suggest a shared sense of happiness and social identity, indicating common social bonds among them. Participants expressed deep gratitude for the handloom industry, which has provided them with focus and purpose in life. They attributed many of the benefits they have received to their involvement



Source(s): Figure developed by authors

Figure 5.
Artisans' emotional
expressions in
province 03

in the industry and described how it has contributed to their emotional well-being and overall happiness in life.

I could do well because of this job and now all is well [...] I got the EPF [Employees Provident Fund] and had a grand wedding for my daughter. When I took my child here [weaving center], villagers were asking me whether I was going to teach the same job to my daughter, but only I knew the reality [...] I informed them [villagers] on the day when my daughter got her appointment [as a weaving instructor] (Artisan 11).

The above quotation is from an artisan with 23 years of experience who expresses her gratitude to the weaving industry while reminiscing about her past when she became the breadwinner of her family following her husband's job loss. She was a working mother of one, and her husband lost his job when her daughter was a toddler. She took on the responsibility of raising and providing for her family, which was her motivation for entering this industry. She overcame her personal struggles and now glows with pride, having enabled her daughter to become a weaving instructor – a role that signifies a significant advancement beyond that of an artisan.

Artisans appear to hold immense respect for the industry, which is an extension of their gratitude. According to the data disclosed, the reason for this is not solely because they consider handloom weaving a mere source of income, but also because of the deep interest they have in the craft. Artisan 16, who has been serving the industry since 1984 (for over 35 years), stated that she never left the industry despite having other employment opportunities. She explained, "There's freedom here, and we love this job. We won't let this industry diminish. Even during challenging times when the industry was struggling for its survival, we never wanted to leave, regardless of the wages." Her resolute tone reflects her indebtedness, sense of duty, and loyalty towards the industry.

The concept of "contentment" emerges as another theme in the narratives of these artisans, serving as a critical element in shaping their emotional identities. Artisan 06, who is 59 years

old, noted that she enjoys seeing the final product of her own creations, stating, “I feel happy after weaving a saree beautifully.” She serves as an apt example to illustrate that happiness does not lie merely in the wages earned but also in the satisfaction and contentment gained from seeing the crafts they spend hours creating wholeheartedly come to life. The contentment demonstrated by artisans through their accomplishments, whether within or beyond the weaving industry, provides valuable insight into their emotional identities.

Furthermore, a young artisan (artisan 02) who is 23 years old stated, “My life is all about weaving now.” With only 7 years of experience in the handloom industry, she serves as proof that age is not a hindrance to developing an interest in handloom despite the stereotypes associated with the belief that the handloom sector is primarily populated by an aging community. She is not your typical young woman who prefers to work at garment factories, as is the case with most young girls who tend to favor employment at export apparel processing companies in the country. She openly expressed her enjoyment of life as a handloom artisan, finding it relaxing. Another artisan, artisan 23, who is 34 years old, mentioned, “[. . .] this has already become a part of my life now. Most often in difficult times, I find peace of mind through this,” emphasizing how handloom weaving has become her pathway to finding inner peace in life.

In addition, “Yes, I thought so [that it would have been better if my mother also did this],” shared Artisan 03, whose mother works abroad. As the eldest in her family, this 20-year-old has taken on the responsibility of caring for her two younger siblings with the income she earns from working on the loom. Although she emotionally confessed how she wishes her mother were with them, doing the same job, she continues to fulfill her duties as a second mother to her younger siblings while working, showing her determination and endurance in life. She symbolizes the compliant nature of the handloom artisan who has accepted life as it is and perseveres to find happiness even during difficult times.

As highlighted, the findings uncovered the emotional identities of the handloom artisans in Sri Lanka across two themes. In this study, we found that the emotional state of handloom artisans is multifaceted, encompassing a range of emotions. These include happiness and gratitude towards the handloom industry, as well as feelings of respect and attachment. Additionally, we observed instances of sadness, but also acceptance and compliance, with a persistent attitude of never giving up.

Discussion

As indicated by the findings, the social strata of the handloom community are largely driven by financial circumstances. Consequently, artisans’ emotional attitudes are influenced by their social contexts, propelling them toward working in this industry. However, most of the participants eventually embraced continuous engagement with weaving as it has enriched their lives. The handloom industry is typically located in rural areas, with a large population of aging individuals who have not had access to formal education. This unique demographic has contributed to the formation of a distinct societal identity among the artisans in this industry. Nevertheless, their extensive involvement in the industry provides them with valuable informal education through experiential learning.

Contrary to the poignant social identities of handloom artisans, their narratives reveal that, despite the hardships in their personal lives, they found solace in the time spent with handloom weaving machines. The tensions of their lives were transformed into the tensions of threads intertwined in the loom, providing them with a sense of relief, as disclosed by many artisans’ social identities. Indeed, as the data findings reveal, the artisans have a profound attachment, utmost respect, and heartfelt gratitude towards this industry. However, as the interviews disclose, they also carry an element of sorrow in their lives, evident in how they become emotional and sentimental when recalling their life struggles. Their recollections highlight their perseverance and strength throughout their lives. The artisans frequently

express the determination they possess to continue working in the industry, not only for their livelihood but also because handloom has become an integral part of their lives. This blend of diverse emotions shapes the selfhood of the Sri Lankan handloom artisan, making them content, strong, and accepting.

Although this research study discussed social identities and emotional identities separately, the study coined its own definition of socio-emotional identities as “The specific way one feels and one’s feelings manifest themselves in relation to the specific social setting that they are a part of”. For example, as discussed, typically an individual from an impoverished background may have negative emotions of sadness, anger, and disappointment. However, despite their financial challenges, handloom artisans possess positive emotions of happiness associated with satisfaction, enjoyment and gratitude as they identify themselves within their specific social group - the handloom community.

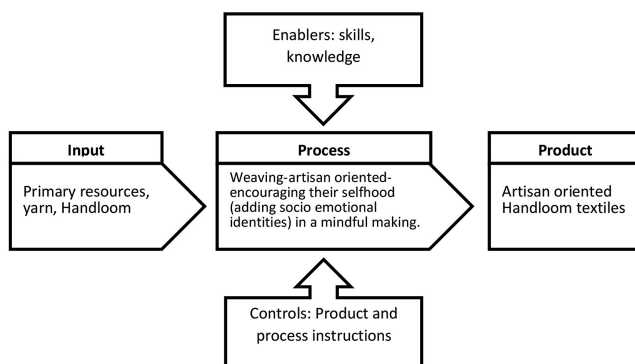
As discussed, an individual from an impoverished background may often experience negative emotions such as sadness, anger, and disappointment. However, despite their financial challenges, handloom artisans often experience positive emotions like happiness, associated with satisfaction, enjoyment, and gratitude, as they identify themselves within their specific social group - the handloom community.

Socio-emotional identities for new product development

The socio-emotional identities of the handloom artisans in SL informs the context of the final output, which applies to the theories of emotion and design. In fact, those socio-emotional profiles together portray who wove the handloom products under what circumstances. As aforementioned, the narrative behind a product has emerged as a crucial factor of modern purchasing decisions. Therefore, products developed with the support of artisans’ emotional sensitivities uphold significant value to the NPD.

Hence, the socio-emotional identities of handloom artisans present a unique opportunity for a NPD, as illustrated in Figure 6 below. By adopting an artisan-centered approach to product development, resources can be allocated, and product and process instructions can be provided while the artisans take personal approach to craft product. By exploring the artisan’s emotions, product developers can infuse new significance into the craft, adding depth and meaning to the final product.

Handcrafted creations, specifically handmade objects, should be valued for the time, expertise, and thought invested by the creators during the crafting process. Handloom products may have slight flaws, unlike power-loom products, but it is these imperfections



Source(s): Figure developed by authors

Figure 6.
The new product
development approach

that add an authentic element to the products, ultimately forging a meaningful connection between the consumer and the artisan. Therefore, as the data analysis has revealed, the personal experiences of handloom artisans can serve as the foundation for a fresh approach to product development. This novel approach to fabric development can encourage collaborations among artisans, expanding the narrative of the fabric and adding significance to the socio-emotional identities of artisans, as noted by [Gopura et al. \(2021\)](#).

Furthermore, the researchers in this study argue for the incorporation of socio-emotional identities of artisans into the development of new products, using a framework based on the concept of human emotions and the choice of skills. For instance, this can be achieved through the optimal use of color, leveraging various weaving techniques mastered by the artisans. Color plays a crucial role in human life, as people employ it to express their emotions and themselves ([Obeng et al., 2018](#)), which supports the researchers' argument. However, color preferences are subjective and can vary with age, gender, and culture, as individuals develop new preferences based on their unique experiences ([Hurlbert and Ling, 2012](#)). [Augello et al. \(2013\)](#) have concluded that paintings exhibit a defined style and use of color driven by the artist's intention to communicate emotions, further substantiating the researchers' argument on how artisans can convey their emotions through their crafts.

By integrating meaningful design elements inspired by emotions and utilizing various weaving techniques, new means to handloom products can be added with a unique and valuable touch. Hence, this study primarily proposes a NPD approach that prioritizes the creative expression of handloom artistry, enabling artisans to craft authentic products. By infusing their socio-emotional identities and generational skills, Sri Lankan handloom sector has the potential of producing distinctive range of products. This approach allows artisans to convey their feelings emotions and stories through creations, offering consumers a more personal and meaningful experience. Empowering artisans in this manner ultimately enhance the value of the final products, both in terms of its quality and the appreciation of the artisan's craft.

Conclusions

This research study has shed light on the profound significance of understanding the authentic selfhood of handloom artisans in Sri Lanka and its association with NPD. This contributes to the theoretical aspects of understanding the nature of the industry and artisans as no study as this has covered that area previously. Through a meticulous exploration of their socio-emotional identities, we have unearthed a wealth of insights that challenge the conventional perception of artisans as mere labor inputs in the handloom industry. The thematic findings of the study inform some policy implications required in the industry of which is more related to the social sustainability of these artisans. One of the paramount findings of this study is the revelation that handloom artisans are not mechanistic cogs in the production process but rather integral individuals who infuse emotional value into handloom products. Their mindfulness, tacit knowledge, and unspoken expertise contribute immeasurably to the finesse of these crafts. This realization underscores the practical implications of socio-emotional identities in elevating the value of handloom products, aligning them with the burgeoning trends of sustainability and hyper-localization in the market. The innovative approach of infusing emotions into NPD, as elucidated in this study, holds profound cultural and economic implications. It not only safeguards the rich heritage of the handloom industry but also positions it favorably in the ever-evolving fashion landscape. Furthermore, this study serves as a pioneering empirical examination of the socio-emotional identities of handloom artisans and their integration into the product development process, making it a valuable resource for future research and industry practices. As we look to the future, the recommendations stemming from this study underscore the importance of harnessing the authentic socio-emotional identities of artisans. Their tacit knowledge, accumulated experience, creative abilities, and socio-cultural values should be

considered indispensable assets in the realm of product development. By doing so, we can not only preserve the cultural heritage of handloom craftsmanship but also empower artisans and bolster the handloom textile sector in Sri Lanka and beyond. In essence, this study has illuminated the transformative potential of embracing the emotional facets of handloom products, ensuring that they resonate deeply with consumers while safeguarding the essence of this time-honored industry. Further practical implications of these findings serve as a catalyst for a brighter, more sustainable future for handloom artisans and their cherished craft.

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