

An Emotional Design Approach to Handknit Fashion: Gen Z Consumer Insights and SHG Livelihood Systems in Kumaon, Uttarakhand

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ABSTRACT

Sustainable fashion research increasingly recognises the role of emotional attachment in extending garment lifespans and countering disposability. This study examines handknitting as an emotionally durable and eco-sustainable fashion practice by connecting the demand side of evidence from Gen Z consumers with supply-side insights from women-led Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in the Kumaon region of Uttarakhand, India. Drawing on emotional design theory, the research investigates how affective associations, such as love, nostalgia, and personal meaning, shape consumer relationships with handknitted garments and how these associations can support sustainable livelihood systems.

A mixed-method research approach was adopted. Quantitative data were collected through a structured survey of Gen Z respondents (n = 44), capturing emotional responses, wardrobe retention patterns, purchase behaviour, and awareness of handknitted apparel. Qualitative insights were obtained through interview schedules with selected SHGs engaged in handknitting, documenting production practices, materials, income generation, and sustainability attributes.

Findings reveal a strong emotional attachment to handknitted garments among Gen Z consumers, particularly those gifted by family members, with a significant proportion of respondents retaining handknits for over a decade. Despite this emotional receptivity and willingness to pay a premium for handcrafted products, awareness of SHG-produced handknit apparel remains extremely low. SHGs, meanwhile, operate low-waste, decentralised, and women-empowering production systems aligned with principles of slow fashion and eco-sustainability.

The study identifies a clear market and a market gap. It argues that emotional design strategies, such as storytelling, visibility of makers, and customisation, can bridge this divide. By repositioning handknitting as a contemporary practice of emotional sustainability rather than a nostalgic craft, the paper highlights pathways for strengthening women's livelihoods and promoting sustainable fashion consumption.

Keywords: Emotional design; handknitted fashion; emotional durability; Generation Z; sustainable fashion; Self-Help Groups (SHGs); women's livelihoods; Kumaon, Uttarakhand.

INTRODUCTION:

Research on dress and fashion has often been organised around hierarchies of what counts as “fashion” and what is treated as peripheral or ordinary. Yet everyday clothing practices provide a more revealing lens for sustainability, because they show how garments circulate through routines of use, care, repair, storage, and memory. Responding to calls within consumer research and design scholarship to take ordinary consumption seriously, wardrobe-focused approaches have emerged as a way to study how attachment, habit, and meaning shape what people keep, discard, and value over time (Fletcher & Klepp, 2017).

Handknit garments are a particularly under-examined element within this everyday wardrobe terrain, even though they commonly carry long lifespans and dense emotional associations. Handknitting, the interlooping of yarn using knitting needles, is a portable technique, a technique that exists at an intersection of material function and felt experience. Beyond providing warmth, handknits often carry tactile textures, visible irregularities, and

traces of the maker's hand that transform garments into personal objects rather than replaceable commodities.

Emotional design scholarship argues that product experience unfolds across visceral, behavioural, and reflective levels (Norman, 2004). In handknitting, these layers converge through sensory appeal, functional comfort, and symbolic meaning tied to relationships and memory. Emotional attachment therefore becomes a sustainability mechanism: garments endure not because they are trend-relevant, but because they remain meaningful.

In the Indian Himalayan region, women-led Self-Help Groups (SHGs) sustain handknitting as a livelihood activity, and micro-enterprises use knitting to supplement agricultural livelihoods. These decentralised production systems can operate with low infrastructure requirements and minimal waste, and they enable income generation within domestic schedules. However, the sustainability potential of SHG-made handknits depends on whether contemporary consumers can discover, understand, and value these products beyond family gifting traditions.

This paper examines emotional design and handknitted

garments through two connected perspectives:

1. Emotional meanings and purchasing preferences of Indian Gen Z consumers
2. Production realities of women-centric SHGs in Kumaon, Uttarakhand

By bringing consumer data into dialogue with SHG ecosystem insights, the study identifies a maker–market gap and outlines implications for design communication, product strategy, and sustainable livelihood development.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Emotional Design and Emotional Durability

Emotional design research emphasises that product experience is not limited to utility; it is shaped by affective and meaning-making processes that influence how people judge, use, and keep objects. Norman’s framing of visceral, behavioural, and reflective levels is especially useful for clothing because garments are encountered sensorially (look/feel), practically (comfort, warmth, movement), and symbolically (identity, memory, and social meaning). Across these levels, emotions shape attention, evaluation, and decision-making, which is why emotional factors can be decisive in selection and purchasing behaviour (Damasio, 1994; Reeves & Nass, 1998; Van Gorp & Adams, 2012; Norman, 2004/2007).

In sustainability debates, the emotional dimension matters because attachment can prolong use and reduce premature disposal. When consumers experience a garment as meaningful, tied to relationships, self-image, or personal history, its value exceeds trend cycles. This idea aligns with wardrobe-oriented research, which shows that longevity is often sustained through habitual wear, repair, and emotionally anchored keeping rather than purely “green” intent. In other words, emotional durability can operate as an informal but powerful mechanism of slow consumption: the garment is retained not because it is new, but because it continues to matter.

2.2 Handknitting as an Affective Craft Practice

Handknitting offers a particularly clear case of how emotion can be embedded in both making and wearing. As a practice, handknitting is low-tech and portable: it requires minimal tools and can be carried out in domestic settings without fixed infrastructure. The act of knitting is frequently described in terms of absorption and calm, and it has been associated with wellbeing benefits, including the satisfaction of completing an object and the comfort of repetitive, focused making (Hosegood, 2009; Corkhill et al., 2014/2015).

What distinguishes handknit garments aesthetically is also central to their emotional appeal. Unlike industrial knitwear, handknits often display subtle variation like changes in tension, small irregularities, and traces of the maker’s “handwriting.” Rather than being treated only as defects, such features can function as markers of authenticity and care, strengthening the perception that the garment is personal and relational. Craft scholarship further highlights that making is a connective act: materials and ideas are brought together to form something new, and the process often includes social dimensions and shared meaning (Gauntlett, 2011 in Vacchani, 2013). These qualities help explain why

handknit apparel is frequently associated with gifting and kinship, such as newborn sets, blankets, and festival garments, where warmth is both physical and symbolic. From a sustainability lens, handknitting also supports long lifespans through repair and reworking. Because makers often possess mending competence, worn zones (elbows, collars, cuffs) can be reinforced, extending service life and supporting slower wardrobe turnover. This positions handknit apparel as a form of slow fashion not only because it is time-intensive to produce, but because it is culturally “time-rich” in how it is used, cared for, and remembered.

2.3 Handknitting in India: from domestic skill to contemporary revival

Compared to Europe, the documented history of handknitting in India is fragmented; however, available accounts suggest that knitting skills were disseminated through colonial-era institutions and women’s education, with knitting entering school curricula and domestic life as a respectable feminine competency (Lind, 1988; Kaur, 2020). Over time, handknitting served multiple roles like household provisioning, gifting, and occasionally income supplementation, while industrial knitting and ready-to-wear gradually displaced domestic production. As mass manufacturing expanded, handknitting became increasingly associated with older generations and leisure, even as it remained economically relevant for groups with fewer resources.

Recent years have witnessed renewed interest in handknitting, shaped by two overlapping forces: (1) heightened attention to handmade authenticity in fashion, and (2) digitally mediated craft cultures that circulate patterns, aesthetics, and communities through social platforms. The revival is visible in both high-fashion moments and “DIY influencer” cultures, suggesting that handknitting can be repositioned from nostalgic domesticity toward contemporary expression. For the Indian context, this matters because knitting persists in Himalayan regions, including Uttarakhand, where wool-based livelihoods intersect with women’s work, seasonality, and decentralised craft production.

2.4 Gen Z Fashion Consumption

Generation Z (Gen Z), commonly defined as individuals born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s, represents a significant and influential consumer segment in contemporary fashion markets. As the first generation to grow up fully immersed in digital technologies and social media, Gen Z consumers rely heavily on visual and narrative-driven content for product discovery, evaluation, and identity expression. While often characterised by fast-paced consumption patterns, this cohort also demonstrates heightened awareness of ethical, social, and environmental issues within fashion supply chains. For fashion producers and designers, Gen Z is therefore a paradoxical but critical audience: simultaneously trend-responsive and meaning-seeking, price-conscious yet receptive to authenticity, customisation, and ethical production narratives. Understanding how Gen Z forms emotional relationships with garments is particularly important for sustainable fashion systems that depend on longer product lifespans

and value-based consumption.

Gen Z is frequently characterised by high digital exposure, reliance on visual media for discovery, and strong interest in identity expression. This generation is also often described as ethically aware, though willingness-to-pay can vary and sustainability motivations may compete with affordability and trend appeal (McKinsey & Co., 2020; Lee et al., 2016). For handknit garments, Gen Z presents a particularly relevant audience because emotional design pathways of personalisation, narrative, gifting meanings, and authenticity are highly communicable through digital formats.

3. Research Objectives

The present study is guided by the following research objectives:

RO1. To examine the emotional associations (e.g., love, nostalgia, comfort, attachment) that Gen Z consumers in India attribute to handknitted garments.

RO2. To analyse Gen Z consumers' awareness, purchase behaviour, and willingness to engage with handknitted apparel, including preferences for customisation and perceived price value.

RO3. To investigate the role of women-led Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in Kumaon, Uttarakhand, as producers of handknitted garments, with particular reference to production practices, materials, income generation, and sustainability attributes.

RO4. To identify gaps between Gen Z consumers' emotional receptivity towards handknitted garments and their awareness of SHG-produced handknit products.

RO5. To explore emotional design strategies as bridging mechanisms.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research design

This study adopts a mixed-method approach to examine (a) the emotional meanings and preferences associated with handknitted garments among Indian Gen Z consumers, and (b) the role of women-led Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in producing handknit apparel as a livelihood activity in Kumaon, Uttarakhand. Quantitative survey data is used to capture consumer attitudes, experiences, and purchasing behaviour, while qualitative interviews with SHG representatives provide contextual insight into production practices, materials, and constraints.

4.2 Sampling and participants

A purposive sampling strategy was used due to the exploratory nature of the research and the need to engage respondents with relevant exposure to fashion consumption and design discourse. The consumer survey was administered to 44 Gen Z participants (aged 18–24) drawn from a design education cohort (NIFT students). To capture the producer-side ecosystem, interviews were conducted with selected SHG-linked initiatives in the Almora district, Uttarakhand (Mahila Umang Producers Company Ltd., Himadri Foundation-linked initiatives, Needles to say more - a privately operated women's cooperative).

4.3 Data collection instruments

The consumer questionnaire included a combination of closed-ended items (purchase frequency, shopping channels, decision criteria for winter wear, awareness of handknit brands/NGOs, willingness to pay, customisation preference) and structured emotional-response items capturing affective associations with handknitted garments (e.g., love, nostalgia, comfort). Open-ended prompts were included to elicit reasons for retaining garments over long durations and meanings attached to gifted handknits. The SHG interview schedule captured production workflow (frequency of meetings, piece-rate distribution), material types (cashmere/pashmina, merino, virgin wool, acrylic blends, indigenous wool), quality control practices, product focus, and approximate earning ranges by experience level.

4.4 Data analysis

Survey results were analysed primarily using descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) to establish patterns in emotional association, awareness, purchase behaviour, and preferences. Open-ended responses were reviewed and grouped into thematic categories (e.g., nostalgia, gifting, comfort, continuity). SHG interviews were summarised thematically to identify shared operational characteristics and constraints relevant to sustainability (e.g., material provisioning, waste minimisation through yarn weight checks, decentralised work distribution, and product category concentration in infant wear and accessories). The mixed-method synthesis was used to identify alignment and gaps between consumer values and producer visibility.

5. Findings

5.1 Gen Z Clothing Practices and Sustainability Orientation

The respondent group (n = 44, aged 18–24) demonstrates active fashion engagement, with the majority purchasing apparel every 1–4 months and acquiring multiple garments per shopping instance. Despite this frequency, wardrobe longevity remains notable: a quarter of respondents reported keeping garments for 2–3 years, while a subset retained selected items for over three years and more. At the same time, 64% acknowledged owning garments that remain unused, indicating a tension between accumulation and sustained use.

Sustainability awareness is present but uneven. A large majority of respondents agreed that ethical treatment of workers, customers, and suppliers is central to sustainable development, reflecting value alignment with ethical fashion discourse. However, this awareness does not automatically translate into informed purchasing decisions, particularly for handcrafted or SHG-produced apparel.

Table 1. Demographic and Clothing Consumption Profile (n = 44)

Variable	Category	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	91
	Male	9
Household income (annual)	≤ ₹6 lakhs	20
	₹6–12 lakhs	25
	₹12–24 lakhs	23
	₹24–36 lakhs	14
	> ₹36 lakhs	18
Clothing purchase frequency	Every 1–2 weeks	9
	Every 1–2 months	36
	Every 3–4 months	30
	Every 5–6 months	18
	Once a year	7
Average wardrobe age	6-12 months	11
	1-2 years	18
	2–3 years	25
	>3 years	45

Table 1 summarises demographic characteristics and clothing consumption patterns of Gen Z respondents, highlighting frequent purchasing alongside selective long-term garment retention

5.2 Emotional Associations

A strong emotional relationship with handknitted garments emerges from the data. More than three-quarters of respondents reported having received handknitted garments from their grandmothers, and over 40% from their mothers, highlighting the familial and intergenerational transmission of knitted apparel. While only a small proportion of respondents actively practice knitting themselves (15.9%), emotional attachment remains high.

When asked about feelings associated with wearing

handknitted garments, 52.3% of respondents reported feeling loved, while 31.8% associated such garments with nostalgia. This emotional intensity is further reflected in wardrobe retention patterns: 65.9% of respondents reported owning a handknitted sweater for over ten years, primarily due to emotional reasons rather than functional necessity. These findings support the idea that handknitted garments operate as emotionally durable objects, whose value is sustained through memory, gifting, and relational meaning.

Table 2. Emotional Associations

Emotional Response	Percentage (%)
Feeling loved	52.3
Nostalgia	31.8
Comfort / familiarity	3.3
Warmth / care	6.7
Childhood memory	6.7

Table 2 illustrates dominant emotional responses associated with handknitted garments, underscoring their role as emotionally durable wardrobe items

5.3 Awareness and Purchase Behaviour

Despite strong emotional receptivity, awareness of SHG-produced handknit apparel is strikingly low. An overwhelming 93% of respondents were unaware of any brand or NGO engaged in selling handknitted garments, and over half had not heard of established organisations operating in Uttarakhand. Among respondents who had purchased handknitted garments, the most common purchase points were malls, local markets, and online platforms, while NGO and SHG outlets accounted for the smallest share.

For respondents who had not purchased handknitted apparel, the primary barriers were lack of awareness (“did not think about buying”) and lack of access (“did not

know where to buy”), rather than negative perceptions of handknitting itself. Importantly, 84.1% of respondents expressed a preference for choosing their own wool, colour, and pattern, indicating a strong inclination toward personalisation and co-creation.

Price perceptions further reinforce this potential: over two-thirds of respondents believed that handknitted garments should be priced higher than machine-knitted alternatives, recognising the labour and craftsmanship involved.

Table 3. Awareness and Purchase Behaviour

Indicator	Percentage (%)
Unaware of SHG/NGO brands selling handknits	93
Unable to identify where to buy handknits	15.9
Never considered buying handknits	11.4
Obtain handknits via family/friends	13.6
Perceive handknits as non-trendy	2.3

Table 3 highlights the maker–market gap, showing that low awareness and access, rather than negative perception, limited engagement with SHG-produced handknitted garments.

Table 4. Preferences and Value Perception

Preference Indicator	Percentage (%)
Preference for customisation (colour, yarn, pattern)	84.1
Expect handknits to cost more than machine knits	68.2
Expect slightly higher price	29.4
Wear purchased handknits for >3 years	41
Wear purchased handknits for 2–3 years	39

Table 4 demonstrates strong consumer readiness for personalised, fairly priced handknitted apparel, supporting the potential for emotional design-led engagement.

5.4 SHG and Handknitting as a Livelihood Practice

Insights from SHG interviews reveal handknitting as a decentralised, flexible, and low-waste livelihood practice. Women knit from their homes, attend periodic meetings, and receive yarn and tools through SHG coordination. Finished garments are weighed against issued yarn, ensuring minimal material waste. Income varies by experience, with senior knitters earning between INR 7,000–12,000 per month, while newer knitters earn approximately INR 3,000–4,000.

For hand-knit garments, SHGs' primary focus is on infant wear and accessories, with adult sweaters produced on demand. Materials range from cashmere and merino to virgin wool and blends, including limited use of indigenous wool such as Harsil (Local wool from Uttarakhand). While these systems align strongly with sustainability principles of low energy use, zero waste, and local labour, their visibility within contemporary consumer markets remains limited.

6. Discussion

The findings reveal a clear maker and market disconnect. On the demand side, Gen Z consumers demonstrate a strong emotional attachment to hand-knit garments, recognise their value and express willingness to engage through customisation and fair pricing. On the supply side, women-led SHGs produce handknitted apparel using sustainable, low-impact practices that align closely with these consumer values. Yet, the two remain largely disconnected due to gaps in awareness, access, and communication. These garments function as emotionally durable objects, retained not because of fashion relevance but because of their relational and symbolic value. On the production side, women-led SHGs in Kumaon operate handknitting systems that are inherently aligned with sustainability principles, including decentralised labour,

low energy use, minimal material waste, and skill-based income generation. From an emotional design perspective, this disconnect represents a missed opportunity. Emotional design theory suggests that products become meaningful when users can connect sensory experience, use, and personal narrative. Handknitted garments already embody these qualities; however, when produced by anonymous SHGs rather than known family members, the emotional narrative is not automatically transferred. Designing for connection, through storytelling, visibility of makers, and participatory customisation, can help translate inherited emotional meanings into contemporary market contexts. For sustainable fashion, these findings suggest that longevity is not driven solely by environmental messaging, but by emotional attachment rooted in relationships and memory. SHGs, therefore, are not merely production units but potential custodians of emotionally durable fashion. Leveraging digital platforms, video storytelling, and co-design interfaces aligned with Gen Z's media habits could strengthen this connection and enhance livelihood outcomes without compromising craft integrity.

6.1 Emotional Design as a Mediating Framework

Fig 1: is a Conceptual Diagram Illustrating the maker-market gap between Gen Z consumers and women -led SHG producers of handknitted apparel



The figure functions as a conceptual mapping device within the design-research framework of this study, articulating the relational gap partially aligned with ethical, emotional, and sustainability orientations. However, these systems remain weakly connected due to limited communicative interfaces, low visibility of making practices, and the absence of narrative translation across contexts. The bridge model positions emotional design, encompassing storytelling, customisation, and mediated visibility, as a design-led intervention that operates between these systems. In methodological terms, the figure establishes emotional design as an analytical lens and a connective strategy, framing the research inquiry around how intangible cultural, social, and affective values embedded in handknitting can be translated into meaningful consumer engagement through design processes.

7. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that handknitting occupies a unique position at the intersection of emotional design, sustainable fashion, and women's livelihood generation. Evidence from Gen Z consumers shows that handknitted garments evoke strong emotional responses, particularly love and nostalgia, and are often retained for extended periods, supporting emotional durability and slow consumption. At the same time, women-led SHGs in Kumaon produce handknitted apparel through systems that are environmentally low-impact, skill-intensive, and socially empowering.

The core challenge identified is not a lack of consumer

interest, but a disconnect between emotionally receptive consumers and largely invisible SHG producers. By applying emotional design principles through storytelling, maker visibility, and co-creation, this gap can be narrowed, enabling handknitting to function as both a sustainable fashion practice and a viable livelihood strategy.

Rather than viewing handknitting as a remnant of the past, the study positions it as a forward-looking mode of fashion production that aligns with contemporary concerns around ethics, individuality, and emotional wellbeing.

8. Limitations and Future Research

This study is exploratory in nature and is subject to certain limitations. The consumer sample size is modest and drawn from a design-educated cohort, which may influence levels of awareness and ethical sensitivity. Future research could expand the sample across regions, educational backgrounds, and income groups to strengthen generalisability. Additionally, while this study identifies emotional design as a promising bridge between SHGs and Gen Z consumers, further research is required to empirically test specific interventions such as digital storytelling, customisation platforms, or pilot market experiments.

Longitudinal studies examining whether emotionally designed handknit products demonstrably extend garment lifespans and improve SHG income stability would further strengthen the evidence base for emotionally sustainable fashion systems...

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