

## **SOC 499: Capstone Project**

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# **Cultural Symbolism of Fashion Brands in Kazakhstan**

## **Abstract**

This capstone project explores the cultural symbolism among the Kazakhstani fashion brands, particularly clothing and jewelry brands. The methodology of the study consists of the individual interview, the focus group and digital ethnography. Data interpretation was done via open coding and thematic analysis. Findings show that the use of Kazakh cultural symbols is influenced by historical context, traditions, and cultural values. All of these led ethno-items to be trendy among society. Another key factor that facilitated the promotion of such items is influence of the businesses on social media platforms. They have an ability to influence and create new trends as well as to transmit cultural values. It depends on the brand identity and purpose. Thus, they are able to change customer behavior and attitudes. Analyzing the market and potential clients' responses, it was determined that price, design and quality are priority factors when it comes to choosing a piece of clothing or jewelry. The following factor is the meaning of cultural symbols. Study participants also highlighted that through purchasing ethno-styled things, they feel belonging to the Kazakh community and build their own uniqueness among other people. Therefore, such symbols can be used as a tool of communication among individuals. Thus, it also helps to strengthen the sense of belonging, along with the growing trend of rethinking Kazakh culture.

**Keywords:** cultural symbolism; Kazakh symbols; ethnic jewelry; ethnic clothing; brand identity; cultural values; nation-building; consumerism.

## **Introduction**

Do you pay attention to what you are buying? Do you understand the values of commodities that are translated via the brands' identity and representation? An interest in this theme of the Capstone project arose after reading the book about cultural codes and how they are used in the marketing field. I pointed out interesting ideas regarding the individuals' values,

identity, and the sense of belonging. The idea of symbols in terms of culture is to transmit values and beliefs, which belong to a particular group of people, from generation to generation. It can be represented and observed in daily life. The language we talk, traditions we follow, clothes we wear, colors and patterns we use, and meanings we interpret behind all these.

The main research question of the capstone project is why is there a trend of creating and buying clothes and jewelry with cultural symbols? This capstone project considers cultural symbolism promoted via clothes and jewelry made by Kazakhstani brands that represents ethno-symbolic features. In recent years, interest and demand for such commodities have been increasing based on the analysis and results that were obtained during the research. Investigations into the causes of this trend were made. Within the framework of this capstone project, it was studied how new companies create their brand identity and what exactly they are guided by. Customers' attitudes towards ethno-styled goods were also analyzed. Their behavior and intentions are researched through the lenses of ethnocentrism, symbolic interactionism, and consumerism developed by Jean Baudrillard. Consequently, this analysis helps in drawing correlations between Kazakhstani brands' attitudes and customer experiences.

Another question that is also taken into account is whether cultural symbols can be used as marketing and non-verbal communication tools. The study intends to discover the nature of materializing Kazakh culture. Since Kazakhstan is young and multicultural, it is crucial to think about the aims of commodifying ethno-symbols. Do companies promote the cultural and national identity among their customers, or do they do it to earn more money, leading to the customers' willingness to identify themselves as Kazakhs?

Firstly, the research explores the companies' intentions and the messages they want to convey. In addition, the study examines how they are represented in their brand identity. By knowing this, the nature of using ethno-symbols can be identified. Moreover, the research project is aimed to observe whether the audience perceives companies' messages as they are or if there are other interpretations. Secondly, customers' attitudes and reasons for purchasing such items are researched.

The significance of the capstone project lies in its investigation of the relationship between culture and commercialization. Using cultural symbols helps to understand the values of a particular society, and utilizing them in a commercial way can convey multiple meanings. This study examines the nature of fashion brands' and customers' attitudes towards promoting cultural identity through clothing and/or jewelry items. It is crucial to understand why and how the market is influenced. Moreover, the research contributes to market analysis and understanding client preferences, which can be beneficial for businesses.

## **Literature Review**

### *Commercialization of Culture*

Kazakhstan is a country which is a home to more than 120 ethnic groups. You and Hardwick (2020) researched how Asian countries, such as China, India, Japan, and Malaysia, secure and transmit their intangible cultural heritage (ICH) through generations. Cultural symbols represent the idea of belonging to one community, and at the same time they are used to express self-identity (You & Hadwick, 2020; Torelli, Keh & Chiu, 2009; Awanis, Schlegelmilch, & Cui, 2017). As a way of cultural heritage transmission through generations, material commodities, specifically clothes, and jewelry, will be discovered as a scope of the study. It will be identified whether cultural symbols are part of the heritage or the companies' brand strategy. Torelli, Keh, and Chiu (2009) proposed several perspectives of brand management and brand identity creation. The authors focused on the relationship between the cultural symbolism of brands and consumers' cultural values. Products are sold not for their functions but for their meanings (Levy, 1959, cited in Torelli, Keh & Chiu, 2009; Awanis, Schlegelmilch, & Cui, 2017). It can be referred to as consumer culture theory (Stöttinger & Penz, 2011). Furthermore, Drahos, Johnsson, and Frankel (2012) also researched the branding of traditional cultural expressions. They raised a question about the commercialization of cultural symbols and the benefits of it. As they noted, indigenous symbols can be exploited for commercial purposes. Also, Zhanguzinova's et al. (2022), Kazakhstani scholar, explored the meaning of the Kazakh symbols on traditional costumes. They were created throughout the historical process under the influence of socio-cultural and political changes. Thus, it is not only about clothing but also about lifestyle, communication with each other, values, and spiritual beliefs. The authors presented six functions of an ornament. They transmit cultural meanings via semantic codes, signs, and symbols.

As it was discussed, culture is becoming commercialized. Awanis, Schlegelmilch, and Cui (2017) wrote that materialism is about collective-oriented interests, not only individuals' money, status, and possessions. Collective-oriented materialism talks about the essence of symbolic and social attributes (Awanis, Schlegelmilch, & Cui, 2017). The authors used culture and consumer theories to identify materialists' attitude towards this concept. As Torelli et al. (2012) asserted humans pay attention to the meanings. The authors' central argument is that values play a guiding role in people's lives. Thus, brands' new concepts are based on what is essential for people to promote their products. Torelli et al. (2012) identified 11 dimensions of human values, one of which is respecting the nation's traditions. Another essential point to consider is consumers' perception of global and local brands. Brand meaningfulness for customers can be observed by understanding consumer culture theory (CCT). Stöttinger and Penz (2011) agreed that socio-cultural practices and structures facilitate markets. Also, for customers, brands are not owned and controlled by companies. They are developed with customers' influence to create individual and collective identities.

### *Social identity*

Cultural symbolism is about values. Values are about individuals. Individuals are about social identity formation. The sense of belonging is something that humans seek for. Awanis, Schlegelmilch, and Cui (2017) stated that people aim to pursue a unique identity. Tribes and nations started to form as soon as individuals wanted to be a part of a community to feel closeness with someone. Identity is the way of talking about you and the community you belong to (Bhavnani & Phoenix, 1994, and Shotter & Gergen, 1989, cited in Billig 1995). Nation-construction starts from shared beliefs, culture, and language (Abashin, 2012; Billig, 1995). Kazakhstan is a post-Soviet country. Thus, its formation as a nation was also initially influenced by Soviet Union ideologies. After the collapse, countries received an opportunity to be self-determined. Relying on Abashin (2012), every Central Asian country aimed to rebuild the "titular" nation. For this purpose, they have applied to the colonial heritage and created traditional clothing, dances, rituals, art, cultural codes, etc. As a result, ethno-elements were more deeply embodied in individuals' lives than it was during the Soviet Union's period (Abashin, 2012). Also, Michael Billig (1995) introduced the concept of banal nationalism which refers to the daily habits and contributes to a nation-identity formation.

The national development process is always accompanied by external factors influencing the global scale. Thus, it is also vital to consider the globalization process. It is highly possible that it also affects cultural symbolism, referring to glocalization. Torelli and Cheng (2011) discussed “cultural” products that became representations of a nation’s cultural meanings and shared beliefs globally. They argued that consumers’ attitude towards local products exposes globalization’s effects on socio-cultural aspects (Torelli & Cheng, 2011). The trend of using cultural symbols by Kazakhstani local brands can also correlate with globalization. In addition, Torelli and Cheng (2011) mentioned that people use cultural symbols to show their salient identity to a nation. Promoting cultural identification via brands can also be one of the modern ways of nation-building.

### *Theoretical Framework*

This study focuses on fashion brands’ and customers’ attitude towards objectification of ethno-symbols. During the research cultural symbolism, consumerism, interactionism, and identity formation theories will be used as a fundament for analysis.

Culture is commonly perceived as a comprehensive system of meanings and social actions in contemporary sociology. Kłoskowska (1966) underlined Parsons’ thought that human actions are constituted of cultural meanings, which are fundamentals of the system. Using Anna Kłoskowska’s work culture’s role in the symbolization process will be identified. Moreover, the author observed different models that can be implemented in analyzing the cultural symbolism of Kazakhstani brands. Many authors agree that every culture is commercialized now. Baudrillard (1998) wrote about the consumer society guided by Marx and Durkheim’s ideas. He refers to consumption as collective behavior and enforced values of a system. Moreover, the commodification of culture was also highlighted in his work. In order to explain the customer behavior, Baudrillard’s theories will be used. Behind the demand for products, social status codes might be hidden (Baudrillard, 1998). Aligning with customer behavior and intentions, consumerism culture needs to learn to have a broader understanding of society. Arnould and Thompson (2005) spent twenty years investigating consumer culture theory (CCT). During the research, they looked at consumption from ideological, symbolic, and socio-cultural perspectives. Geertz (1983, cited in Arnould & Thompson, 2005) viewed CCT as an action,

experience, and meaning combined into the culture. An interesting point they mentioned is about globalization, which is also included in the scope of capstone research interest. Global brands often are experts in promoting their products. Their strategies make people want to buy. CCT reviewed this action as a way of transferring meanings and values into the advertisements (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Implementing CCT as a guiding theory for explaining consumer behavior might also be helpful during the data analysis interpretation.

The capstone project focuses on fashion brands' identity, particularly the Kazakhstan market's experience. The fashion industry can be about an individual's uniqueness, and it can be about collective perception. Kaiser, Nagasawa, and Hutton (1991) researched fashion changes through symbolic interactionism. Authors assert that fashion is a collective behavior influenced by symbolic cultural meanings. Moreover, the micro and macro levels of the relationship between cultural and symbolic ambivalences are clearly described (Kaiser, Nagasawa, & Hutton, 1991). By analyzing the authors' work, cultural symbols as tools of non-verbal communication for customers can be explained in the research project. There is a possibility that individuals want to express their identity and to belong to one community, in this case, to one culture. Therefore, symbolism's effect on group identification needs to be investigated. Munch (1954) presented the theory of collective norms, which is about the nature of the concept of "group norm". Norms in society related to its values. Values can be represented via symbols. As will be discussed in the capstone project, brands might be aimed to promote these values. Thanks to this, individuals have a sense of unity with one another (Munch 1954). Moreover, Munch (1954) stated that expressing individuality using socio-cultural symbols is a sign of having shared values and beliefs with the community.

## **Research Design**

This capstone research project is guided by a qualitative design. Methodology includes three methods: digital ethnography, one interview, and one focus group with 5 participants. 16 social media accounts of fashion brands, specifically Instagram, were analyzed during the digital ethnography. Only those which are available publicly and have open access were chosen. The purpose is to identify the narratives on their pages and what they are trying to transmit via published content. I focused mainly on photos, symbols, text, and language used to lead pages. It

helped me learn more about brands' identities and find the ones that fit my research project. In addition, audience reactions and comments were analyzed. Lacity and Janson's (1994) manual used to understand and interpret texts. This manual was fundamental for text analysis.

In the framework of the Capstone Project, individual and group interviews (i.e. focus group) were conducted. The types of questions were based on the semi-structured interview in order to not to lose control over the conversations as Atkinson (2017) suggested. One individual interview was conducted with the CEO of the Jewelry brand. Initially, one clothing and one jewelry company were chosen. However, due to the limitation of access and unwillingness to participate in the study, the interview was conducted with the second brand only.

The focus group was organized for the group interview. The focus group gathered five individuals who are potentially purchasing items with ethno-symbols. For recruitment purposes, random and snowball sampling were used. Participants were expected from different gender, race, or ethnic identities. Since the geographic location of participants did not play a role, there were two people who are studying in foreign countries now. The focus group was conducted online via Google Meet platform. The individual interview with the CEO was done in a private and safe meeting room.

Data analysis was divided into four stages. Firstly, all the interviews were transcribed via MaxQDA software. Then, key moments and ideas were highlighted during the open-coding. The concluding step was to combine all notes into similar topics and analyze them. For thematic analysis, MaxQDA was used. Final stage was to compare and interpret the data.

### **Ethical considerations**

During the interviews with the CEO, confidential information was not shared. Considering the brand and company privacy, the interviewee was asked to tell the information that is allowed and feel free to share. Any internal or sensitive information was not disclosed. Furthermore, all brand names were hidden. Regarding the focus group participants, they were asked to keep each other anonymous. Since, for some people, the topic of using ethno-symbols and nation-building might be sensitive, all participants were asked to respect each other's opinions and not interrupt. No potential harm was caused. In addition, all participants signed the written informed consent beforehand.

## **Findings**

### **Cultural Symbols as a Trend**

Understanding the relation of culture and society is vital to explain the role of symbols. All participants mentioned that items with ethno-symbols became quite popular in Kazakhstan. Adhering to selected symbols can be explained through socio-cultural symbolism. Munch (1954) stated that this sociological principle is connected to the group identification and patterning specific norms. The focus group participants mentioned that they feel uniqueness when they wear any item with cultural symbols. Therefore, it can be directly connected to their emotions and perception. Such an attitude is explained by socio-cultural symbolism. Munch (1954) agreed that having a positive attitude toward symbols and valuing them as sacred objects is a part of the phenomenon. Therefore, the popularity of Kazakh ethno-symbolic jewelry and clothing is related to the creation of particular patterns in a society and significance of symbols. Moreover, Awanis, Schlegelmilch, and Cui (2017) explained society's materialistic behavior from the perspective of valuing and mirroring cultural hallmarks.

"Cultural code can be worn anywhere in the world if it is beautiful," said the CEO of the jewelry brand. Also, he added that ethnic-style jewelry can be incorporated into modern outfits, which many admire. People buy those things that are stylish and in fashion. Changes in fashion can be analyzed and interpreted by Kaiser, Nagasawa, and Hutton's (1991) findings on symbolic interactionism and collective behavior. Authors argued that the fashion industry changes faster than it was in the past. There are a bunch of "fashionable" styles that appear at one time. Even though fashion is a dynamic collective change, the way how items are worn and stylized cannot be controlled. Kaiser, Nagasawa, and Hutton's (1991) noted:

"Cultural ambivalences are likely to be transformed into symbolically ambiguous displays of self" (p. 172).

From this we might assume that individuals can wear or produce any time item with their own modifications to some extent. In addition to the statement, the founder of Jewelry Brand also remarked:

"It can be expected that the purpose of wearing a particular cloth or accessory can be changed over time."

The question here is “who and how will investigate these changes?”. Usually, those people with new vision and creativity became those who set new trends among society. As it was found out during the individual interview, the CEO of the Brand practices visiting museums and historical sites to gain inspiration for new jewelry designs. One example that was discussed is:

“We are the first to launch body chains. Only after that, there was a wave of this accessory from other brands. The idea of its creation came to us when we were at the National Museum in Astana. The body chain was inspired by the horse sleds that Tomiris and other kings had. In the original version, they were made of leather, but we make them from metal.”

Analyzing such actions, we can say that people create products based on their history and culture, and then turn this into a trend among customers. Following these thoughts, Participant 3 of the focus group said that almost all trends are formed on social media and influence customer behavior. As it is known, social media platforms are the best tool to make anything viral. Also, Participant 3 added:

“I have seen a lot of *Get ready with me* videos and always had a desire to film them. The final inspiring factor was when I saw a girl creating an outfit in the national style. At that time, I did not have many jewelry or clothing pieces with Kazakh oyu, but I did my best and loved how everything was combined together. To mention, I used to wear traditional items only on special occasions, but now, I incorporated them in my daily life. So, I have more ethno-styled things, ha-ha”.

This can be an example of how a consumer-driven economy works. Guided by consumer culture theorists’ (CCT) analysis, we can observe the influence of the marketplace on consumer’s behavior (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). In the example of Participant 3, her choice of purchasing items with Kazakh oyu was affected by the trend on social media. To note, other participants also mentioned that they were influenced by social media platforms. Thus, let’s discuss the example of how a company promotes ethno-symbolic goods. Under one of the publications of Instagram account that was researched during the digital ethnography, it was written:

“Allow yourself to experience the national heritage with a sophisticated accent of modernity in every inspiring design of /*Brand name*/” (Appendix D, Picture 1).

Moreover, there were also various captions such as “trend of this year” and “ethnic/cultural/national style”. It shows that companies are trying to convey the audience that items with Kazakh cultural symbols are trendy, i.e. there is a demand. Sometimes, it might create an artificial image of popularity among customers, even if an item is not a “bestseller”. Thus, we see that it can directly influence consumer behavior. It is proven by consumption theory that not everything is bought for enjoyment, it simply can be forced upon society (Baudrillard, 1998). Additionally Baudrillard would say that the cultural “recycling” process is going on via the means of social media. Let’s have a look at this digital ethnography finding - Picture 2.1-2.2, Appendix D. In the first image we can see the girl in a street style look with the description “Basic outfit”. In the second picture the description changed to the “Ethno outfit” since the model is wearing ethnic jewelry now. These pictures are screenshots from one of the outfit change trends. Therefore, we can observe an example of how modernized look becomes “ethno”, and promoted as trendy in the publication’s description.

One focus group participant also highlighted that there is a difference in young and older generations' preferences and choices. The former pays more attention to fashion and aesthetics, whereas the latter might look for the meaning of every piece of clothing and accessories. However, it does not work all the time. Interestingly, some customers purchase items not because of symbols and designs but because of a brand. Thus, Participant 1 concluded that brands can translate cultural values via content and encourage people to wear clothes consciously. Discussing the relationship between brands and customers, we observe traits of mutual influence on each other's behavior and attitudes.

We can see how trends can be easily spread and affect individuals’ attitudes. In the case of Kazakh cultural symbols, there is also a possibility of wearing them just because they are trendy and not knowing their meaning can cause misconceptions. We will talk more about symbols’ meaning for potential customers in the section “Brands’ Values Vs. Customers’ Values”.

## **Brand Identity**

Brand identity is an interesting concept that can represent a variety of values. Torelli et al. (2012) stated that building brand identity based on human values is a new approach. Authors also added that marketers work on brand representation based on individual and collective values of

the local marketplace. Thus, they research and analyze culture in detail to localize promotional campaigns and gain the audience's attention. Combining visual appeal, culture and history of a local market results in transferring human values and successful media campaigns (Torelli et al., 2012) . Not just selling for commercial purposes but having meaning. During the interview, the ethno-jewelry Brand's founder mentioned several times that he has specific requirements for the brand's representation and values. For example, he said:

"When it comes to photoshoots, every detail is important. We pay attention to models' appearance. For example, we try to find girls with green or blue eyes as they probably were in our ancestors. Also, we have boys with tattoos, which refers to a more modernized image. We try to combine traditions and culture with modern values. In our content, we can present different traditions and use only natural fabrics such as cotton, leather, and linen to show the nature of Kazakh culture."

It was an interesting point regarding the model's appearance with blue or green eyes. However, a Kazakh historian said that it is a myth that most of the people believe in (Büyenbay, 2018). As anthropologist Zhambyl Artyqbayev said we will never be able to identify the color of eyes and hair. Therefore, the CEO's understanding of Kazakh ancestors' visual appearance is a misconception based on a myth. Even so, from his answer we can underline the attitude to show and translate values from a cultural and historical perspective. Another example that supports this approach was obtained during the analysis of the Brand's Instagram page. We can take a look at their description under one of the posts (Appendix D, Picture 3). It is said:

"Culture must develop and undergo changes. These are the functions of our brand. We recycle old, familiar designs of Kazakh national jewelry into something new and unique, into jewelry that can be worn in everyday life without giving up your culture and roots."

From these findings, we can notice key principles of identity formation that Brand is guided by. We see that it has a clear vision of promoting and transmitting cultural values among its audience. Moreover, reimagination of Kazakh culture can also be noted here. Promoting Kazakh traditions and beliefs is a part of transmitting intangible cultural heritage (You & Hardwick, 2020). If jewelry and clothing with ethno-symbols are material heritage of a nation, their nature and meanings behind is intangible heritage that can be transferred through generations.

In addition, this jewelry Brand's identity also depends on the language. The founder mentioned that they initially led an Instagram account only in Russian, even though he understood the necessity of the Kazakh language. Considering the fact that he is mixed-blooded, was raised mainly using the Russian language, and did not know Kazakh language perfectly, he was afraid to misuse words/phrases. However, after some time, the brand was blamed and bullied. It happened right after the situation with Chocofood company regarding the non-usage of Kazakh language. In a few words, the founder of the Chocofamily Holding talked about nationalism when Kazakhs do not want to lead conversations in Russian language (Kalmurat, 2022). According to the jewelry Brand's founder, a bunch of businesses were pressured and checked by the general public regarding the use of Kazakh language. The CEO hired a professional translator who helped run the company's account in Kazakh. As a result, he highlighted:

“In fact, because we started maintaining an account in Kazakh, we have added a local Kazakh-speaking audience. Therefore, I believe that the Kazakh language is necessary, especially in business in Kazakhstan.”

From this example, we can see the localization of brand identity that was proposed by Torelli et al. (2012). It is another case that supports the approach of successful adaptation to local language and values. Therefore, it can be stated that localization of a brand is not only useful for adhering to society's values but also it is vital for commercial success.

Generally, if we look at a brand's Instagram page, patterns, translated Kazakh cultural values, and uniqueness can be observed (Appendix D, pictures 3 and 5). In comparison, another brand's page looks chaotic and too commercialized by trendy content (Appendix D, pictures 4 and 6). One of the examples from the second brand's page is presenting ethno-jewelry in the theme of “Barbie world”, which was popular at the time of publication. Unfortunately, due to the limitation of access, we cannot say which one is more successful from the entrepreneurship and finance aspects. However, the attempt to localize or globalize their content can be clearly distinguished.

Another example that is going to be discussed is Haori with Kazakh symbolics. Haori is a Japanese traditional clothing item with cultural meaning behind. Nowadays, it is also modernized and can be incorporated into daily outfits. Historically, its purpose was to protect warriors from cold weather, but over time it began to be worn by geisha as a fashionable thing and popularized

(Lealand and Esa, 2022). During digital ethnography, an interesting approach to fashion clothing was observed. Let's have a look at the Picture 7 in the Appendix D. We can see how Japanese haori is stylized with Kazakh oyu. It is a sign of adaptation to local culture. Moreover, we can see that it is a sign of globalization of Japanese culture. By adapting another culture's item, this brand is trying to promote Kazakh stylized fashion clothing. Thus, we can see the localization traces via global trends, intertwining of two cultures, and how it creates brand's positioning. In this case, as Torelli and Cheng (2011) researched, cultural contamination during the globalization process can be one of the threats. Therefore, it is important to create the right brand positioning, which will clearly demonstrate the transmission of values so that potential consumers do not perceive it as a threat.

The following account clearly indicates their mission and values via post description. I want to draw your attention to these lines from Picture 8 (Appendix D):

“It is a synthesis of our cultural codes and modern visual language.”

“High-quality luxury fabrics, attention to every detail, the ability to make the national stylish and modern is what distinguishes our brand from others.”

“All our products were created in Kazakhstan with a reverent and attentive attitude to our culture, history and identity.”

Reading this description, we can clearly see that this brand identifies itself as a representation of modern Kazakh fashion. Their items inherit the cultural code of a Kazakh nation which make them unique from others as the brand states.

The next company's Instagram account shows a clear transmission of Kazakh traditional and cultural values via its content as the previous Jewelry Brand. Let's have a look at their heading (Appendix D, Picture 9):

“Where the soul meets the steppe”; “Ethnic Jewelry”; “Kazakh identity.”

Furthermore, their publications seem to be unique (Appendix D, Pictures 10.1-10.6). They try to depict ethno-symbols not only through their items, but also through picture details (ex. nail design, musical instrument, ceramic vessel). The majority of post descriptions are about Kazakh culture and traditions. They do not just sell their jewelry but also introduce the audience to cultural values and symbols. In addition, their main color palette symbolizes earth, water, fire and air. All of these work towards building their brand identity. We can notice that the main

colors that they use are pastel beige/yellow and blue. Now, let's look at the symbolic meanings of these colors in Kazakh culture. Sarmanbetova and Mandal (2019) researched that yellowish color's main meaning is endless movement and life. The blue color is associated with sky and freedom that results in higher power. Understanding the meaning of colors, we can assume that this Instagram account wanted to translate the continuous life and power of Kazakh culture. Moreover, keeping in mind depicted details, the richness of culture is also presented to the audience. Combination of all these elements builds one unique brand identity and positioning.

### **Brands' Values Vs. Customers' Values**

“People buy products not only for what they do, but also for what the product means; thus, brands can be symbols that become part of the individual identities of consumers.” (Levy 1959 in Torelli, Keh & Chiu, 2010, p. 114).

This excerpt from Levy's saying explains how and why values are created. Sometimes people might not realize how brand and product values influence their choice to purchase or not. The founder of the brand and focus group participants agreed that it is essential to understand the meaning and nature of what you are buying. Knowing the uniqueness and nature of cultural symbols can help understand the world and the connections between people better, as Zhanguzinova et al. (2022) also discussed. Focus group participants had the same opinion; however Participant 4 mentioned:

“Unfortunately, following trending things, people tend to forget about the meaning and value of the thing they are buying. It seems to me that buying a trending item is often an emotional and impulsive purchase for individuals, at least I noticed this with my friends. Therefore, people do not go into details of the patterns and symbols they wear. I have recently started to take an interest in this topic and learned that most of the patterns that we see on the market are actually used for other purposes.”

Analyzing this customer behavior, we might say that for them it is not always crucial to know the meanings of symbols. At the same time, one of the Jewelry Brand's values is sharing history and traditions. Even the brand itself was built and inspired by one of the Kazakh traditions. Also, the CEO highlighted that history and creativity in the modern world can create the uniqueness of a product. All of these create value of the commodity. Therefore, the product is perceived as consumption power in the cycle of the system of need and production (Baudrillard,

1998). It is highly possible that customers' purchases become meaningless if the system of production (in this case brands) does not create enjoyment and values around the product. By looking at how the brand presents itself to the consumer, we can determine whether the product is being sold for pleasure or it is simply imposed for commercial purposes.

Let's discuss the case when ethno-symbols are incorporated into the trendy corsets. Picture 11 (Appendix D) is an example of such corsets. Audience reaction is divided into two. Some of them said that it is beautiful and they would like to buy them. However, the second group of people do not understand the purpose and they are offended. On the Picture 12 (Appendix D), we can look at one of comments which says:

“They say that it is an ethnic style, they say that they have Kazakh ornaments. This is wrong. Kazakh girls have never shown their breasts. On the contrary, these corsets are designed to emphasize the shape of the breast. Therefore, something that does not belong to an ethno style cannot be called that. Do not mislead the youth.”

In addition to this, we can take a look at Picture 13 in Appendix D. People notice that some clothing and jewelry items do not belong to Kazakh culture, but they are still promoted as ethno-styled, and customers purchase them. We can notice the commentator's vivid perplexity. We also want to add that the ornaments on such corsets are not always Kazakh. In addition to this, Participant 1 underlined that she was interested in the similar corset. However, when she found out that it depicted oyu is not Kazakh, even though it was advertised as such, she refused to make a purchase. She stated that the trend for ethno-styled corsets began from the clothing brand located in Kyrgyzstan and the ornaments on corsets are probably also Kyrgyz ones. The problem here is that some brands are misleading their potential clients. Moreover, values that they translate and values that customers have might be different. It also might cause incongruity of expectation and reality. Even though trendy items are forced to be bought (which continues the consumerism chain), there are still people who have their own agency to decide.

Another Instagram page that was analyzed during the digital ethnography, represents how brand values can be translated to customers. In this case, the company clearly shows what they are trying to say by selling clothing items with Kazakh symbols. Pictures 14.1-3 (Appendix D) uses such phrases as “connection with history and its endless power”, “the beauty of nation and its traditions”, and “connection between you and your ancestors”. By using such words the

brand is trying to convey the goods' meaning to customers which also has an effect on customers' attitude and behavior.

Talking about customers' values, main purchasing factors were identified: price, aesthetic design, quality, and meaning. All of them mentioned that design is essential but should not be the only criterion. Participants 1 and 4 shared that they are investigating the nature of Kazakh cultural symbols. They have noticed that many brands use symbols without knowing their meaning as in the case with corsets. Even though companies promote themselves as Kazakh-styled, the symbols on their products are not entirely Kazakh; they assume this happened because many raw materials for jewelry and fabrics for clothes with various ornaments entered the markets. After all, there was a demand. Accordingly, many began to buy it without understanding what it could mean and its purpose. Participant 2 said:

“If we take the example of a regular T-shirt and a similar T-shirt, but with a pattern. For me personally, it is also influenced by the factor of what kind of pattern or what kind of meaning there is. It happens that the clothes are just there, so to speak, put in order for it to be simple, so that perhaps all people would buy. I'm looking more at the meaning. Why is there a certain pattern, for what, what does it mean? And then if something is really interesting, then I focus more on the meaning and then buy.”

During the focus group discussion participants agreed that even though symbolic meaning is important, it will not be listed as a prior criteria among customers.

In the cycle of endless consumerism, it is challenging to give one exact answer that will explain all brands' and customers' attitude. By analyzing all findings, we can say that there are two types of companies: those who actively engage in the promotion of cultural values, and those who are looking for financial benefits via combination of modern trends and globalization.

### **Affordability of Jewelry and Clothes with Kazakh Ethno-symbols**

Findings obtained that price is one of the major concerns for customers. Awanis, Schlegelmilch, and Cui (2017) talked about three components of materialistic consumerism; they are social, price, and brand. These three referents explain the influence of society and marketing on the level of materialistic consumption. The CEO of Jewelry brand shared a bit information about their pricing policy:

“Our pricing policy is built in a way so that it is available to many, because, probably, our brand is more aimed at people from 16 years old. The cheapest item in our catalog is only 1.000 tg. If we talk about the average price for items is 5.000 tg. We suppose that our jewelry is affordable for everyone. We want everyone to be able to buy items with Kazakh symbols. This is the way we promote culture among society. ”

From this example, we see that there are affordable prices on the market. However, other examples show that there are items with higher than average prices. Common justification for this was discussed during the focus group. From the potential customers’ point of view (i.e. focus group participants), manufacturing, rent of premises, and salary of employees require a lot of investments and expenses. All of the participants also highlighted the importance of ratio between price and quality. Participant 2 said:

"Unfortunately, not all customers know the value of items made in Kazakhstan. I have worked in a company that manufactures high-quality clothes. Prices were a bit higher than the average. The reason was the complex production process since it is not developed in Kazakhstan yet."

Focus group was asked if they were willing to spend more money on clothes and jewelry with cultural symbols. Findings were interesting. Participant 5 mentioned the "pink tax" when “girl” products are more expensive than “boy” products but concerning cultural commodities. He highlighted that items labeled as “cultural” often have higher prices. So, the participant's answer was "probably, no". At the same time, Participant 3 highlighted that she is not ready to spend a lot of money on clothing items but can spend it on valuable jewelry since it can be preserved and gifted to the next generations. Participant 4 shared her principles and importance of price during the jewelry and clothing shopping:

“Yes, but depending on the quality. Here, conditionally, for example, I would give for */Brand name/*. Well, of course, now their prices have increased very much over the past year, But the prices a year ago were just perfect. And there's a 40.000 tg sweatshirt, a cool sweater, a cardigan that they had for 60.000 tg, I think I'd love to take it now. Now they are already around 100.000 tg. I probably would not have taken it here, because this is not the price segment that I can afford in terms of jewelry. There is no such thing in terms of jewelry. Because there are ordinary earrings that you can buy for 5.000, and there are

for 40.000 tg. And there will already be a big difference. Therefore, I would love to take both of them.”

The answers of all participants differed when the price discussion began. Accordingly, we can say that the cost of a good is a very subjective factor, which is influenced by an individual's perception and social status.

Analyzing people's comments under the clothing brand's post, it can be observed that people do not understand the pricing policy (Appendix D, Picture 15). They say:

“It's not cheap, what kind of thing is it anyway”;

“Is patriotism false propaganda, just business? If not, then you need to lower the price”;

“The sum seems to show an extra 0, will you change it?”

From their perspective, the brand works only for business purposes, not promoting cultural identity. Such behavior can be analyzed using Baudrillard's (1988) concepts of commodification and consumerism. Another example of cultural commercialization can be seen by promoting installment plans in order to purchase items. On Picture 16 (Appendix D), we can notice “Kaspi: 0-0-24” program’s label on every post. It means that a potential customer can buy in installments for 24 months which seems to be advantageous if the cost of products is higher than the average on the market.

### **Self-identity as a Tool of Nonverbal Communication**

N. Gist:

“When social interaction involves the transmission of meanings through the use of symbols, it is known as communication.” (Kłoskowska, 1966, p. 14)

All findings show that wearing jewelry and clothing with Kazakh ethno-symbols provide a sense of individuality. Focus group participants highlighted that they feel the uniqueness of such items, and this helps to express themselves. Participant 5 stated:

“The tendency is just to show that, let's say, you are a Kazakh boy or a Kazakh girl. To show your dynamics through the jewelry and clothes. That is, to show your self-identity.”

Two focus group participants are currently studying abroad. They mentioned that sometimes they wore things with cultural symbols to show others that they were Kazakhs. It helped them to connect with new people in a new country. Participant 4 shared a story when she was wearing a T-shirt with red-colored oyu and the text “I am a Kazakh girl”:

“I remembered this story. I arrived in Budapest. I was wearing my T-shirt, and there are animals from the Red Book painted on it. And they are just so red. I didn't think at all that when you wear clothes, you forget that they are painted for you. I am on the subway, I notice some guys staring at me. I understand that they are from Central Asia. They were just staring at me, and it made me uncomfortable. I forgot that I have the text "I am Kazakh" on my chest. Then after a while, they came and asked me me in Russian:

- Are you a Kazakh?

I answered yes. After that, they started to wonder what I was doing here. When I came out, I passed by some kind of glass building that was illuminated. I only realized later that I was wearing this white T-shirt with the Kazakh symbols and oyu. It was only later that I realized why some adult men were looking at me and trying to talk.”

This design immediately caught the attention of other Kazakhstani students who then approached her to get to know her. Such behavior can be a sign of a nonverbal communication (Kaiser, Nagasawa, & Hutton, 1991). Therefore, wearing a cultural code can attract the attention of people from the same culture or nationality, which can lead to friendship and communication. The focus group Participant 2 said:

"Self-identification is uniqueness, and I want to show it by belonging to a particular culture."

The Brand founder during the individual interview mentioned that his customers purchase unique accessories to express themselves. Thus, cultural code is worn to grab people's attention and present your individuality. Furthermore, during digital ethnography, patterns of using words like “identification”, “be unique”, and “self-determination” were observed to sell clothes and jewelry.

## **The Building of National Identity**

The findings of this section of the research can be divided into two main groups:

- Historical context;
- Identification of national/cultural belonging and patriotism.

During the individual and group interviews, participants were asked to share their opinions on why the tendency to use cultural symbols has appeared. More than half of them

connected their answers with the historical background of Kazakhs. Participants 1 and 2 talked about a repressed and colonized nation that is now willing to showcase their "true" identity.

“Probably, there will be more about the fact that if you look at it, then this trend is, in principle, going on among almost all people and nations. Well, in our time, in these years, those people who were once repressed, or who were robbed of this dynamic. That is, in addition to Central Asia, there is now a very strong trend towards more awareness of the indigenous population of America. They are now trying to get tattoos on their faces, to show their national jewelry, which is somehow similar. And if you look at this trend, then, in principle, people who were once repressed have such a desire to identify themselves. And, for example, conditionally white people who are in Europe and so on, they do not have such ethics. More precisely, the desire to be associated with their indigenous people.” (Participant 2)

During this conversation Kazakh's history, repression and life during the Soviet Union was discussed. Analyzing their perspectives we can say that currently there is a tendency of moving toward reimagination of Kazakh culture and strengthening the sense of belonging to a nation. On the Picture 14.1 (Appendix D), brand states:

“We foster love for the nation through the beauty of our products.”

It depicts that brands are also trying to build a stronger sense of belonging. People are trying to maintain culture and symbols. Additionally, during the analysis of Instagram pages of different clothing and jewelry brands', the admiration of "truly Kazakh" boys or girls was observed in comment sections (Appendix D, Pictures 17-19). As Abashin (2012) claimed, every Central Asian country aimed to rebuild the "titular" nation. Participant 4 added that most young adults are eager to identify with the indigenous people and show it through clothing and jewelry. The CEO of the Brand noticed that the younger generation wants to be closer to their roots, which is why they tend to purchase things with cultural symbols. Furthermore, he added:

“This willingness did not come because of serious conflict or intervention of politics. Our people do it just because they want to. For example, Ukrainian people have hard times, and only now do they show their belonging to language, culture, and country.”

Thus, we can assume that individuals in Kazakhstan show their love of their country and culture without "solid" reason. Moreover, as we noticed they do it on a daily basis. We can refer to this as an act of banal nationalism that was proposed by Billig (1995). Wearing jewelry and clothes

with cultural symbols is a part of building national identity via daily actions, shared beliefs and values.

Findings of this Capstone research showed that reimagination of Kazakh culture and the sense of belonging to a nation is getting stronger. Since it was concluded that jewelry and clothing items are part of the communication with individuals, they also help to transmit the idea of nation-building.

## **Conclusion**

By analyzing cultural symbolism among Kazakhstani fashion brands, there is no doubt that there are intertwining patterns between consumer behavior, brand identity, and cultural values. This interplay is not only about trends and popularity caused by businesses on social media platforms but also about historical roots, cultural heritage and significance among people. Brands play a vital role in building narrative around items they are selling. They promote Kazakh authenticity by using cultural symbols and values. Therefore, it directly affects consumer consumption and behavior. Even though some brands create their identity around combining cultural and modern values, there are brands who work only to earn money without thinking about deeper cultural meanings. The same with customers. It resulted that the majority prioritized affordability and aesthetics over the meanings.

Another key finding is that jewelry and clothes with cultural symbols are used as tools for nonverbal communication, creating self- and national identity. It helps to facilitate relationships between people and gives a sense of belonging to the Kazakh community. Moreover, globalization and historical context are also one of the factors that caused modernization of Kazakh symbols.

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## **Appendix A.** Written consent form sample

**Introduction.** You are invited to participate in a research study entitled “*Cultural symbolism of Fashion Brands in Kazakhstan*”.

**Procedures.** The purpose of this research is to analyze how cultural symbolism is represented among local brands in the Kazakhstani market. Additionally, it will be studied how new companies create their brand identity and what exactly they are guided by. I will delve into whether cultural symbolism is a marketing tool for companies and a non-verbal communication tool for customers. The methods used will involve digital ethnography, interviews, and the focus group with individuals. You will be asked to participate in the individual interview related to the study and invited to answer questions. The individual interview is expected to take approximately up to 45 minutes to complete.

**Risks.** The researcher does not anticipate any risks associated with participating in the study.

**Benefits.** The expected benefits of this research are that it will help to learn more about cultural symbolism and its influence on businesses development. Moreover, the nature of using ethno-symbolics might be useful for creating brand strategies. In addition, customer behavior, consumerism, and globalization influence will be analyzed.

**Compensation.** No tangible compensation will be given. A copy of the research results will be available at the conclusion of the study in the form of the web Atlas which will contain information about the sites and from interviews as well as articles in local and international journals.

**Confidentiality & Privacy.** Any information that is obtained during this study will be kept confidential to the full extent possible. Only information that you are allowed to share about your company will be used. All efforts, within reason, will be made to keep your personal information in your research record confidential but total confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. By total confidentiality, we mean that the real names, workplaces, and other personal information of the informant would be hidden and not used in future publications, reports in other open-access resources.

To the extent possible pseudonyms will be used. Access to the digital audio files of the interviews will be limited to the researcher. The identifying information will be kept separately from the audio and transcripts of the interviews. All audio files, written materials and transcripts will remain the property of the research team and will not be used for other purposes without your additional permission. The audio files will be destroyed if the consultant withdraws and requests their destruction.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study.** Participation in this study is strictly voluntary, and if agreement to participation is given, it can be withdrawn at any time without prejudice.

**Points of Contact.** It is understood that should any questions or comments arise regarding this project, or a research related injury is received, the Principal Investigator, *Adiyelya Bekbayeva*, +7 771 831 27 95, *adiyelya.bekbayeva@nu.edu.kz* should be contacted. Any other questions or concerns may be addressed to the Nazarbayev University Institutional Research Ethics Committee, *sshirec@nu.edu.kz*.

**Statement of Consent.**

I, \_\_\_\_\_,

Give my voluntary consent to participate in this study.

The researchers clearly explained to me the background information and objectives of the study and what my participation in this study involves.

I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary. I can at any time and without giving any reasons withdraw my consent, and this will not have any negative consequences for myself.

I understand that the information collected during this study will be treated confidentially.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher: Adiyelya Bekbayeva

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix B. Individual interview questions**

1. Can you please tell me more about your company?
2. How did you create your company and brand identity?
  - Do you have specific requirements for branding?
3. Who or what inspired you to use cultural symbolics?
  - Can you describe the process of aligning your brand with cultural symbols to resonate with the target audience?
4. What is an intended message to deliver to your customers via your products?
5. In your opinion, how do customers perceive products with ethno-symbols?
  - What are their motivations to buy?
  - What are their first reactions and comments about your product?
6. How has your brand evolved its approach to cultural symbolism based on past experiences or changing market dynamics?
  - Have you considered changing how you present your company on the market?
  - What are the main languages you use on your social media?
7. When/In which seasons do you have the higher sales rate?
  - What are the reasons for that?
8. What is the average cost of your products?
9. Did you encounter challenges implementing ethno-symbols into the company's brand identity?

## **Appendix C. Focus group questions**

1. What are your thoughts about clothes and/or jewelry with cultural symbols?
  - Do you have such items?
  - Do you feel connected to your culture when you are wearing them?
2. How do cultural symbols influence your perception of the product?
3. In your opinion, what are customers' motivations for buying ethno-symbolic items?
4. Is it essential for you to have that product authentically represent the nation's culture?
5. How much do current fashion or cultural trends influence your decision to purchase items with cultural symbols?

- To what extent does the influence of friends or social circles impact your purchase of items with cultural symbols?

- Have you ever purchased such items to seek social validation or belonging?

6. Are you more drawn to products with cultural symbols during certain seasons or trends?

7. Does the price of culturally symbolic items influence your buying decision?

- If yes, what is your price range for buying such items?

8. Does your awareness of a product's cultural background influence your buying decision?

9. What should brands do to meet consumers' expectations regarding cultural symbolism in their products?

## Appendix D. Digital ethnography images/findings

Позвольте себе ощутить национальное наследие  
с утонченным акцентом современности в каждом  
вдохновляющем дизайне

Picture 1.



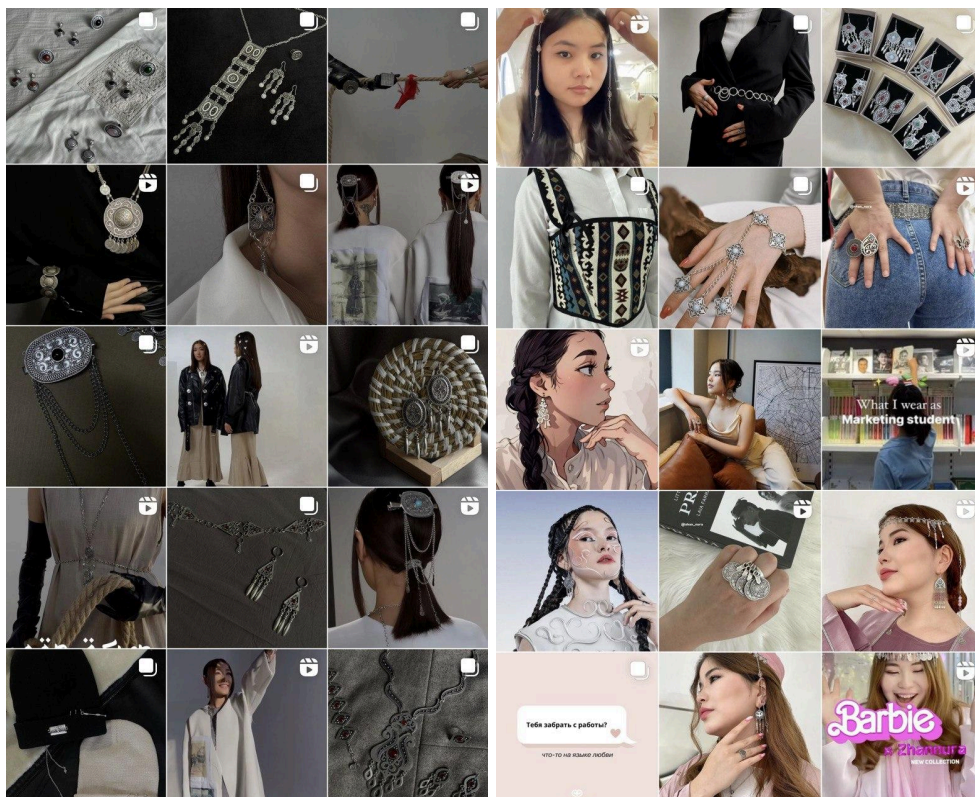
Picture 2.1

Picture 2.2

Мәдениет үнемі дамып, өзгеріп, жетіліп отыруы тиіс. Біздің бренд осы мақсатқа қызмет етеді.

Біз қазақтың ұлттық әшекейлерінің ертеректе қалыптасқан үйреншікті дизайнын жаңа, ерекше қылып жасап шығарамыз. Мұндай әшекейлерді өз мәдениетің мен тамырыңа құрмет көрсете отырып, күнделікті өмірде тағып жүруге болады.

Picture 3.



Picture 3.

Picture 4.

Ұлттық әшекейлер / Национальные Украшения | Онлайн Clothing (Brand) Өткеннен болашаққа / Из прошлого в будущее . Астана | Қазақстанның барлық қалаларына жеткіземіз / Доставка по КЗ| Обмена и Возврата нет/ Заказы в DM See Translation

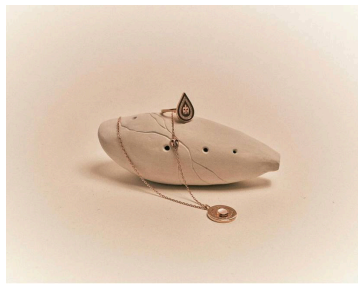
Picture 5.

этно | стиль | украшения | такия

Алматы - Астана | Атырау - онлайн Актау - Доставка по РК всему миру 🌐 Есть опт Заказать прямо сейчас 📩 See Translation

Picture 6.





215 likes

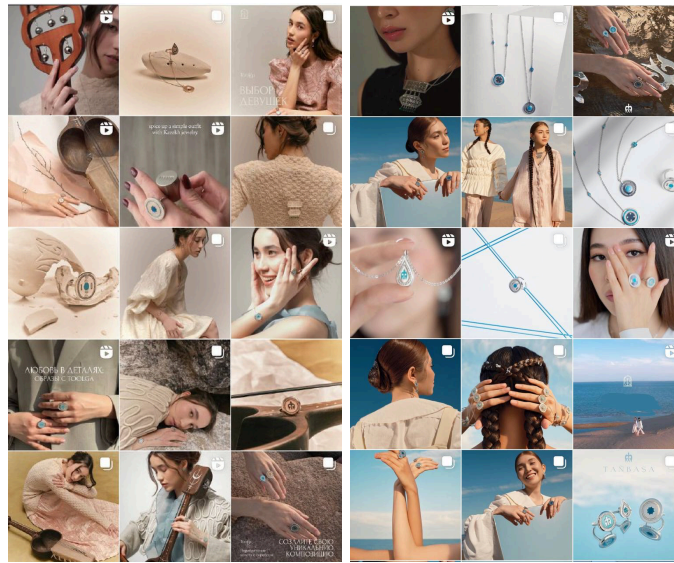
Қазақтар сазсырнайды төрт элементтің бейнесі деп атайды: жер, су, от және ауа ✨

Шебер құралды саздан мүсіндейді — ол жердің сыйы, қолдарын суға батырады, пішінін отпен күйдіреді, ал ойнаған кезде жел әні туындайды 🎶

+

Сазсырнай қазақша называють воплощением четырех стихий: земли, воды, огня и воздуха ✨

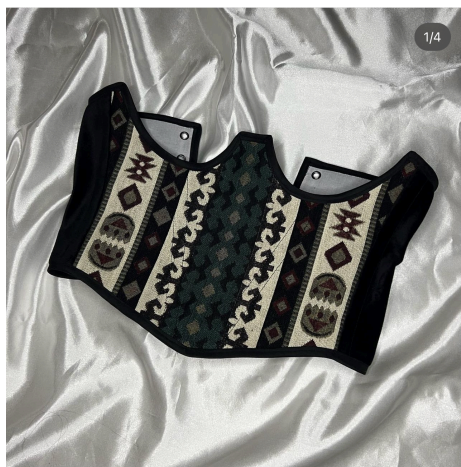
Мастер лепит инструмент из глины — дара земли, руки смачивает в воде, форму обжигает пламенем, а при игре рождается песня ветра 🎶



Picture 10.4.

Picture 10.5.

Picture 10.6.



Picture 11.



a

a 21w

Бастарына келгендерінді этно стиль деп айтабересіндер, айтеуір қазақша арнамент бар үой деп. Бұларын дұрыс емес. Қазақтардың қыздары ешқашан кеуделерін адіі көрсетпеген. Ал бул корсеттерің керісіңше, кеуденің формасын көрсету үшің жасалған . Сондықтан , этностилге жатпайтын нәрсені олай атауға болмайды. Жастарды адастырмандар.

[Reply](#) [See translation](#)

Picture 12.



b

n 21w · ❤️ by author

Бастағы моншақ қазақтардікі емес қо

[1 like](#) [Reply](#) [See translation](#)

Picture 13.

## КТО МЫ?

- казахстанский онлайн-магазин национальных тканевых изделий.

Мы развиваем любовь к нации через красоту наших изделий.



## НАШИ ЦЕННОСТИ

Родина - мы выражаем свою любовь к Родине путем создания нового национального стиля одежды

Красота - наши изделия раскрывают красоту нации и ее традиций

Традиции - опыт нашего народа это бесценный дар, наши изделия - окно между вами и вашими предками



## НАШИ ИЗДЕЛИЯ

Проявляя любовь при создании нашей продукции, мы стараемся передать ее Вам - нашему народу

Наши изделия - соприкосновение со своей историей и ее бесконечной силой

Шапаны, «абайки», платья и многое другое Вы найдете на нашем аккаунте.

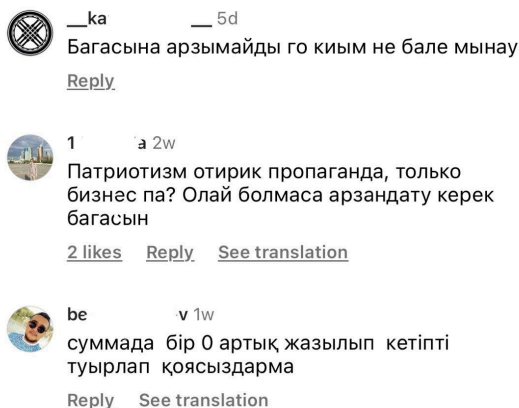
Для индивидуального заказа - переходите в direct



Picture 14.1.

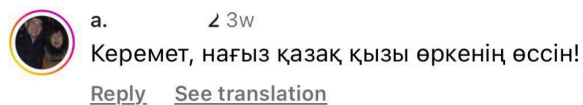
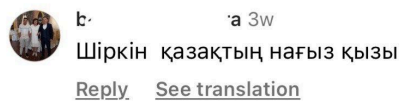
Picture 14.2.

Picture 14.3.



Picture 15.

Picture 16.



Picture 17.

Picture 18.



Picture 19.