



“Names doing rounds”: On brands in the bazaar economy

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Abstract

This article draws on fieldwork from Delhi’s garment and electronics bazaars to articulate an alternative perspective on the role of brands in the global bazaar economy. Knockoffs and counterfeit brands have mostly been viewed as problematic manifestations of counterfeiting and piracy, or framed in terms of authenticity or marginal practices of imitation. In this article, we suggest that bazaar brands also function as central to a growing popular innovation system able to provide material goods as well as immaterial experiences to the world’s poorer consumers in ways that stay in close contacts with the mediated fluctuations of popular affects. Bazaar brands develop a unique relationship with consumers based on an ability to seize the moment rather than the creation of enduring loyalties. We suggest that bazaar brands can be understood as central to an emerging postcapitalist consumer economy that has been substantially empowered by the spread of digital technologies.

Keywords

Brands, bazaar, counterfeits, post-capitalism, piracy

On popular markets around the globe, from Bangkok’s Chatuchak market, via Forcella in Naples and London’s Brick Lane, to the bazaars of Delhi that we will discuss in this article, you will find T-shirts with meaningless English words and random numbers, Jeans adorned with logos of Levis alongside Ferrari or Facebook, or heaps of Ghlain Klain or Georgio Peviani underwear filling up the market stalls (the later recently made famous in a successful media stunt by *Vice* journalist [Butler, 2017](#)). As Hietanen and his colleagues

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suggest in their recent comprehensive review of the literature, marketing thought and social theory has mostly treated this underbelly of the global brand economy in terms of problematic manifestations of piracy or counterfeiting. Alternatively the economy of “fakes” has been framed in terms of cultural authenticity or imitation (Craicun, 2014; Hietanen et al., 2019). However, the global bazaar economy (as we call it) of street markets, petty traders, counterfeits, and knockoffs is growing in size and importance, providing cell phones, game consoles, and other cheap electronics together with stylish street clothes and footwear to the millions who have recently risen out of destitute poverty but still lack the resources to purchase the originals (Arvidsson, 2019; Lin, 2011; Mathews et al., 2012). Brands have become more central to its operations, both for consumers and producers, as the new availability of global consumer culture, transpiring even into the poorest of households through the 4.5 billion smartphone screens in operation globally, has created a general desire for what Constantine Nakassis calls “brandedness”; logos that resemble global brands without actually representing any of them (Nakassis, 2016). In this article, we draw on fieldwork from Delhi’s garment bazaars to explore the role of brands in the bazaar economy. We suggest that this is not simply a matter of counterfeiting or imitative practices performed at the margin. Rather, we argue that bazaar brands can be understood to operate within an alternative, postcapitalist circuit of value. The article presents a novel approach to brands and the bazaar economy, deploying a theoretical perspective that combines insights from the growing thread of ethnographic research on bazaars, counterfeits, *shanzhai* and, more generally, what Mathews et al. (2012) call “globalization from below,” with theoretical models from the established literature on the political economy of brands and globalization. The result is an original argument that views bazaar brands not simply as cultural artifacts but as important economic devices that operate within an alternative, yet rapidly growing, popular consumer economy.

The argument is structured as follows: In the next section, we provide a theoretical framework and some background by discussing the relevant literature on the political economy of brands; on bazaars and “globalization from below” and on the idea of “postcapitalist” economic forms. We use these discussions to articulate our original theoretical perspective on bazaar brands as postcapitalist economic devices. In the subsequent section, we discuss our methods and approach and provide an overview of the field. We then move on to present and discuss the findings, emphasizing the common nature of brands in the bazaars and their proximity to what Braudel (1984) called the *longue durée*: the slow moving, deep structures of everyday life. In the ensuing discussion, we articulate a theory of bazaar brands as postcapitalist economic devices. The conclusion connects the discussion on bazaar brands to post-capitalism and the predominance of popular innovative systems. It suggests that bazaar brands are not merely “fakes” or counterfeits. Instead, they enable alternative ways to mediate between popular desires and flexible productive networks within an alternative, postcapitalist circuit of market-based innovation that is growing in importance globally.

Brands inside and outside capitalism

Brands have developed into key institutions of global consumer society. They add additional dimensions of symbolic or “immaterial” value to goods, permitting new forms of consumer identification and affect (Lury, 2004). Brands also enable the translation of such consumer affect into corporate profits and financial valuations. Indeed, in the capitalist economy, brands have developed into the most important “intangible asset” to substantiate the value of goods and, importantly, corporations. This development has been paralleled by the evolution of powerful disciplines like market research and brand management, and lately “data driven” managerial techniques that operate at the level of information flows (Carah, 2017). As a consequence of these developments, to manage brands in the capitalist economy has largely become a matter of organizing the logistics of meaning and affect in building measurable forms of intangible value. Brands have evolved to guide the almost total integration of commercial culture within the value logics of financial capitalism.

Bazaar economy

In recent decades, this function of brands as managerial devices has been undermined by the global growth of counterfeiting. While counterfeits are as old as brands and the practice of intellectual “piracy” probably as old as the culture industries themselves (Johns, 2009), this practice has been substantially empowered by the same two tendencies that have driven the transformation of corporate brands discussed above. The outsourcing of production has made it significantly easier to produce material goods with a feel and quality comparable to the “original.” The globalization of media culture has created a demand for knockoffs, low fi-fashions, and imitations of the originals that now are constantly visible on ubiquitous television and smartphone screens, along with the billboards that adorn the shopping centers proliferating in cities all across the globe. The accompanying globalization has lifted millions out of extreme poverty, generating a new market demand in countries like India, China, or Nigeria for cheap electronics and textiles. They desire its brands, fashions, and symbols, without perhaps fully understanding the mainstream rules of their combination and deployment (Nakassis, 2013; Tarrus, 2015).

The global market for counterfeits, knockoffs, and sometimes creative imitations is mostly organized in networks of what Matthews et al. call “globalization from below.” With this, they refer to a transnational economy situated between the formal and the informal, dedicated to small-scale enterprise, organized and regulated through personal contacts, family, or neighborhood networks. Sometimes, it operates at the margins of the “official” capitalist economy, as when surplus from export-oriented textile factories circulates in bazaars and on street markets. Sometimes it is antithetical to it, as when Chinese Shanzhai operators directly challenge intellectual property legislation (Barton, 2014). Mostly however, it operates below the radar; the bazaar economy is, in this sense, similar to the competitive market economy of small-scale family or artisan enterprises that Braudel (1984) distinguished from the “true capitalism” of large corporations.

Post-capitalism?

In India, bazaars have provided alternative channels of distribution of commodities to popular consumers. Indeed the “industrious” (Arvidsson, 2019) or “petty capitalist” (Zhang, 2020) enterprises that populate the bazaar economy are generally too capital poor to count as “capitalist” in any meaningful sense of the term, and they generally lack the resources, legal or otherwise, to enforce the kind of claims to rights and property that can substantiate capitalist market power (although sometimes they are capable of successful collective action, cf. Anjaria, 2016). At the same time, they remain close to the *longue durée* of everyday life, embedded in a common context of shared worldviews and cultural frameworks, as well as networks of sharing and cooperation. Their mode of organization is the bazaar (rather than the shopping mall), commercial spaces, which feature seemingly contradictory combinations of cooperation and sharing on the one hand, and market competition on the other (Deka, 2018).

In other contexts, the term “postcapitalist” has been used to refer to the collaborative practices that mark recent developments in the digital economy: collaborative consumer work or prosumption (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010); commons-based peer production, sharing economies and new kinds of open licenses, and less restrictive forms of intellectual property (Mason, 2016). These alternative economic practices tend to rely on common (rather than proprietary) resources and combine them with small-scale market exchange (Benkler, 2006). The bazaars feature a similar social economy; a world of “poor to poor and peer to peer,” to use Tarrius’ (2015) terms. This perspective has been most strongly developed in relation to the Chinese *shanzhai* (or “pirate”) economy that flourished in the 00s. Starting in the mid-2000s, Shenzhen became the center of the world’s pirate economy as petty traders arrive with suitcases from Lagos or Delhi to buy up cheap and cheerful shanzhai cell phones to distribute on street markets throughout Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. In a seminal study, Chinese sociologist Bai Gao suggests that shanzhai production networks, combining cheap and rapid manufacturing, flexible and short-lived production networks, and a constant attention to popular use value through face-to-face contacts with small-scale traders, constitute a popular deployment of the forms of commons-based peer production that have come to feature as central to theories of post-capitalism (Gao, 2011). Within shanzhai networks, brands feature as part of such common resources. They are available, along with other aspects of shared popular culture, to be freely appropriated and used to identify often transitory and short-lived market niches.

Postcapitalist brands?

Indeed, brands feature abundantly in the global bazaar economy, and recent scholarship has pointed at the ubiquity knockoffs and counterfeits. (According to the OECD, the global market for counterfeits is supposed to have reached a turnover of almost half a trillion dollars in 2013, roughly 20 times the annual sales volume of H&M, cf. OECD, 2016; Singh, 2020.) Most scholarship has treated counterfeits as a problem, or at the most as a question of the authenticity of material culture (Craicun, 2014). Lately, however

anthropologists have begun to probe deeper into the role of brands in this “the world’s other economy.” For example, Nakassis (2016) uses the term “brandedness” to suggest that among consumers and producers of knockoff fashions in Tamil Nadu, international brands are appropriated and re-proposed in ways that are unrelated to their original identity. Neither consumers nor producers care about brands, or are able to recognize them “correctly.” In the garment bazaars that Nakassis studied *“the logics governing which brands were cited in the acts of design and manufacture were indifferent to the role of brand identity (and the demand for it) in local (or global) markets, even as they responded to the vagaries of global brand economies”* (Nakassis, 2016, p. 78).

Similar forms of imitation and reappropriation of brands were also identified by sociologists looking at Western youth subcultures in the “70s and 80s.” Willis (1990) uses the term “common culture” (1990) to highlight processes of symbolic production, resulting in novel identities, lifestyles, and street fashion trends, many of which would subsequently drive the evolution of the commercial brands and fashion niches. In what follows, we will suggest that bazaar brands operate as such a symbolic commons. Along with other elements of popular media culture, they form a freely available resource that traders and vendors can use in the creation of successions of creative recombinations to identify often short-lived and transitory market niches. In addition to the subcultural innovation identified on the part of Western youth culture in the 70s, bazaar-based innovation combines the symbolic commons with access to cheap and rapid small-scale manufacturing, often relying on overcapacity generated by capitalist outsourcing and an entrepreneurial market orientation. This way bazaar brands are becoming central to an emerging, postcapitalist consumer economy.

Note on methods and the field

The empirical material discussed in this article derives from the first author’s fieldwork in Palika Bazaar, Nehru Place, Lajpat Rai Market, and Gandhi Nagar Market, in Delhi. Originally part of PhD research, fieldwork has extended over 6 years, with yearly one-month visits following upon a first 12-month period in 2012–2013. Each visit has combined observation, visiting the markets daily, speaking with consumers, vendors (selling their merchandise directly on the streets), traders (the proprietors of market stalls and small shops) and other participants, and hanging around the market stalls, with in-depth interviews with traders, wholesalers, and consumers. In the summers of 2018 and 2019 fieldwork concentrated on Gandhi Nagar Market, a wholesale garment market that caters both to retail consumers and to the sellers in Palika Bazaar and Nehru Place. During these later visits, interviews were conducted with 15 wholesale traders in Gandhi Nagar Market, as well as 28 garment traders and vendors in Palika Bazaar. All the interviews were with men between the ages of 19 and 55 years (bazaar vendors and traders were exclusively male). On average, the interviews lasted for two hours. Along with the interviews, the majority of the time was spent hanging out with consumers, vendors, and traders who congregated on the pavements outside the main market complexes and in the case of Gandhi Nagar Market in the narrow lanes between shops.

The original focus of the research was to understand how knowledge sharing and innovation operated in the bazaars. After a brief period of fieldwork, the importance of brands to these processes became obvious. In order to develop these insights, interviews centered initially on traders to subsequently fan out along their networks. Traders would provide an initial idea and point to other actors, such as vendors, suppliers, distributors, technicians, and sometimes clients and consumers who were subsequently interviewed. Interviews were combined with participant observation: hanging out in the shops and perusing the market stalls. During the periods of participant observation, a number of unstructured interviews were conducted with consumers and other actors. The focus of the interviews was on mechanisms of market innovation and the role of brands in this. Interviews originally explored how traders and vendors identified consumer needs and how they developed products to keep up with this. Given the importance of brands to these processes, later interviews, and those conducted in 2018 and 2019 in particular, came to focus on the mechanism of production and distribution of logos. Who materially produced counterfeit or imitation logos (or “stickers,” see below)? How were they produced and distributed? How did makers of logos understand what logos were in demand and how to combine words and popular cultural symbols in making new ones? Fieldwork in 2018 and 2019 also included a number of unstructured interviews with consumers in the bazaars (while conducting nonparticipant observation). Interviews were recorded when feasible. When this was not feasible, as well as in the case of unstructured interviews and participant observation, copious field notes were taken. The field notes and the recorded interviews were subsequently analyzed manually, looking for recurrent patterns. This process was performed repeatedly as patterns discovered in one reading were tested in subsequent reiterations until the point of saturation was reached (Strauss and Corbin, 1997).

Field

The empirical focus has been on the street-level garment economy in Delhi, of which Palika Bazaar and Nehru Place form a central part. Gandhi Nagar Market is a central node for garment manufactures and wholesale traders. The research on Gandhi Nagar Market provided insights on how the marketplace connected to other street-level retail markets such as Palika Bazaar, Kamla Nagar, Karol Bagh, Nehru Place, Sadar Bazaar, and Tank Road in Delhi. Fieldwork in Palika Bazaar and Nehru Place became a microcosm to reflect on the retail side of the garment economy, and Gandhi Nagar Market was the site to study networks of production and wholesale distribution.

Palika Bazaar, Nehru Place, and Gandhi Nagar Market bazaar have been integral to Delhi's popular economy since at least independence. Along with a few others, these are the places where popular consumers have traditionally gone to meet their needs. As all bazaars, these are social spaces. The traders and consumers come from a shared social and cultural background. They share a common lifeworld made up of common political concerns, shared patterns of cultural consumption, and, for most traders, a common backdrop of popular Hindu religiosity. Their economic situation were comparable and they form part of the non-elites, their income ranking among the middle to lower middle

strata of the urban poor. To be more precise, the daily earnings of street vendors were on an average between 1 and 10 dollars a day and traders made a little more.

Starting as markets for household goods, used garments, cheap tools, and media products, the merchandise on offer expanded during the 1990s, as the bazaars entered into the emerging global circuit of what Matthews et al. have called “globalization from below” as a result of the implementation of economic liberalization policies post 1992. Prior to the 1990s, Hong Kong, Dubai, and Bangkok were the main hubs from where the bazaar traders began to source cheap electronics, CDs, DVD players, gaming consoles, and used computers. In the 2000s, the boom of Chinese manufacturing flooded the bazaars with Shanzhai cell phones, cheap gaming consoles, and any conceivable kind of knockoff electronics (Lueng, 2012). Counterfeit or knockoff branded shoes and sportswear would follow. The garments were mostly locally produced in tight networks of small manufacturers centered on the wholesale bazaars such as Sadar Bazaar and Gandhi Nagar. Gandhi Nagar became an important producer and distributor of the ready-made trade as about 1000 wholesalers sold garments connected to a wide network of small-scale garment manufacturers and accessory producers within about 2- km radius of the marketplace. Unlike the export-oriented textile factories that feature in Nakassis’ (2016) ethnography, Gandhi Nagar manufacturers cater to the national market. Similar to Hong Kong’s Chungking Mansions (Mathews, 2011) or Shenzhen’s Huaqiangbei market (O’Donnell et al., 2017), the traders in Gandhi Nagar represent networks of manufacturers that are able to quickly churn out small series of simple garments, like T-shirts, as well as more complicated items like jeans. Fieldwork indicated that for T-shirts, the production time is short; an order can be fulfilled within days. While also featuring some retail stalls, Gandhi Nagar Market functions as a rapid manufacturing hub that supports a substantial part of the products sold at other retail-oriented garment bazaars in Delhi as well as in popular markets throughout India.

Brands in the bazaars

Through their inclusion into this new global circuit, Delhi’s bazaars would become central to what Ravi Sundaram has called “pirate modernity” (2010), a popular, “street” culture of imitation or knockoff electronics and commercial symbols that connects the popular masses to global consumer and internet culture, albeit in particular ways. They remained marked by the aesthetic of excess that has been highlighted as a feature of bazaars ever since Geertz’ (1979) classic account of the Suqs of Morocco, where he emphasized the overburdening of impressions, smells, overall gossip, and chatter as well as the chaotic display of any kind of goods imaginable. Such an aesthetic of excess has persisted as features of popular marketplaces. Since brands were introduced as a feature of the Indian economy, knockoffs flooded the bazaars in the 1990s, their display have followed a similar model.

Indeed, in Delhi’s bazaars, it is common to see piles of T-shirts, sports pants, and other garments with varying logos attached to them—Nike, Fila, Puma, Reebok, or even seemingly unrelated logos like Ferrari or Facebook—all in random order. One type of

T-shirt with a Fila brand might lie next to a pile of identical garments with another brand on them. Sometimes several brands adorn a single piece of garment. Among the jeans sellers, it is common to see jeans with a combination of brands: Levis, Ferrari, and Armani in different configurations. Often, the brand names would be distorted, like H M N (instead of H & M). Obviously, they do not carry the weight and importance that brands have in the carefully managed corporate economy, like in the DLF Emporio mall in the city, where solemn shop attendants guard the commercial shrines devoted to the likes of Gucci or Prada (Figures 1–3).

Sticker book

Indeed, this ephemeral role of brands is indicated by the term generally used by bazaar traders to refer to the textile logos that can be freely sewn on to garments—“stickers.” The stickers can be ordered from designated sticker manufacturers in and around Gandhi Nagar Market. They are available through the “sticker book,” a thick laminated volume of cheap images of various stickers pasted one page after another. Some wholesale traders specialize in providing stickers, along with other accessories like buttons, zippers, and metal hardware for pants. They also take orders from traders and act as intermediaries in relation to the sticker factories. Rajesh, one such accessory specialist, explained how it is done. He would simply download logos from the internet and edit them with the help of commonly available software packages like Adobe Photoshop or Microsoft Paint. The resulting design will then be sent on to a sticker manufacturer, located close by, and distributed through a sticker book, which wholesale traders would have available in their shops, and from which other traders can choose what stickers or combination of stickers to use in adorning a new batch of T-shirts or jeans. The stickers come in the form of counterfeits of original brands, often in low quality slightly distorted reproductions (due to the low quality of the software packages and production techniques used). They also come as edited versions of the originals. Here, Rajesh told us that this was as a precaution against anti-piracy measures, to avoid being charged with counterfeiting. Nakassis (2013) has similar observations, although it is doubtful whether this is a real concern in Gandhi Nagar Market. Actual counterfeit “stickers” are abundant in the bazaar, and contrary to the electronics bazaars in the city where police raids are frequent, the garment bazaars were seldom touched by the hand of the law. Another factor might be that the traders considered edited logos more legitimate. Paradoxically perhaps, they harbored a generalized aversion to piracy seeing it as something shameful, akin to petty theft (Deka, 2017). Importantly, Rajesh also provided his own creations: combinations of existing brands, popular movie stars, memes and slogans, or simply random, mostly English words. These were made in the same way, by downloading images from the internet, editing and combining them in Photoshop.

“Names that are doing rounds”

How did Rajesh choose what images and words to combine in producing his custom-made stickers? Even though he exercised what in the corporate world would be referred to

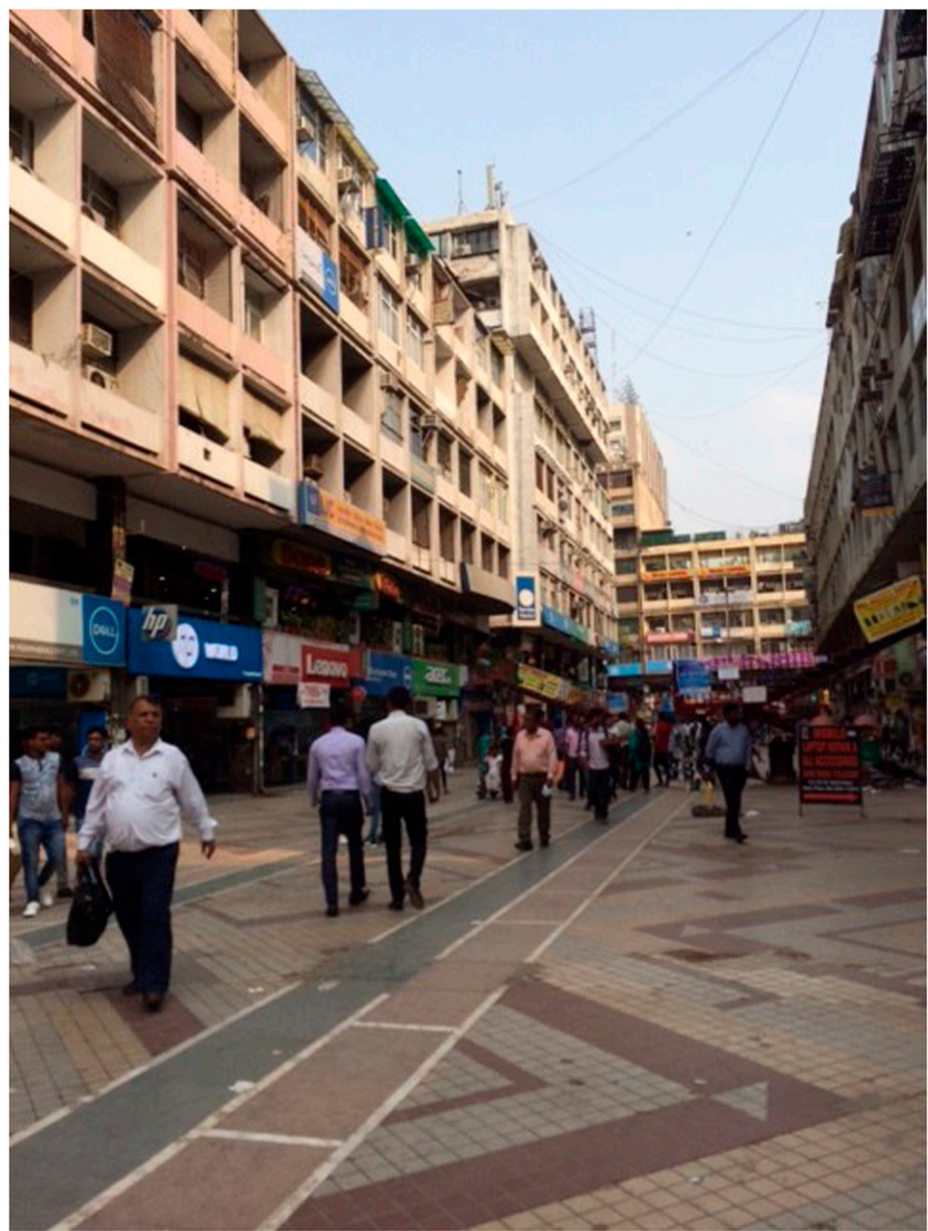


Figure 1. Entrance to Nehru Place.



Figure 2. Jeans with multiple features.



Figure 3. TikTok T-shirt.

as a “creative” function (cf. [Lloyd, 2006](#)), Rajesh did not claim to possess any particular talent or genius in this respect that would set him off from other bazaar traders. Nor did he simply imitate international brands. Rather than the “foreign quality” that [Nakassis’ \(2016\)](#) informants mention as a paradigm of stylishness, Rajesh emphasizes the need to stay in touch with the shifting tastes of popular consumers. His are “names that are doing rounds”; he caters to “what people want,” provides things that “are cool.” Rather than aspiring to any particular creative genius, Rajesh operated as an interpreter of a common culture, shared by both the bazaar traders and their customers. He stays on top of pop culture, listens to the news, and follows the latest films and songs, often on his phone. He reads the celebrity and gossip blogs, stays glued in front of TikTok or similar apps on his smartphone, and above all, engages in the seemingly ceaseless “chatter,” which has struck virtually all observers of bazaars as one of their key features. The bricolage that Rajesh and other bazaar traders engage in is similar to what has been identified by the prosumer literature ([Dujarier, 2014](#)). However, the kinds of “fandom” or community-like organizations identified among (mostly Western) prosumers are lacking in the bazaar (cf. [Tse and Tsang, 2018](#)). Rather, successful innovation or creativity in the bazaar consists in locking down the movements of this common culture into a concrete commercial opportunity in that are very similar to the world of internet memes.

As in the case of meme culture, such innovation consists of the right recombination of commonly available symbols, what Chinese intellectual Lu Xun has called “grabism,” the “active reappropriation of global cultural authority for local purposes” ([Chubb, 2015](#)). Along with Francois Jullien’s characterization of Chinese thought as oriented to immanence, “efficacy” and the “moment” such grabism is different from the Weberian rationality of means and ends ([Jullien, 2004](#)). It is not strategic, but rather about exploiting the possibilities of the particular situation, of acting in the moment. In 2007, at the time of the American presidential elections, the “Obama phone,” a Blackberry clone with “Obama” written in the graphic style of the Blackberry logo, enjoyed a brief, but substantial success in Kenya and East Africa.

In finding clues to what might have worked, the shanzhai designers were aided by the continuous face-to-face contacts with the “suitcase entrepreneurs” who flowed into Shenzhen from Africa (as well as other places), placed their orders directly at market stalls in Guangzhou and Shenzhen’s electronics market, and brought back cell phones in their suitcases, bribing customs officials on their way ([Yu and Kwan, 2015](#)). In this context, places like Hong Kong’s Chungking Mansions functioned as a crucial *agora*, connecting African demand to Chinese supply. Delhi’s bazaars operate much the same way. The traders are in continuous contact with customers who articulate their demands at their shops. When talking to street vendors in Palika Bazaar, the general sensation was that of being overburdened by such requests. Consumers generally were excessive or even irrational in their demands: more and more “stickers” in any possible combination, along with multiple zippers, and decorative metal hardware, like pins or rivets.

From the traders’ accounts, the consumers were aware of the dominant symbols of global consumer modernity, but they were not sufficiently integrated or “at home” in that world to know the codes that governed their combination. This sense of liminality; of being outside and inside at the same time, led to overcompensation. They were

undisciplined consumers, and their demands were excessive. And even though the traders recognized this and generally looked down on the consumers as irrational, the cheap nature of stickers and accessories made it rational to follow up on most requests. A small batch could quickly be produced, sending a new batch of stickers along with the usual order to the local garment factory. The result was plenty of garments that had stickers, unusual patterns, zips, and embroidery details, all in one place. Usually, the brand was considered a marginal feature of the products, less important than price or the quality of cloth. A lot of the shops had varieties of track pants. On inquiring what prompted the traders to stock up different types of track pants, it appeared that the fabric of the pants was the most important factor in deciding which pants got maximum visibility. So during the summer months, it was the pants made with “discart” material that occupied the maximum space in the racks. “Discart” was a local name used for a synthetic fabric that had a lighter feel than the more heavily knitted fabric used for the winters. When probed if consumers were more likely to buy the pants with the logo than without, the traders remained confused, “Those who buy things from us do not have 5000 or 6000 rupees in their pocket to buy a branded pair of pants from a showroom. They want low quality *kam chalo* (useful) pieces.” The overall focus was on the use value of products, and the stickers were understood as one of many dimensions of this essentially irrational and rapidly shifting world of use value. Indeed, the traders kept rotating their shop displays, moving particular garments with particular fabrics and adorned with particular stickers back and forth between the back rooms and the front displays to keep up with the rapid fluctuation of the world of popular demand. They did this on a daily basis.

Contrary to the corporate economy where brands are endowed with proprietary equity, built by enduring relations and significations, brands in the bazaar were but one dimension of a constantly shifting world of use value. And to survive in the bazaar, vendors need to stay in constant touch with this world of use values, sharing in the common culture of everyday life, and transforming its frequent whims into ever new material products, following its occasions and moments.

In July, the shops and vendors had heaps of T-shirts with faces of Shiva attached to them, as annual *kanwar yatra* (where a group of Shiva devotees travels to Holy places) was celebrated then. Often the quest to stay in touch with such fluctuating use values would further fuel the aesthetic of excess. In the last, a couple of years High Street jeans came adorned with zippers, embroidery, and side stripes, often their legs were also shredded to look worn out. In Gandhi Nagar Market at the same time, jeans with all of these features combined-shredded pants with zippers, and side stripes and a lot of embroideries featured everywhere. When asked, traders responded that since customers often ask for these different features, putting them all together would be a good idea. Vikram, a wholesaler in Gandhi Nagar Market, said that “more is more in the bazaars” and ultimately what gets edited out is completely at the discretion of the trader. Personally, he would never produce a pair of jeans with elastic at the waist and the legs. Although there have been a few demands for the product, he could not bring himself up to manufacturing it out of aesthetic considerations. The production process emerges from an almost instinctive mixing of popular trends and personal taste.

Easy access to quick and cheap production fuels this process. Retail traders from marketplaces would visit wholesale bazaars at least once a week, often several times, to check what is new, and order small batches of some 50–100 items. Often they would try out their own ideas in similar batches simply sending in an order to a trusted manufacturer who would churn out the results in a couple of days. With retail prices of a few euros per garment (most T-shirts and track pants would sell for around 150–200 Indian rupees), the economic risk of such experimentation is low. And to keep engaging in it is necessary, customers, the traders kept repeating, always want new things, and if you do not provide it, your shop goes out of business. This constant attention to the novelty of shifting use values was the source of the excess that marked the bazaars. Indeed, the overall feeling of walking around Delhi's bazaars was one of the cramped spaces and abundant goods. Most shops quickly filled up with unsold items, stacked in every corner of the back rooms, piling up toward the ceiling.

Apna time aayega! (Our time will come!)

At times, a certain fabric, logo or combination will “trend” in the bazaar and become a source of memetic repetition. One trader notes that a particular combination of garments and stickers sells, and decides to make a batch himself, and so on. Indeed, innovations diffuse rapidly across the bazaar, and there is little sense of distinction between innovation and imitation (Deka, 2018). Sometimes such memetic success can be triggered or enforced by a product of the mainstream culture industries. In a true Tardian fashion the stars of Bollywood cinema are frequent sources of memetic repetition fueled by strong currents of popular affect. The enduring popularity of the Polo Sport T-shirt comes from Shah Rukh Khan wearing it in the 1990s the blockbuster *Kuch Kuch Hota Hain*. In the summer of 2019, stickers and decorations with the words “Apna time aayega” (“our time will come”), written in the style of the posters of the successful Bollywood movie *Gully Boy* would go viral across the bazaars. They would feature on T-shirts, sweatshirts, and hoodies. All across Delhi, college students, vendors, and mechanics were wearing them. Part of the force of the slogan came from its political promise. Taken from the 2019 movie *Gully Boy*, a Bollywoodized story of the rap scene of Mumbai's underbelly, the slogan can be read as an anthem for the marginalized to wake up to a different time when new aspirations can turn into reality. Here, the bazaars and the productive networks that support them became an integral part of a wave of collective affect that moved popular youth all across India, as well as in the Indian diaspora.

At the same time, the phrase was ubiquitous on B2B (Business to Business) platforms like Udaan and Indiamart, used by mid-level textile manufacturers. Traders would peruse these apps to find inspirations for new fashions and fads. Indeed, digital media have come to play a growing part in keeping up with popular demand. And the names of the dominant platforms would themselves become popular motives for stickers that adorn jeans and other garments. Facebook jeans had been all the rage for several years; in 2019, they were paralleled by T-shirts with the TikTok logo. Similarly, traders in the bazaar will be constantly following TikTok or watching videos on the similar Vigo app that come preinstalled on cheap android-based Chinese phones. So far, dominant media coverage

has been critical about the cringeworthy nature of popular TikTok videos carrying the most unimaginable and unheard of props, appear vulgar and cringeworthy (Jennings, 2020; Lorenz, 2018). But for the traders in Gandhi Nagar, these platforms are creating a different type of space. They provide immediate access to truly popular, user-generated cultural content. For bazaar traders, these apps have become an important way to grasp what their consumers are interested in their daily life, to get an idea of the aesthetic and economic concerns of their primary clientele. Traders use them to spot emerging trends and to seek confirmation for a hunch or intuition that they had already formed elsewhere. This way a T-shirt with the TikTok or Vigo logo also works as a recognition of the common cultural universe that unites traders and their consumers.

The power of these spaces is that they materialize a truly popular peer-produced creative sphere, where the creators and the consumers do not simply imitate otherwise unattainable corporate brands or luxury trends. In a way, the online platforms have inverted the traditional Veblenian logic of imitation: the popular classes are no longer looking at the middle and upper classes for inspiration. Rather they are looking at each other, while middle class society “cringes” at the results. Again this is, in itself nothing new, popular users have appropriated and transformed elite fashions since the beginnings of consumer society, and youth or subcultures have made such creative appropriation their hallmark. In India, the Bhojpuri cinema circuit and pirate cassette cultures have been central to ordinary people claiming their preferences and desires (Kumar, 2014). However, what changes with the platforms is the power and extent of these cultural production systems, their immediate connection to the realm of material production through flexible and dynamic manufacturing networks centered on the bazaars and the peer-to-peer dynamic of cultural creation where mimesis and virality rather than elite power and symbolic monopoly become the main factor. The new role of digital platforms as creative support points to the ever more complicated landscape of bazaar brands were added to their already obscure status of being a “sticker” they now enter into larger popular narratives of an immanent present. The popularity of T-shirts adorned with the slogan *apna time aayega!* was embraced testify, perhaps to an unconscious awareness of this: this truly popular aesthetic is growing, and maybe its time will come!

Discussion: postcapitalist brands?

Brands have become central to the globalized and digitally accelerated bazaar economy. But they work in ways that are different from their role in global capitalist economy. In the bazaar economy, brands have been appropriated as part of a global commons. Along with design features, images, motives, cultural tropes, and other “memes,” they can be freely combined to translate passing popular affects into market opportunities. This is not simply a matter of imitation. While direct counterfeiting is an important dimension and while the kinds of imperfect marginal imitation that Nakassis (2016) discusses remains an important aspect, much of the branded merchandise in the bazaars feature forms of recombination or creative variation. Rather than an effect of subaltern “ignorance” and resulting imperfect imitation of global brands, such recombinations are generally triggered by precise

moments in the flows of popular demand. It is driven by a close attention to the popular market and oriented to satisfying some kind of desire or other and will disappear (or rather be moved to the back of the shop) to be replaced by another recombination when popular desires shift. Unlike capitalist corporations, bazaar traders do not seek nor are they are able to control this language. The bazaar traders are moved by its currents of affect, driven to mimetic imitation by the “names doing rounds,” and this is an important source of the “excess” that marks the ways brands, as well as other goods, are displayed.

Lury (2009) has argued that, in the capitalist economy, brands function as proprietary interfaces; they connect the productive and financial capacities of corporations to the flows of consumer desire, allowing one “side” to interact and influence the other through a number of mechanisms of translation, such as market research and various marketing disciplines. In the bazaar economy, brands fulfill a similar interface function, albeit with a number of modifications. Like corporate brands, bazaar brands allow for traders, vendors, and other market actors to interact with consumer demand, generating relations of mutual influence as diffuse flows of popular affect are translated into market niches for branded goods, and as such niches, and the use values that they give rise to, in turn materialize and render “tangible” popular affects, translating them into the concrete possession or display of a particular branded garment. Contrary to the corporate economy, such interfaces are not proprietary, but part of a commercial commons that enables traders and vendors to operate and to make however marginal a living. Another important difference is that bazaar brands as interfaces do not operate through mechanisms of datafication or through other kinds of abstraction. Rather they offer a way to focus an ongoing face-to-face and social media-based interaction so that it is able to generate another kind of “information,” able to fuel continuous innovation and immaterial production, albeit in a way that is popular, concrete, and inherently vernacular (Burgess, 2006).

The ways in which brands feature in the contemporary bazaar economy have much in common with the meme culture which has become influential globally (Kramer, 2015). Here too, images, symbols, texts, and personalities are all part of a cultural commons that are appropriated from below in the continuous flow of a global vernacular creativity. The bricolage serves not principally to articulate and “communicate” enduring symbolic meanings, as much as to make public and concrete shared affects and sentiment, giving them a tangible and consolidated existence as “public things” (Weibel and Latour, 2005). The term “memefacturing” is now used to describe how Shenzhen design houses pick up trends on the internet, and quickly transform them into mass-produced, relatively affordable products to be distributed on street markets and bazaars across the world. It might provide an apt idea of what the next step of the evolution of the global bazaar economy might look like. Such memefacturing might come to involve technologically more sophisticated goods, in particular as unemployed university graduates begin to join the productive networks that supports the bazaar economy, as is already happening in Shenzhen and other parts of China. It might become an important alternative to the capitalist economy in “giving ordinary people what they want,” also in the sense of the intangible experience that has been at the heart of what global brands can offer for several decades.

Globalization has rendered the symbolic resources of consumer culture common. At the same time, the skills and knowledge necessary to engage in advanced forms of commodity production have escaped the control of corporate supply chains. These two developments have come together in driving the growth of a global bazaar economy that operates close to the needs and desires of the *longué durée* of popular lives, and generally below the radar or beyond the control of the capitalist economy. Brands have become a central device for connecting popular demands to productive capacity in this bazaar economy, enabling a genuinely popular alternative innovation system.

Taken each in isolation, the singular features of this alternative innovation system are not new. The popular strata have appropriated elite culture since the beginning of consumer society, and such appropriation has always been a matter of creative re-elaboration, rather than simply imitation. The novelty rather consists in the quantitative growth of both the bazaar economy and the popular consumer tastes that it caters to, and its growing networking and technological sophistication. Starting with the arrival of DVDs, CDs, and pirated satellite decoders in the 1990s, accelerating with the internet and leading on to the proliferation of apps and social media in the 2010s, this popular consumer culture has come to encompass more people who are more intensely connected around fads and fashions that circulate more rapidly. TikTok and Vigo enable fashions to circulate much quicker and more widely. Apps like WhatsApp, Line, and WeChat enable more efficient contacts between traders as well as direct connections between traders and factories, often located in neighboring countries like China or Bangladesh. Increasingly, hawala networks, digital payments, and cryptocurrencies allow for more efficient financial flows as well. This expansion has enabled the bazaar economy to “come out” as a productive circuit in its own right.

This vernacular innovation system has evolved as part of a popular reappropriation of the brands and consumer lifestyles generated by the global capitalist economy. It has the potential to become even more important in the future as its technological sophistication and networking grows and as the capitalist economy increasingly fails to address popular desires (Streeck, 2017).

Conclusion

In this article, we have investigated the role of brands in the world’s growing bazaar economy. We have used a combination of fieldwork in Delhi’s electronics and garment bazaars and a theoretical perspective that combines insights from the emerging ethnographic literature on bazaars, counterfeits, and “globalization from below,” with established perspectives from the political economy of brands and globalization. We suggest that rather than simply a matter of counterfeits and imitation, bazaar brands are central to a growing popular innovation system. Accelerated by digital media, this bazaar economy enables the rapid translation of popular affect into market opportunities for networks of small-scale, commons-based, and capital-poor producers. We have suggested that this bazaar-based cultural economy can be understood as a postcapitalist economic form. By this, we understand that while it draws on elements and institutions created by global

consumer capitalism, like brands and outsourced supply chains, it deploys them in ways that escape the control of the corporate institutions that govern the capitalist consumer economy. Central to the idea of post-capitalism is also that bazaar brands are not linked to attempts at dominating markets and accumulating long-standing forms of brand equity. Rather they operate in the here and now, translating rapidly shifting manifestations of popular affect into momentary market opportunities. Given the growing importance of the global bazaar economy, also as an alternative to an ever more crisis prone capitalist economy, our study proposes a novel emphasis on the genuinely creative potential of its use of brands, digital technologies, and commercial culture more generally.

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