Reselling Practices in a Textile Bazaar: Translating E-Commerce Platforms to WhatsApp

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Abstract

We examine WhatsApp-based reselling practices adopted by small garment sellers in Surat, a textile city in India, as a response to the challenges posed by high commission costs, confusing dashboards, and restrictive rules of global e-commerce platforms. Through interviews and observations, we show how sellers use WhatsApp's popularity to collaborate with women resellers and customers, enabling participation in online commerce bypassing e-commerce platforms. Using the lens of translation, we argue that WhatsApp functions as a tool and site of praxis for sellers who translate the complicated, standardized, and expensive processes of e-commerce platforms that are in English into multimodal, idiomatic, collaborative reselling practices. These are undertaken in regional languages on WhatsApp with the help of traders and women resellers economically benefiting everyone while delivering a personalized online shopping experience for customers. We discuss the politics of this translation, examining its impact on the design of e-commerce platforms while also shaping the discourse of reselling as an empowering pathway for women.

CCS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing → Empirical studies in collaborative and social computing**.

Keywords

Social Commerce, Technology Translation, WhatsApp Reselling, Algorithmic Platforms, Gendered Labor, Social Computing

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1 Introduction

In January 2020, during a visit to India, Amazon founder Jeff Bezos famously earned the moniker of an 'economic terrorist' [51] despite his promises of creating millions of jobs and investing $1 billion to integrate small and medium-sized businesses (SMBs) into the digital economy [35, 104]. Bezos, then CEO of Amazon, faced intense backlash from small retail business owners across the country. The Confederation of All India Trade (CAIT) organized large protests in 300 cities against Amazon's high platform charges and unfavorable terms, which they claimed harmed SMBs [51, 96]. While media coverage highlighted concerns about Amazon's platform fees that were smothering small businesses, our research indicates that SMB discontent extends beyond these charges to include broader issues with e-commerce algorithms, terms and conditions, and digital interfaces that govern their selling activities.

This paper explores how garment sellers protests against e-commerce platforms like Amazon does not signify a rejection of online commerce. Instead, we find sellers turning to free mobile instant messaging (IM) platforms such as WhatsApp to sell their goods online. The turn to WhatsApp is motivated not only by pragmatic livelihood needs to avoid platform charges, but also to conduct business in ways that are rooted in the colloquial logic of the bazaar, a Persian word that is used to describe traditional South Asian and Middle Eastern marketplace settings. Bazaars usually reflect the social and cultural identities of their regions. They are bustling places that are marked by public gatherings, conversations, and bargaining as forms of collaboration between merchants, intermediaries, and customers, forming a strong network for sales and distribution [11]. This is antithetical to the way e-commerce platforms operate with centralized organizational rules enforced through technology mediated dashboards [44].

HCI scholarship, through lenses like hacking [36, 74] and jugaad [83, 84], explores the collaborative use of technologies in the Majority World, challenging the idea that infrastructures emerge solely through top-down efforts. Crabu and Magaudda [19] introduce "bottom-up infrastructuring" to describe grassroots collaboration among non-professional designers who mobilize political and cultural identities to craft local technology practices. Recent studies [22, 40, 106] show how grassroots efforts subvert dominant platform economies. Wang [106] highlights homegrown taxi services in China, while Dalal et al. [22] document community-driven food delivery systems that utilize an "unbundling economy" - where existing resources are creatively re-purposed to create new solutions [7]. These cases demonstrate that platform economies are not universally accepted or adapted, but instead are challenged by local actors who develop alternatives that better fit their cultural and socio-economic realities.

Technology artifacts often embody the organizational contexts and politics they are designed to represent, with their functionalities

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scripted by software developers [2, 3, 108]. E-commerce platforms, for example, use extensive codes to build recommendation systems and enforce centralized rules through rigid, codified dashboards that leave no room for negotiation between buyers and sellers. In India, while e-commerce platforms offer multilingual support, sellers often feel constrained by the need to operate primarily in English, which may not be familiar to them. In contrast, WhatsApp, a free tool that supports multimodal communication, is widely adopted in India due to affordable mobile data [93]. It provides sellers with the flexibility to conduct business in ways that reflect the culturally familiar practices of traditional South Asian bazaars, allowing for interactive and networked collaborations. This approach combines the ease of WhatsApp with the transparency and safety that e-commerce platforms offer, creating a more adaptable and accessible environment for online commerce.

Moreover, as marketplaces embrace WhatsApp as a dominant technology for everyday business operations, its parent company, Meta, has also taken cognizance of the popularity of WhatsApp for online commerce. It has introduced the "WhatsApp Business" app along with proactive measures to onboard local marketplace sellers [24]. This is also in line with Meta's broader history involving strategic investments in networked infrastructures in the Global South (such as Facebook's Free Basics plan in Africa [75]). The resulting collaboration across the marketplace comprising sellers, traders, resellers, and customers forms a robust, networked reselling ecosystem. Marked by the socio-technical relational labor that holds it in place [101], the reselling ecosystem grows into an infrastructure aided by business practices that are culturally grounded in the familiar rituals of communication practice [24]. By leveraging multiple social media platforms and enabling actors to collaboratively foster a traditional marketplace, social media platform companies such as Meta garner greater infrastructural power [80, 112] in offering a viable alternative to mainstream e-commerce platforms.

To explain why small garment sellers in Surat turn to WhatsApp over e-commerce platforms, we use the lens of translation. This approach views technology as a text that reflects and interprets organizational politics [57, 107]. By analyzing how Surat's sellers collaboratively adapt the logic and interface of e-commerce platforms into interactive selling on WhatsApp, we reveal how they transform Western models of platformized e-commerce into localized, peer-to-peer practices. WhatsApp enables traders to integrate socio-cultural contexts into their selling strategies, facilitating collaboration while avoiding the constraints of big tech platforms. This translation process allows sellers to engage with the modern digital economy while maintaining local market dynamics.

Even as social media is increasingly becoming important in the offline market sphere, its footing against the e-commerce platform is relatively understudied. Our paper captures the tensions of local sellers confronting e-commerce platform policies and navigating social media to sell online. Attending to the recent calls in HCI to study regional adoption of online commerce [14, 64, 65], we spotlight the coalescence of IM-based online commerce and offline marketplaces against the backdrop of traditional e-commerce platforms to address the following research questions:

RQ1: How do small-scale garment sellers collaborate with traders and resellers to bring a WhatsApp reselling infrastructure into being?

RQ2: How do sellers, traders, and resellers translate the processes of e-commerce platforms into interactive WhatsApp reselling?

In the following sections, we first review prior research on marketplaces and IM-based commerce, placing it within the context of technology translation. We then explore WhatsApp's significance for Surat's textile market and the formation of reselling networks, followed by our study's methodology. Our findings reveal why sellers and traders reject e-commerce scripts and detail the collaborative translation work involved in establishing the WhatsApp reselling infrastructure. We discuss the implications of our findings for platform re-design and the illusion of the women's empowerment discourse that shapes the reseller narrative. We conclude with design recommendations to improve trust and privacy in WhatsApp reselling.

2 Related Work

Local marketplaces are increasingly turning towards IM apps for commerce as sellers capitalize on personal relationships and social influence afforded by social media interactions, transcending the impersonal transactions of an e-commerce interface [6, 94]. Studies show how social influence-based commerce involving intermediaries [10, 15, 113] enacts a virtual bazaar permitting practices such as bargaining and trade relationships, thereby accruing social capital [11] and also helping buyers earn social recognition when they strike a good deal [14]. Building on these studies, we explore how IM-based social commerce intersects with local city bazaars to displace e-commerce platforms.

2.1 WhatsApp, Interactive Conversations and Online Commerce

In addition to its infrastructural aspect comprising wireless spectrum and cellphone towers, Mukherjee [70] argues that the technocultural cellular imaginary driving mobile phone use in India is animated by popular culture consisting of advertisements and Bollywood's myriad ripples that create and market a range of affects of desires, intimacies, and vulnerabilities. Together, they make the cell phone an object of pleasure and entertainment rather than mere function, especially for rural Indians. Therefore, in India, mobile phones embody affects of connection, possibility, and anxiety and in this landscape, Maddox and Kanthawala [58] observe that WhatsApp extends the technocultural cellular imaginary through its no-cost, multimodal, real-time, instant messaging features that support fluid, informal, conversations. It fosters intimate community and connection as if one were talking face-to-face. Additionally, WhatsApp has also liberated conversations from restrictive norms governing social interactions and private interactions on WhatsApp are perceived to be trustworthy, making it an attractive channel for supporting commercial transactions [17, 58, 60, 69, 78]. Cruz & Harindranath [20] note that in developing societies like India, Brazil, and Mexico, technologies like WhatsApp are central economic and communication infrastructures that expand and shape every activity connected to daily life. Owing to its multimodal nature that supports text, audio, video, images, stickers, emojis and gifs, WhatsApp is accessible equally to low-literate users, giving it a

wide user base and elevating it into "a technology of life", transcending borders and class divides. WhatsApp thus becomes a part of a ritual communication practice, seamlessly integrating its cultural significance into the business sphere. WhatsApp has thus become an essential infrastructure and a significant player in India's online commerce landscape via both the regular and business versions of the app.

2.1.1 Instant Messaging Commerce in the Majority World. Several HCI studies [6, 46, 65, 82, 111] have explored the use of social media platforms, including IM apps like WhatsApp, in Majority World marketplaces. Jack et al. [46] examined Cambodian garment markets, highlighting how market actors creatively integrate platforms like Facebook with local logistics and customer care, broadening design practices beyond Global North contexts. Similarly, Awori et al. [6] showed how WhatsApp's adoption in Kenya facilitated "sociotecture," where social and business networks are tightly coupled. A study of peri-urban Tanzania reported that WhatsApp groups effectively enacted offline practices like *mali kauli*, a system for establishing trust in verbal credit agreements [82]. In India, affordable mobile Internet and the zero cost of WhatsApp use [49, 93] spurred its adoption by small businesses for team communication, customer support, marketing, and promotion [67]. The COVID pandemic further accelerated this shift, as manufacturers turned to digital platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Google Pay and created digital catalogues on WhatsApp Business to sell garments [45].

This led to the rise of reselling as an economic activity, where resellers earned by sharing products on WhatsApp and social media. Platforms like Meesho and Glowroad capitalized on this trend by aggregating catalogues and targeting women homemakers for employment through reselling [9, 50, 54, 66, 79, 92, 95]. Driven by recommendations and social influence from resellers who were part of their social network, IM apps have thus become a fertile site for online commerce.

2.2 Translating Technology

The notion of translation has been widely used to explain how technology travels across geographies, contexts, users, and practices. Irani et al. [43] frame technology translation as part of a broader critical design process in postcolonial contexts that is embedded in local cultural and political struggles, where actors negotiate uneven power relations to repurpose technologies for their own needs. Freeman [32] further develops this idea by describing translation as a collaborative communication process, where different actors reconstruct their social worlds to achieve shared outcomes through what Star & Griesemer call "boundary objects" [101]. By focusing on the power dynamics within these collaborations, Lu & Qiu [57] highlight how intermediary actors—those who mediate between local and global, or between different technological regimes—play a crucial role in the translation process. These intermediaries shape the ways technologies are used and adapted, underscoring the importance of local agency in global technology networks. Rather than seeing technology adoption in the Global South as a linear, center-periphery dynamic [86], Lu & Qiu also propose the concept of "technology translation", which emphasizes the two-way flow of technology, focusing on how local actors adapt and reconfigure imported technologies to suit their own contexts [57]. They argue that this process involves careful comparison between the technology's original (often Western) setting and the local context, creating feedback loops that challenge assumptions of one-way technological superiority.

Further refining translation as a framework for technology transfer, Schritt and Voß [91] present three different modes in which translation takes place, namely, 1) 'colonization' that involves replicating the original practice in a new site as a form of expanding the original; 2) 'appropriation' that speaks to adaptations in the original artifacts and practices that get absorbed into local configurations; and 3) 'commensuration' that connects different practices and systems by placing them into a shared framework. It treats them as similar in purpose or function and aims to create networks that bring diverse elements together. While the authors observe that different modes of translation often overlap and intersect with each other, we find that our study resonates most with the commensuration mode of translation with different actors collaborating on WhatsApp to mobilize garment sales within the shared framework of e-commerce practices.

In using translation to understand the market practices that claim WhatsApp as an alternative to an e-commerce platform, we are also inspired by the literary and cultural theories that inform translation work. We draw on postcolonial feminist scholar Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak's arguments on the Eurocentrism of translation practice that critiques how the colonial mindset elevates the English language, dismissing other languages as lesser. Spivak terms this as "epistemic violence" highlighting how power operates through knowledge production [99, 100]. She argues that the agents of globalization insist on homogenizing languages, narratives, and practices that erase the diversity of local cultures, marginalizes those who cannot conform to the dominant narratives and turns them into the "subaltern." The subaltern, according to Spivak, thus cannot "speak" because their histories and identities are overwritten by the dominant systems of power.

In the context of technology transfer, this means that imported technological frameworks can often suppress indigenous knowledge systems, local practices, and alternative ways of engaging with technology. While the trading communities that are a part of this study belong to dominant caste, social, and economic groups and are not traditionally recognized as marginalized and disempowered groups, they are still experiencing economic marginalization and a threat to their livelihood for reasons including, but not limited to the advent of e-commerce platforms. Additional challenges arise from business regulations in India, such as the Goods and Services Tax (GST) registration, which has been particularly difficult for micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) since its introduction. Furthermore, restrictive banking practices have led to reduced access to formal credit and harsh recovery measures [21, 73]. Thus, trading communities are motivated to find ways to do business that protect their livelihood.

Galastri [34] argues that subaltern groups are not a monolithic, empirical entity confined to a specific position within society's material production process. Instead, their social composition is diverse On one hand are the more "advanced" subaltern groups i.e. those with greater political, cultural, and economic organization who innovate with production methods and cultural strategies to improve their material conditions and politically challenge their subaltern

status. On the other hand, the least advanced subaltern groups face greater obstacles in overcoming their subalternity. These insights are particularly relevant in our analysis of the WhatsApp reselling ecosystem. We find actors with varying degrees of subalternity such as traders experiencing economic distress and women homemakers seeking a source of income outside the formal work sector, collaborate to adapt and translate e-commerce platforms to suit their needs.

In the WhatsApp reselling process, we then see a counter-narrative to the subaltern's silence in the face of epistemic violence that Spivak would explain as a process of "epistemic translation". By using WhatsApp to challenge e-commerce sites and their frameworks as the only way of participating in the online commerce economy, the subaltern fosters a space where it translates the underlying epistemological framework of e-commerce into interactions and cultural idioms that are rooted in its own experience, linguistic, and knowledge systems. It is driven by the collaborative labor on WhatsApp, where traders, resellers, and customers engage in the act of translating the standardized, dashboard-based e-commerce model into localized, multimodal interactions that fit their specific needs and realities.

In contrast to the marginalization that local actors experience because of e-commerce platforms, the reselling ecosystem empowers them by offering alternative forms of engagement. However, this empowerment is not absolute in that the global and local forces remain in tension. Therefore, we also remain alert to the process of translation to understand its politics and see how oppression may shift when marginalized voices are heard within the structures of globalization. As Massey [62] writes, the increasing interconnectedness of the global economy does not simply flatten power relations; rather, it reconfigures them, often in unpredictable ways, creating new forms of inclusion and exclusion. In the evolving power geometry of time-space compression, different social groups exert different degrees of control, some dictating the flow while others are left to follow the course governed by dominant social groups, seeding new power relations and oppressions.

3 Study Context

3.1 Algorithmic Logics and Entrepreneurship in Platform Economies

Entrepreneurial work on digital platforms is increasingly mediated by algorithmic systems that act as gatekeepers, shaping the visibility of entrepreneurs and their offerings. According to Wu et al. [109], the algorithmic and interface logic of platforms significantly affects YouTubers, requiring them to engage in sensemaking through rumors [12], folk theories [26], and personas [109]. The opacity, secrecy, and technical complexity of these proprietary, dynamic algorithms threaten the agency and creativity of even amateurs sharing their creative work for free [25]. Despite these efforts, performance metrics remain unpredictable [28, 29], adding to the confusion. The ambiguous nature of complex algorithms evolves as the platform grows, leading to broader shifts in its functioning due to demographic changes, upgrades in logistics capabilities, and increased user-generated content. Over time, platforms leverage this information asymmetry to exert their epistemic authority over users [18].

E-commerce platforms too work in algorithmically similar ways. Klawitter and Hargittai [55] report that Etsy sellers often feel clueless about their products' visibility to customers. They further show how sellers view algorithmic skills on Etsy as akin to learning a new language.

The algorithmic logic of e-commerce platform relies on sellers competing for visibility in the customers' search results [42]. These logics, which are often opaque to sellers, are also biased towards sponsored recommendations, demoting sellers who do not advertise [23]. Furthermore, the algorithmic script values sellers based on metrics such as customer ratings, inventory, and the number of products sold, i.e. sales volume. Although customer ratings are largely organic, inventory and sales volume are proportionate to the scale of business. Thus, the growth prospects of small-scale sellers with limited stock are relatively lower as platform logics privilege large-scale sellers with a huge inventory at their disposal.[13].

Managing an e-commerce account also involves navigating complex dashboard interfaces, including product listings and paid ads. Recognizing this, Amazon launched India's first Digital Kendra (digital centre) in Surat to help onboard sellers and manage their accounts [81]. Despite such scaffolding, manufacturers report that selling on e-commerce platforms diverted time from their core competency of production to non-manufacturing activities such as photography and cataloguing to meet the specific standards set by platforms [44].

3.2 WhatsApp Reselling in the Textile Markets of Surat

Surat, located in southern Gujarat, India, is a major hub for textile manufacturing and diamond polishing, earning it the title of "synthetic textile capital of India." The city meets 90% of the country's synthetic cloth demand, with an annual turnover of around $59 million USD (Rs. 5 billion INR) [52]. The six-kilometer-long Ring Road has been a center for textile trading since the 1960s, offering various womenswear garments. Traditionally, retailers bought stock on credit through verbal agreements, with payment periods of 90 to 120 days. Although payment delays were common, sellers had to maintain ties with retailers since they were the only customer segment for sales. However, the rise in WhatsApp reselling allowed sellers to use digital platforms like Facebook Marketplace and WhatsApp Business to advertise and sell garments to customers through WhatsApp-based resellers spread across the country. This system resulted in advance payments and also increased their daily sales.

3.3 The WhatsApp Reselling Process

The unbranded textile industry in cities like Surat includes various actors: garment manufacturing unit owners, loom operators, mill workers, and packaging and delivery personnel. This paper examines how garments from Surat are sold via WhatsApp reselling, a process involving collaboration among multiple actors. Participants identified themselves as sellers, traders, and resellers, terms that we adopt to describe their roles. Sellers, the first link in the chain, focus on manufacturing new designs and coordinating with manufacturers and traders to manage inventory. Traders, the second link, handle garment sales. They visit sellers, collect garments on

orders, and deliver them to customers on behalf of resellers. The roles of seller and trader often overlap, with participants shifting between them based on autonomy, capital, and personal ambitions. For instance, sellers with capital might hire staff and take on trading roles, while traders sometimes pivot to manufacturing once they accumulate sufficient resources. Resellers, the third link, act as intermediaries between Surat-based traders and customers nationwide. They handle sales, maintain customer relationships, track orders, and communicate updates on returns and delays. Resellers earn a commission of Rs. 50–200 ($0.6–$2.4) per order before paying the trader, who ships the product. Customers, the final link, are active WhatsApp users who purchase garments through reselling groups formed via personal networks of friends and family. Customers noted that the garment designs sold by WhatsApp resellers were exclusive and niche, unlikely to be found on e-commerce platforms. Customers place orders with resellers and make payments through apps.

3.4 WhatsApp Business App

The WhatsApp Business app was introduced by WhatsApp in 2018 for small businesses to establish a private end-to-end communication channel with customers and was also key in the sellers' turn to WhatsApp reselling given their familiarity with the WhatsApp interface. The WhatsApp Business App offers useful features not present in the regular WhatsApp app such as broadcast for messaging multiple customers at the same time, creating and managing catalogues, and labels to segment customer conversations based on self-created attributes. These features enable businesses to display products professionally by including details like pricing, descriptions, and product codes, allowing them to engage customers directly by chatting. Additionally, the app integrates seamlessly with other Meta-owned platforms like Facebook and Instagram, making advertising and cross-platform visibility easier for businesses. WhatsApp also developed the "SMB Saathi Utsav" initiative ("saathi" meaning friendship and "utsav" meaning celebration in Hindi), aimed at training small-scale businesses to go digital with WhatsApp [85]. These initiatives cemented WhatsApp as a vital distribution channel for the garment industry, allowing textile businesses to connect with thousands of retail customers [48].

4 Methodology

4.1 Data Collection

Fieldwork for the study was conducted from May 2022 to June 2023. The first author, a male native of Gujarat, visited Surat four times, with each visit building on prior data analysis conducted by both authors. This iterative approach led to new lines of inquiry and identified diverse sites and demographics for interviews and observations. The first author's upper-caste affiliation played a role in gaining 'insider' access to sellers' shops and their business networks, as he was often asked his surname upon entering. His upper-caste surname may have influenced participants' willingness to engage, as they were themselves of upper and middle caste identities. Additionally, two of his women relatives who were resellers facilitated closer observation of everyday practices and introductions to trader and customer networks. Both authors, although experienced in online shopping, had not purchased from WhatsApp resellers. They followed Instagram accounts of traders and resellers, observing promotional reels for garments. Data collection included semi-structured interviews, field observations, and field notes from interviewing and observing 12 sellers, 16 traders, 11 WhatsApp resellers, and 12 customers. Sellers and traders were recruited through market visits, while resellers and customers were approached via personal contacts and social media. Interviews covered topics such as platform preferences, work practices, motivations for reselling, integration of reselling with daily routines, and customer buying experiences. Customer interviews were conducted in person and online, centering around their preferences for buying from WhatsApp resellers in comparison to other options and their overall buying experience from WhatsApp resellers.

In Surat, we also interacted with property managers of the different markets hosting textile businesses, staff members managing e-commerce platforms for the sellers, Amazon Digital Kendra executives, and YouTubers producing lifestyle content. Collectively, these interactions allowed us a sharper understanding of the garment sector in online commerce.

Offline data collection in Surat was complimented by the online observation of WhatsApp-based reselling groups and the online presence of traders and resellers who added the first author to their WhatsApp groups and directed him to their Facebook pages. Taking a cue from the traders and resellers, the first author also began using the WhatsApp Business app to understand how the app helps small businesses structure their activities. On WhatsApp, we added his professional details including his institutional affiliation, e-mail ID, and website, in the "About" section of the WhatsApp Business profile. We also shared the details of the study on the status blurb of his profile that was visible to anyone who clicked on his number.

Our online observations consisted of noting status updates and messages on catalogues, tracking packages, and stocks. People's contact numbers and WhatsApp groups were important commodities for traders who engage in predatory practices such as joining other WhatsApp groups to harvest the numbers of potential resellers for their businesses. It was common for traders to send WhatsApp group links to unknown contacts, inviting them to join their reselling network. As our fieldwork progressed, the first author received over 150+ invitations to join reselling groups with his number becoming a part of various trader databases.

The study received IRB approval from IIIT Bangalore's ethics board review committee. Participation in the study was voluntary, with no monetary compensation. Interviews were conducted in English, Hindi, and Gujarati and were either audio recorded or handwritten depending on participant consent. Interviews ranged between 20 minutes to about 3.5 hours when shadowing sellers and traders at shops.

4.2 Participant Sample

While Surat's Ring Road area has over 185 textile markets and 65,000 shops [90], our study focuses on sellers and traders from markets known for online selling. We, therefore, employed purposive sampling [31], visiting local markets well known for housing sellers engaged in online selling as informed by early participants. Sellers and trader belonged to ten different textile markets. They were all men, reflecting the male dominance of Indian marketplaces

Table 1: Seller Demographics

Seller Code	Gender	Platform Used	Age	Education	Medium of Education	Years of Experience
S1	Male	E-Commerce (Flipkart, Amazon)	45	Grade 12	Gujarati	25
S2	Male	WhatsApp	23	Grade 10	Hindi	2
S3	Male	WhatsApp	42	Grade 12	Gujarati	2
S4	Male	WhatsApp	33	Graduate	Gujarati	5
S5	Male	WhatsApp	32	Grade 12	Hindi	10
S6	Male	WhatsApp	35	PhD	Gujarati	2
S7	Male	WhatsApp	30	Postgraduate	English	11
S8	Male	E-Commerce (Flipkart, Amazon)	25	Graduate	English	1
S9	Male	WhatsApp	34	Graduate	Hindi	4
S10	Male	WhatsApp	52	Graduate	Gujarati	22
S11	Male	WhatsApp	40	Grade 9	Gujarati	7
S12	Male	E-Commerce (Meesho)	45	Grade 12	Gujarati	3

Table 2: Trader Demographics

Trader Code	Gender	Age	Education	Years of Experience	Number of Phones
T1	Male	24	Graduate	5	1
T2	Male	28	Graduate	7	3
T3	Male	23	Graduate	4	5
T4	Male	43	High School	10	1
T5	Male	24	Graduate	1	1
T6	Male	24	Graduate	4	6
T7	Male	24	Graduate	2	2
T8	Male	32	Graduate	7	3
T9	Male	32	Graduate	8	3
T10	Male	31	Graduate	7	2
T11	Male	36	Graduate	2	3
T12	Male	32	High School	2	1
T13	Male	29	High School	9	3
T14	Male	32	Postgraduate	6	2
T15	Male	37	High School	12	2
T16	Male	31	Graduate	11	2

[11]. Their textile manufacturing experience varied between 2 to 25 years. Some sellers were informally part of the family business (as apprentices) since their school days, shadowing their father to learn business skills with the aim of officially joining the business after completing their education. Table 1 outlines the sellers' demographics.

Traders expanded their reselling network by promoting their WhatsApp profiles and catalogues on social media. They used multiple phones and SIM cards to manage high chat volumes and had hundreds of resellers on their Broadcast channels. Table 2 summarizes trader demographics.

The resellers in our sample were women homemakers from six Indian states. Indian cities are classified into tiers based on variables such as public infrastructure, population, and internet penetration with tier 1 cities being the largest and most developed [4]. Social commerce adoption is particularly popular in smaller cities (i.e. beyond tier 1 and tier 2). As reported in Table 3, we interviewed resellers from Tier 1, 2, and 3 cities. For seven resellers, reselling was their first professional job, while four had previous careers as a bank clerk, teacher, nurse, engineer but quit their jobs after marriage. The average reselling experience was five years. Resellers managed multiple WhatsApp groups for various garments, and some used a separate phone to handle their reselling work. Table 3 summarizes their demographic details.

Customers in our sample were from five Indian states. Seven of the 12 were from tier 2 towns. Seven customers discovered resellers through social media, while four bought from relatives who were resellers. Table 4 summarizes customer demographics.

Additionally, we also interacted with property managers (n=3) of the different markets known for online selling, the listing staff members (LS) managing e-commerce platforms for the sellers (n=5), Amazon Digital Kendra executives (n=2), and YouTubers (n=2) producing lifestyle content for a holistic understanding of Surat's garment sector.

4.3 Data Analysis

Our data consisted of interview transcripts, field notes, images and videos. Analysis was an ongoing process through fieldwork

Table 3: Reseller Demographics

Reseller Code	Age	Education	Past Work Experience	Location	Reselling Experience	Number of WhatsApp Reselling groups administered
R1	42	Graduate	No	Mangalore, Karnataka (Tier 2)	7	4
R2	24	Graduate	Yes	Kadi, Gujarat (Tier 3)	5	1
R3	35	Graduate	Yes	Chennai, Tamil Nadu (Tier 1)	9	8
R4	36	High School	No	Surat, Gujarat (Tier 2)	5	4
R5	40	Postgraduate	Yes	Shahjahanpur, Uttar Pradesh (Tier 3)	2	1
R6	37	Diploma	No	Baroda, Gujarat (Tier 2)	8	3
R7	47	Graduate	No	Mumbai, Maharashtra (Tier 1)	5	1
R8	33	Graduate	Yes	Bengaluru, Karnataka (Tier 1)	10	5
R9	31	High School	No	Jorhat, Assam (Tier 3)	2	1
R10	23	Graduate	No	Surat, Gujarat (Tier 2)	1	4
R11	33	Diploma	No	Surat, Gujarat (Tier 2)	7	2

Table 4: Customer Demographics

Customer Code	Age	Location
C1	43	Bengaluru, Karnataka
C2	44	Bengaluru, Karnataka
C3	37	Bengaluru, Karnataka
C4	49	Ahmedabad, Gujarat
C5	35	Ahmedabad, Gujarat
C6	40	Bhiwandi, Maharashtra
C7	44	Mumbai, Maharashtra
C8	50	Bhavnagar, Gujarat
C9	32	Ahmedabad, Gujarat
C10	52	Raipur, Chattisgarh
C11	31	Ahmedabad, Gujarat
C12	24	New Delhi

with open coding of data [102] that shaped the next steps in data collection and analysis. Both authors read transcripts and field notes and met weekly to discuss their analytical codes. The open coding process resulted in codes such as "commission charges", "tracking id as common truth", "contact stealing in groups", "labelling resellers", and "reseller network". Codes were mapped and carefully structured into axial codes to understand WhatsApp's role in online commerce yielding final codes such as "Dashboard to WhatsApp interactions", "Commission to women's labor", and "Trust artifacts as boundary objects".

5 Findings

We start by analyzing why sellers and traders opt out of e-commerce to engage in WhatsApp reselling. We then explore how the WhatsApp reselling infrastructure is established by translating various social factors into an online commerce ecosystem. Next, we examine the collaborative translation labor performed by all participants to align WhatsApp reselling with standardized e-commerce processes for a reliable payment and delivery experience. Finally, we look at how frictions in the WhatsApp reselling process are managed through the exchange of digital trust artifacts.

5.1 Rejecting E-Commerce Platform Script

Sellers and traders in our study had mixed experiences with e-commerce platforms such as Amazon, Flipkart, and Meesho. The majority (n = 16) abandoned these platforms, while a few (n = 3) continued to use them to learn how to optimize their sales and revenue alongside WhatsApp reselling. Common concerns across all e-commerce platforms included high commission charges, complex return logistics, and difficult inventory management. Notably, all platforms had similar commission structures. A staff member at the Amazon Digital Kendra noted that while she facilitated onboarding for nearly 300 accounts on Amazon each month across various sectors, the garment category saw lesser interest due to high commission charges and the rapid adoption of WhatsApp reselling. Advertisement spending was crucial for visibility, but consistent spending did not always translate to sales, leaving sellers confused about how the platforms operated.

Seller S1, who sold sarees on Flipkart, reflected, *"It is all random. Sometimes, I get lucky and get good visibility and sales. But if I were to budget for ads, I cannot make sense of how much I will earn after spending the same amount. Sometimes, I get unexpectedly great returns; other times, even for a great catalogue, I won't get enough sales."*

The process of delivery and returns was prone to fraud by customers and delivery executives, who handled garments through third-party vendors employed by platforms. One seller showed us a video of a delivery executive caught tampering with a package, which went viral in market circles, causing significant disenchantment among sellers about e-commerce platforms. During our shop visits, we observed sellers carefully checking garments for any signs of tampering. In cases of valid proof of fraud, sellers could claim money from the platform, but the claims process was fraught with distrust and uncertainty, involving email follow-ups with the company. Despite submitting valid proofs, platforms tracked the volume of claims from sellers and processed only a fraction of the claims. One seller noted that he would successfully receive five to six claims out of every ten he raised, leading to losses.

Beyond commissions and frauds, sellers and traders also have to conform to platform companies' terms and conditions. For instance, traders have to be cautious about the inventory they hold, as late dispatches can adversely impact their account health inviting suspension. Trader T2 explained that holding large stock for a new catalogue could be a risky bet and they often made inventory decisions based on market response to the catalogue. He said,

"E-commerce algorithms favors sellers who can maintain huge stock. Also, shipping delays affect account health, reducing product visibility."(T2, Surat)

A key factor in becoming a successful e-commerce seller is proficiency in managing the platform's dashboard. Sellers must catalogue their products according to platform requirements and run paid advertising campaigns to boost visibility. Cataloging tasks require familiarity with the platform's schema to align listings with trending search keywords. These processes involve a steep learning curve and often fall outside the seller's primary focus of manufacturing, necessitating external assistance.

Sellers were anxious about 'proper listing,' which involves accurately uploading product details such as size, fabric, color, packaging dimensions, shipping preferences, inventory, and keywords. Platforms typically took up to 48 hours to evaluate and approve a catalogue, making listing a time-consuming task for sellers who were also focused on manufacturing. The importance of listing as an activity is visibly prominent in Surat and we found recruitment fliers for "e-commerce listing staff" in the textile markets, especially from sellers with low digital literacy. Sellers offered up to Rs. 20,000 ($240) for listing services and dashboard management on different e-commerce platforms.

Seller S1, a high school graduate, felt that only educated people familiar with English and computers could list garments on e-commerce platforms:

"I do not know C of Computer…I am barely 12th-pass and do not know how to operate computers. But I have a staff who is a postgraduate in computer applications. So, he would do an e-commerce listing for me along with email follow-ups with the platform."

LS3, the listing staff recruited by S1, had a working knowledge of account management for different e-commerce platforms. Explaining the importance of the listing process, he said,

"Listing involves labelling attributes for garments such as color, print, and dimensions. Accurate listing is important...one should list a lehenga (ankle-length skirt) in Ethnic wear, not just bottom wear. As for color, baby pink is different from fluorescent pink. Correct listings determine the quality of the catalogue. A catalogue rated as 'Excellent' has greater visibility and impacts the order ratio"

In addition to complicated dashboard interfaces, platform rules were restrictive, often requiring sellers to hire staff proficient in English and familiar with the digital scripts and algorithmic logic of e-commerce platforms. These staff acted as translators [57], a role that sellers found could be collaboratively performed with other market actors if they moved to WhatsApp as an alternative to e-commerce platforms.

5.2 Creating a WhatsApp Reselling Ecosystem

Unlike e-commerce platforms, WhatsApp reselling lacks a centralized, standardized script for trade. Instead, collaboration and shared understanding among market actors shape the online commerce experience. Without a central authority or dashboard interface, participants work together to build a self-governed infrastructure using WhatsApp as the fulcrum for online trade. The key factors leveraged by participants to propel the WhatsApp reselling ecosystem are as follows:

5.2.1 Translating Ethnic Identity into Business Ties. In the textile markets of Surat, sellers and traders built reselling networks leveraging the strength of their kinship, caste, and ethnic ties. Most were Gujarati and Marwari Hindus and Jains, with upper and middle caste last names such as Purohit, Chaudhuri, Maheshwari, and Patel. Among our participants, most traders were Marwaris, a mercantile community from Marwar, Rajasthan known for their entrepreneurial spirit, which led them to migrate and pursue business ventures across the country [8]. A popular saying within this community highlights their enterprising nature: *"Jahaan na pahunche bailgaadi, wahaan pahunche Marwari"* (Marwaris reach where even

a bullock cart cannot). This religious, caste, and community composition has historically been a defining feature of Surat's textile industry [63].

Consistent with other observations [63], we found that even among different caste groups, Marwaris strongly identified with their regional identity, which played a crucial role in developing their business networks. As a business community, the Marwaris are tightly knit through their caste-based social and network capital, granting them access to economic and social opportunities within their circles. As Trader T13 shares,

"My Agarwal samaaj (a mercantile caste) hosts frequent meetups and I regularly attend them. Whatever the purpose, it eventually turns into a business conclave. I find other traders and we discuss new garment trends and digital marketing. We exchange phone numbers and continue discussing business beyond the event because several of us are in the kapda business (garment reselling)".

The Marwari community's widespread presence in India benefited traders, allowing them to use their networks to recruit resellers from diverse parts of the country. T5, a trader hailing from Jodhpur, Rajasthan in North India, said,

"I have a cousin running an imitation jewellery store in Chennai (a metro city in South India). He put a WhatsApp broadcast inviting his jewellery resellers to sell sarees. His regular resellers were added to my WhatsApp group as well. So, I get regular orders from Chennai-based resellers." (T5, Surat)

For some, supporting businesses within their caste community is both a duty and a source of pride. For example, R3, a Chennai-based Maheshwari reseller, received catalogue updates from her brother-in-law, a Surat garment trader, and used her caste network to boost the business. She shares:

"I have a Maheshwari Samaaj WhatsApp group where all the Chennai-based Maheshwari women resellers are members. They keep posting their products so we all take pride and promote them."

Consistent with prior research on ethnic entrepreneurship [38, 39, 77], strong community identities were translated to business ties to set up a WhatsApp reselling ecosystem as an alternative to e-commerce platforms. Sellers' leveraged local identities to participate in the global aspiration of the digital economy [33, 110].

5.2.2 Translating Women's Undervalued Labor to Women's Empowerment. While caste and ethnic ties provide entry into the reselling chain, women's labor is central to completing WhatsApp sales, as they are the key mediators between traders and customers. Customers preferred buying from resellers for a more personalized experience, feeling assured about garment attributes when resellers shared actual images compared to images of models on e-commerce platforms. C10, a customer from a tier 2 city, said,

"On e-commerce, different brands have different size conventions. I generally avoid return processing and prefer chatting with the reseller as she knows my fit and advises me based on my past orders."

Resellers are mostly homemakers seeking income through flexible, home-based work. All reseller participants in this study were women homemakers, balancing household responsibilities while engaging in WhatsApp reselling. Their tasks involve connecting with customers, assuring garment quality, and sharing tracking updates until delivery. As noted in a previous study [82], we found traders associating WhatsApp reselling with women. Although reliant on women for sales, they view reselling as 'easy' work and a way for women to empower themselves during their idle time while staying home. They thus frame reselling as a noble form of financial empowerment. T10, a trader from Surat said,

"E-commerce commission charges are exorbitant, but on WhatsApp with the reseller network, I can earn more margin. These days, 1 of every 4 women are resellers. They spend 4 hours in a day cooking and then watch TV. If they sell garments, they can earn. It is like a game for them to chat and share images on WhatsApp. They may not be allowed to work outside. So, it is easy!"

Women resellers strongly refute notions that reselling work is akin to playing games. They spend significant time organizing catalogue updates on WhatsApp from various traders by selecting catalogues based on trends and price and organizing them into separate WhatsApp groups (Fig. 5). They also undertake significant affective labor to produce and manage successful client experiences. For instance, to assure customers of quality, resellers often test garments themselves by buying and washing samples to test for color and shrinkage. Some resellers also send client pictures of themselves wearing the garments for a more realistic understanding of length and fit. R7, a reseller from Baroda, explains the time and labor behind securing one order from a customer: *"Booking takes about 45 minutes: I explain color variations, confirm size, and check stock with the trader, who won't always reply immediately. After the customer confirms, I wait for their payment and address, then forward these to the trader. The trader sends a tracking link, which I pass to the customer. For those who struggle to track packages, I monitor and update them. Overall, I spend around 75 minutes per customer."*

Some women also faced resistance and disapproval of reselling as legitimate work from family members. Reseller R4 described her mother-in-law's disapproval:

"My mother-in-law used to taunt me, saying, 'Why are you on your mobile phone all day?' I had to explain that I was working and earning money. Even my husband was not happy when he came home from the office and saw me engaged with reselling on the phone. But eventually, I explained what I was doing, and I started managing my reselling work when he wasn't at home, after completing my household chores." This aligns with prior research on women's online work, which shows that women often have to justify using phone and internet to family members and demonstrate their prioritization of household chores over their online activities [105].

Resellers reported that they worked through the day, juggling reselling with household tasks as traders frequently removed inactive resellers to make room for new ones, increasing pressure on women to remain productive. R7, a Mumbai-based reseller said,

"Before starting to cook lunch, I post all the catalogues. Amidst the pressure cooker whistles and making rotis, I attend to customer queries even if my hands are coated with flour. Being a reseller, I cannot cook without checking my phone because I may lose customer's interest if I reply late."

Women also faced privacy risks while reselling on social media. Even as Facebook groups helped build customer networks, they also exposed resellers to unwanted messages and misbehavior, as their contact numbers were often publicly accessible through shared WhatsApp group links. Reseller R10 from Surat said,

"I get many customers from Facebook, but it is unsafe for women to share their numbers because anyone could join the group. Men joined

my WhatsApp group through a Facebook link and started harassing others and my husband had to intervene to stop it."

The logic and script of WhatsApp reselling, as promoted by sellers and traders, emphasizes the voluntary participation of women homemakers in reselling as an empowering choice for easy financial gains (Fig. 2). By propagating the neoliberal logic of choice and freedom, platforms encourage women to engage in affective labor [27]. However, Carls and Dowling [27] note that while affective labor allows for expressive social interactions and some autonomy, it does not substantially challenge capitalist relations. WhatsApp reselling embodies this ambivalence, offering a pathway for women to engage in paid labor under patriarchal constraints, leading to (constrained) empowerment. At the same time, the socio-material realities of everyday reselling highlight how women's labor remains undervalued, operating under societal assumptions and disapproval about women's idleness and online activities.

5.2.3 Translating Real Estate to Specialized Built Infrastructure for Reselling. In Surat, the real estate market adapted to WhatsApp reselling with spaces like the Avadh Textile Market, built exclusively for online selling. Opened in 2019, it spans 8,500 sq. km, has WiFi across 12 floors with 1,488 shops, and is marketed as **"Surat's first online seller's market."** Avadh's built infrastructure includes centralized internet, multiple elevators, and wide walkways to accommodate numerous delivery executives handling bulky consignments (Fig. 1b). Rentals range from Rs. 15,000 ($180) to Rs. 32,000 ($385) monthly and are leased to garment manufacturers to supply to traders serving nationwide resellers. The property manager and participants confirmed Avadh as a key hub for WhatsApp reselling stock, especially for womenswear. T3, a trader visiting the Avadh market to fulfil WhatsApp orders said, *"Avadh is India's biggest market for supplying garments to resellers. It is an offline platform for online reselling. Catalogues of anyone reselling womenswear across India originate from this market."*

Resellers across India recognized the prominence of Avadh Textile Market'. Connecting with a single trader from Avadh often led to numerous WhatsApp group invitations. The first author received over 150 invitations to join reselling groups during this study, spanning markets in Jaipur, Lucknow, Delhi, and Mumbai. Traders from different cities showcased their regional products like Jaipur's hand-printed crafts, Lucknow's chikankari kurtis, and Mumbai's leather bags. They shared business terms and social media testimonials in introductory messages to build trust and establish authenticity, highlighting how local offline markets extend into digital spaces through WhatsApp reselling.

Similarly, R1, a Mangalore-based reseller who has never visited Surat, was added to over 25 WhatsApp groups by Avadh market traders, expanding her business leads. Trader T12, who had over 600 resellers on WhatsApp, remarked,

"If you join the WhatsApp group of any shop at Avadh Market, then other traders will automatically approach you. Traders operate by stealing contacts from WhatsApp groups. Join one WhatsApp group, and you get added to many such groups."

To onboard traders on to sellers' WhatsApp networks, sellers used standees with QR codes at their shopfronts (Fig. 1a), allowing traders to scan and join their groups or send direct messages. Traders joined numerous broadcast networks across floors and received daily catalogue updates. Sellers also provided real-time stock updates through WhatsApp groups organized by floor number, helping traders find out-of-stock items. Additionally, Avadh Market had a public Facebook group with over 2,200 resellers nation wide and both the offline and online presence of markets like Avadh were crucial to the reselling business.

5.3 Translating Standardized E-Commerce Scripts into Social Media Content and Interactions

Liberated from the constraints of English-based e-commerce platforms, traders, sellers, and resellers created and shared their own content on social media, using colloquial regional languages and WhatsApp's features like voice notes and stickers for more inclusive interactions. Below, we describe the advertising content and communication styles for WhatsApp reselling.

5.3.1 Creating Social Media Content for Catalogues. To compete with e-commerce platforms, sellers and traders used various social media platforms [41, 76]. They collaborated with YouTubers to boost their brand and attract resellers to their WhatsApp networks. For example, we encountered YouTuber YT1 filming a promotional video at S7's Surat shop, targeting women in Karnataka and offering tips on successful WhatsApp reselling. S7 chose YT1 for her regional popularity in southern India and said,

"YT1 is a popular YouTuber with thousands of views in Karnataka. We wanted to onboard South Indian resellers for selling silk sarees, so the YT1 channel worked well for us."

YT1 charged Rs. 15,000 ($180) for an 8.5-minute promotional video for S7 that would mention his contact details. Sellers found that using YouTube influencers provided creative control and broader social media reach compared to single-platform e-commerce ads. Some also ran paid Meta ad campaigns to target resellers on Facebook and Instagram. Trader T2 compared return on investment, stating,

"Spending Rs. 1,200 ($14) on a platform may yield 22-25 orders, while Rs. 6,000 ($72) on Meta Ads brings 30-40 reseller inquiries and regular orders from them."

Traders often referenced Hindi films and pop culture in social media content to attract attention. For instance, Trader T13 created a viral Instagram video featuring a look-alike of popular Hindi film actor Kartik Aaryan who mimicked his famous monologue from the film *Pyaar Ka Punchnaama*, appealing to both resellers and customers. Customer C2, an avid Instagram user, found such promotional reels entertaining and informative for updates on fashion trends. Some traders, like T8, created their own videos explaining WhatsApp reselling processes and terms to ensure transparency. Creating content or collaborating with influencers offered traders creative control and a broader reach compared to e-commerce ads.

5.3.2 WhatsApp's Multimodal Features for Bazaar Banter. Sellers, traders, and resellers leveraged the range of WhatsApp's features to promote catalogues and interact within the reselling ecosystem. They carefully crafted descriptions of garments using text that code switched between grammatically incorrect English and regional languages (Fig. 3) with a generous sprinkling of emojis (Fig. 4).



(a) A corridor with standees displaying QR codes to connect traders and sellers on WhatsApp groups

(b) Delivery executives sorting through courier packages at Avadh Textile Market

Figure 1: Scenes from Avadh Textile Markets. Images: © Kartik Joshi

These messages along with videos and images of the garments helped draw attention to their catalogues while conveying an easy informality of interaction, typical of bazaar banter.

Traders highlighted that communication patterns on WhatsApp made online commerce more accessible for people from smaller towns and villages, who often feared the need for written English and email accounts. T3, a trader catering to buyers from rural and small-town India said,

"80-90% of my resellers are from Tier 3 towns. People fear emails and English grammar mistakes. Many lack email IDs, but everyone uses WhatsApp. You can type in any language, send voice notes, or request video calls. I use a WhatsApp logo and chat redirection on my website to reassure customers they can also contact me directly."

Resellers echoed WhatsApp's communication ease for small town customers. Reseller R7 said,

"In my hometown, people distrust e-commerce. They prefer to track my WhatsApp status updates for garment ads and chat directly with me to buy clothes. They don't use tracking numbers and check order status with me instead."

Additionally, features like stickers were also an integral part of messaging practices that created enriching and engaging conversational experiences. Creating personalized stickers to structure messages and interactions in a fun and playful manner was a common practice as the volume of messages on WhatsApp groups was overwhelming. Trader T7, explained,

"There are many catalogue messages in the group chat, and it gets messy. So, I created personalized stickers for my business. Moreover, I now share my brand name, return policy, and greetings with stickers. It just pops up on the screen between the text messages. Resellers can see it and make sense of the catalogue messages."

Another reason why sellers and traders preferred WhatsApp reselling was the reach it afforded to hitherto untapped customers in both rural and remote regions that were not serviced by big platforms. Trader T1 was pleased that WhatsApp expanded his customer base beyond the limited regions covered by e-commerce platforms. He remarked,

"We're often surprised by the remote locations of some orders, so we check Google Maps to confirm their existence. This reach isn't possible with e-commerce platforms."

Thus, the multimodality and reach of WhatsApp facilitated easy communication overcoming barriers of tech competency, literacy, knowledge of English, as well as geographical barriers to online shopping.

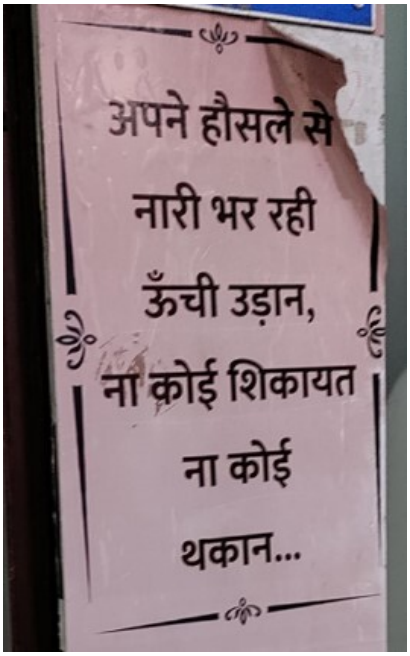

Figure 2: A poster outside a shop in Hindi announcing that women are courageously taking flight without complaints or fatigue. While the poster does not explicitly mention reselling, it is referring to women working as resellers. Image: © Kartik Joshi



Figure 3: Messages between traders and resellers codeswitching between Hindi and English with emojis. Image: © Kartik Joshi

5.3.3 Creating Trust Artifacts to Navigate Frictions in WhatsApp Reselling. Unlike e-commerce, where the platforms arbitrate and resolve disputes, WhatsApp reselling is a self-governed process relying on mutual understanding among traders, resellers, and customers, making it more vulnerable to financial scams [16, 53]. Trader T7, recalled how he was duped,

"I got a message on WhatsApp from a number whose display picture (DP) indicated that he was from the army. He placed a bulk order and even shared a screenshot of the payment. He claimed to have paid extra, so I scanned his QR code to refund him the amount and lost Rs. 12,000."

Traders addressed suspicious activities by flagging them and reporting fraud in reselling groups. Trader T8, with a YouTube channel of 7,000 subscribers, posted a warning video and sent voice notes about scams and protection tips. Resellers R1 and R3 shared his messages in their groups.

Without a centralized authority, traders, resellers, and customers resolve issues through effective communication and by creating 'trust artifacts'—digital proofs that bridge different social worlds and foster trust in the WhatsApp reselling ecosystem. We describe two such artifacts below.

Screenshots and Tracking IDs

In the absence of automated confirmation of payments, resellers took screenshots of proof of payment on e-wallets and shared it with the traders. The act of taking screenshots and sharing them with each other acted as a boundary object [101] proving payment confirmation between the customers, resellers, and traders, post which traders initiated shipping. Similarly, without a formal bill or email acknowledgement, customers accepted that receiving the courier tracking ID from the reseller was proof that their order had been shipped. Traders and resellers were therefore very particular about the timely sharing of tracking IDs as that indicated that the customers' orders were being honored. We found that upfront communication of terms and conditions followed by prompt responses among different participants acted as a gesture of transparency to bring accountability in the reselling process.

Opening Videos Sellers also rejected e-commerce platforms due to issues with order delivery and returns, which often involved fraud by customers and delivery executives. As discussed earlier, a viral video of a delivery executive stealing a saree at the Avadh Textile Market caused widespread panic among traders. Additionally, customers also misused return policies by returning worn garments.

To address fraudulent returns in WhatsApp reselling, traders required customers to record a 360-degree video of them opening the shipment and detailing any defects or reasons for return. This policy was clearly communicated on WhatsApp when customers placed their orders. The comprehensive video allowed traders to verify and process returns effectively, acting as a boundary object [101] that established a common truth for all parties and aided in resolving disputes.

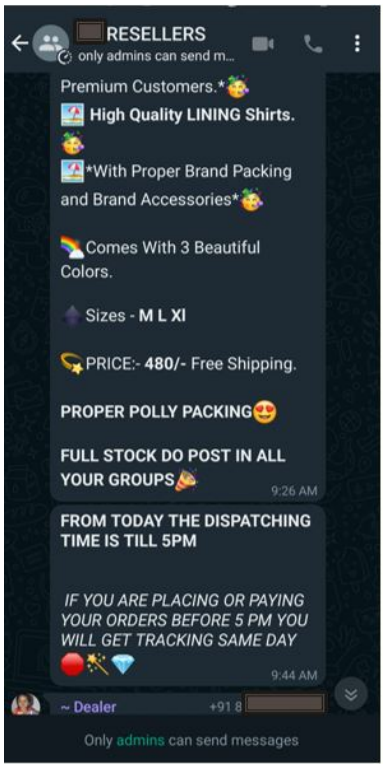

Figure 4: Catalogue listings on a resellers WhatsApp group using emojis. Image: © Kartik Joshi

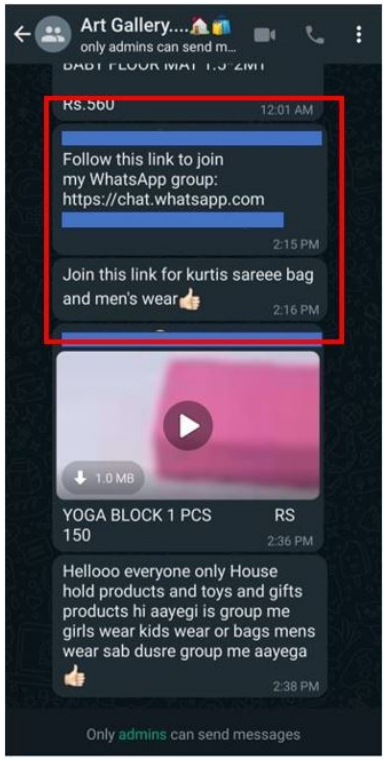

Figure 5: WhatsApp group invite links for catalogues according to different garment types. Image: © Kartik Joshi

Recording opening videos was initially not a priority for customers. However, after resellers explained the difficulties sellers faced with refunds, customers started complying. Customer C7 from Mumbai said,

"An opening video is required for returns, so I record it and keep it or delete it later. My son also reminds me when a courier arrives."

By taking care to alert others in the reselling community to potential frauds and fostering prompt and transparent communication through trust artiacts, resellers and customers negotiated instances of friction and made the WhatsApp reselling ecosystem robust.

We also noted how e-commerce platforms acknowledged the significance of video-based trust artifacts as they introduced systemic shifts in their delivery process. For instance, Meesho introduced a camera in their dispatching process to address the thefts and frauds during the delivery process. As seen in Fig. 6, sellers are discussing Meesho's new feature of having delivery executives wear waist mounted cameras to deter frauds. This demonstrates how e-commerce platforms integrated local practices in WhatsApp reselling of customers recording a 360-degree unboxing video in their formal delivery process.



Figure 6: A picture of a Meesho delivery executive wearing a waist mounted camera during the dispatch process at a textile market being discussed on a WhatsApp reselling group about its potential to lessen thefts and frauds during the delivery process. Image: © Kartik Joshi

6 Discussion

6.1 Translating E-commerce's Algorithm-driven Dashboard Logic to WhatsApp's Colloquial Conversational Interface

E-commerce platforms serve as centralized "algorithmic bosses" [28], enforcing data-driven logic through dashboards [18] and integrating traditional markets into digital ecosystems via physical resource centers [71]. This reflects a broader ambition of post modern systems to merge historical market practices with new technological configurations [91]. However, sellers often find these shifts incompatible with their economic and cultural practices, turning instead to flexible alternatives like WhatsApp reselling. Unlike rigid, algorithm-driven platforms, WhatsApp reselling fosters network-based, locally rooted practices. Sellers collaboratively translate e-commerce functions into conversational exchanges on WhatsApp groups. They replace keyword-driven cataloguing with colloquial listings enhanced by emojis and pop-culture references, appealing even to users with low digital literacy.

This process "unmakes" [88] rigid e-commerce structures, replacing them with practices aligned to local interests. Gajjala [33] writes that e-commerce platforms operate within distinct hierarchies of literacy and practice for both traders and customers. Similarly, our findings reveal that WhatsApp reselling functions as a tool for dismantling the rigid "dashboard logic," for both sellers and small-town customers with lower levels of digital literacy. WhatsApp resellers act as cultural brokers [98], simplifying the online buying process through personalized interactions. This was appealing to urban tech-savvy customers too who preferred buying garments from resellers as the interaction made for a more enriching buying experience. This aligns with past research, highlighting the role of conversations, sociality, and cultural values in supporting global consumption on platforms such as WhatsApp [14, 110]. WhatsApp reselling thus provides customers an interface that is human-centered and human interaction driven with resellers playing a crucial role in collaborating with the "next billion users" [5] from rural and semi-urban areas. By expanding online commerce to include these traditionally overlooked customers, the actors in this process help reshape the design and development of future online platforms. This shift acknowledges that the design of online commerce must incorporate diverse digital literacies and socio-economic backgrounds, rather than catering solely to the digitally literate elite. The process of translation thus reconfigures an algorithm-driven dashboard logic of e-commerce to the colloquial conversational interface of WhatsApp.

6.2 WhatsApp Reselling as Epistemic Translation and Platform Redesign

Translation on WhatsApp bridges the gap between top-down platform designs and grassroots needs, creating a feedback loop that influences mainstream e-commerce, encouraging the evolution of both systems that are interconnected in a dynamic, symbiotic relationship that influences future design innovations. Similar to Meesho, Flipkart, another Indian e-commerce platform, has introduced an "Open Box Delivery" service in select regions, mirroring the opening videos traders request from customers in the WhatsApp reselling process. In this platform version, the delivery executive, or "wishmaster," unboxes the package in front of the customer to confirm the correct item is delivered [37]. Therefore, we observe how e-commerce platforms make systemic changes and introduce functional equivalents of local practices such as recording unboxing videos. The video proof acts as a trust artifact, reinforcing credibility and transparency in the transaction process. This demonstrates how the translation process feeds into e-commerce platform design through an ongoing feedback loop.

Lu & Qiu [57] introduce "deep ploughing" as a model of technology translation, which explains the interaction of different knowledge systems and the resulting creative destruction of technology paradigms resulting in new outcomes. In the context of online commerce, we also see big tech e-commerce platforms recognizing the importance of network- based interactive commerce and respond to such developments. Examples in India include the Walmart-owned Flipkart launching a reselling app called Shopsy [1, 72, 89] and Amazon acquiring the reselling platform Glowroad [66, 79]

Spivak [97] notes that translation is an act of reparation, a moral obligation arising from the recognition that there cannot be a universal language. The creation of a reselling infrastructure on WhatsApp could then be considered an act of reparation, where local actors collaborate to participate in the global phenomenon of online commerce. The growing interest of e-commerce platform companies in the reselling ecosystem is both a validation of their translation efforts as well as testament to platform recognition of online commerce beyond urban, metropolitan cultures.

However, despite being an act of reparation and a counter to Western platformized commerce models, our study shows that WhatsApp reselling as an act of translation continues to reproduce power relations in the way it views and imagines women resellers who drive the reselling economy.

6.3 The Illusion of Women Empowerment in Reselling

Advertisements for reselling platforms portray homemakers as both resellers and household managers, presenting this dual role as a route to women's empowerment. Morris and Spivak [68] describe speech acts of the subaltern as efforts to be heard. We argue that reselling is akin to a speech act for homemakers seeking to earn an income. However, as Morris and Spivak highlight, these speech acts often operate within larger oppressive structures. We note that reselling aligns with the mainstream narrative of neoliberal empowerment [87] that celebrates women hustling for paid work while maintaining oppressive patriarchal structures that devalue care work. Resellers tend to internalize and accept these mainstream norms, as indicated by our interviews where some resellers viewed reselling as "best for ladies." This raises concerns about the superficial application of the term empowerment, showing it is not a standalone outcome but is shaped by societal expectations. Resellers had to justify their mobile use to family members and establish reselling as legitimate work by highlighting its income potential. The dynamic nature of reselling required them to juggle household tasks with customer interactions. The interaction of political, social, and economic factors around reselling applications illuminates how technology embeds empowering narratives for the

subaltern. Jasanoff and Kim [47] show how companies promote specific technologies based on collectively imagined social orders. As techno imaginaries of modernity, reselling applications inveigle women to embrace the opportunities they provide. However, Gajjala [33] urges researchers to scrutinize these designs and imaginaries to critically examine the persistent factors underlying new technology-mediated changes.

Martinez Dy et al. [61] advocate a critical realist perspective to analyze technology interventions claiming to promote empowerment. This lens highlights the underlying patriarchal structures and gendered labor stereotypes impacting WhatsApp reselling. To genuinely advocate for women's empowerment, sociotechnical imaginaries must address these aspects and consider the dynamics of reselling work. Sultana et al. [103] suggest focusing on access points such as the most significant relations that influence women's lives to introduce design actions. Advertisements promoting reselling must reflect these realities, considering women resellers' lived experiences within the context of family expectations and integrate the practical experiences of resellers into their advertisements. Before claiming a technology initiative as empowering, platforms must consider what Gajjala calls the "subaltern praxis space" [33]— that is, resellers' practical life experiences as they navigate complex offline, sociocultural challenges while engaging in online reselling work. True empowerment can only be achieved when rigid social structures around women evolve to support the cause. Beyond immediate family contexts, traders also undermine reselling work by referring to it as "just chatting," "game," or "fun," which starkly contrasts with resellers' actual experiences. The narrative of empowerment thus erodes the resilience of resellers at a systemic level as more and more resellers compete to earn little income [30]. The praxis space for resellers, comprising both their immediate families who expect adherence to household duties while viewing their online activities with suspicion and traders who seek to expand their own reselling networks, contradicts the sociotechnical imaginaries of women empowerment promoted by the platform companies.

7 Design Recommendations

As spotlighted by the study, translation remains a dynamic, iterative dialogue between disparate knowledge systems while reproducing power relations among the actors. The process of translation leads to systemic changes as big tech e-commerce platforms rethink their operations based on local practices. Relatedly, the success of WhatsApp-based reselling infrastructure (local functional equivalents) inevitably ends up shaping the platform economy (often rooted in Western epistemes and cultures). Attending to this phenomenon of translation and recognizing the significant influence of WhatsApp reselling, we propose design recommendations that may help in making the process of translation more trustworthy. Along these lines, we discuss design implications for WhatsApp to enable a safer, more reliable digital economy.

7.1 Designing Trust Features for WhatsApp Reselling

A key challenge for WhatsApp-based commerce is establishing trust between buyers and sellers in the absence of a third-party arbitrator. Traders often question the authenticity of payment screenshots shared by customers, while resellers struggle to prove their reliability to new customers, even when offering trust artifacts like testimonials. Prior research by Raghunath et al. highlights similar trust issues in WhatsApp transactions [82]. They recommend a verification badge to protect sellers when sharing status updates. While the WhatsApp Business app currently offers businesses the option to display a "Meta-verified" badge for authenticity if they are paid subscribers, this creates hierarchies among sellers, disadvantaging smaller businesses if they do not have the resources to pay for the badge. A more organic alternative is to allow for customer ratings on resellers' WhatsApp Business profiles that could bolster trust similar to Google ratings for businesses. Integrating customer feedback mechanisms would foster a more inclusive and trustworthy environment for small businesses.

There is a significant gap in verifying customer behavior on WhatsApp and e-commerce platforms, leaving sellers vulnerable to bad faith practices. Introducing customer rating systems—already tracked by platforms in the back end—could address this issue. For instance, customers with a consistent record of positive buying behavior could earn badges from traders and resellers, which they could choose to display on their profiles. This approach signals trustworthiness without stigmatizing others, fostering fairness and deterring misconduct. Such mechanisms would help reduce trust deficits and contribute to a more reliable and equitable digital marketplace. While WhatsApp is treading a fine line between being a lightweight encrypted communication app and facilitating commerce [56], the WhatsApp Business App could support richer features to serve business and customer needs alike. This is similar to other messaging apps such as WeChat that have emerged as super app without compromising on their primary agenda of supporting interactions [112]

7.2 Integrating WhatsApp with Other Meta Platforms for Improved Privacy

Privacy is a significant concern for resellers conducting business on WhatsApp. Many resellers perceive Facebook as a risky platform for promoting their WhatsApp businesses due to unsolicited messages from strangers. However, public Facebook wholesale groups remain essential for connecting with traders. Despite moderation to detect and block fraudulent accounts, these groups still expose resellers to scammers who can access their WhatsApp links. The disjointed process of flagging suspicious contacts across Meta platforms worsens this vulnerability. Adopting an integrated system to flag suspicious users across Meta apps, as suggested by the communication ecosystem perspective [76], could help address this issue. While WhatsApp allows users to block and report strangers, users currently lack awareness of whether others have flagged the same sender. Publicly highlighting reported contacts could provide better information, enabling users to avoid fraudulent interactions and enhancing overall platform safety.

8 Limitations and Future Work

This study's sample includes Gujarati and Marwari sellers and traders, primarily Hindu, who dominate the garment trade in Surat. Despite our efforts to include participants from diverse religious

and mercantile communities, we were limited in securing representation from sellers and traders such as Muslims or other trading communities like Sindhis. Given the significance of network and kinship ties in this industry, future research could explore the experiences of other religious, regional, and caste groups trying to enter the WhatsApp reselling ecosystem as traders and sellers. This could provide deeper insights into the inclusivity of WhatsApp as a medium and how community and religious identities influence power dynamics in WhatsApp garment reselling and similar online commerce contexts.

Additionally, this study focuses on unbranded garments, but the dynamics of online buying and selling may differ for other commodities, such as household appliances and electronics, where branded products hold greater appeal. Future research could examine whether WhatsApp reselling is equally relevant in non-garment sectors and how these markets compare in their evolution.

9 Conclusion

E-Commerce platform companies are driven by centering seamless customer experience that do not always accommodate and serve the interests of small traders. The emergence of the social commerce economy such as reselling with a future projection of $100 billion in the Asian market by the year 2025 [59] marks an interesting inflection point for how online commerce is conducted. Sellers and traders leverage their ethnic ties and the availability of women homemakers to form reseller networks using near ubiquitous apps like WhatsApp to drive their business. We contribute to HCI scholarship by mobilising the notion of translation to highlight the processes that make the dismantling of the e-commerce platform interface into WhatsApp interactive commerce possible and provide design recommendations for a safe and reliable reselling experience.

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