Crafting Up a Narrative: An Ethnographic Study of Fair Trade Marketing Practices and the Representation of Female Handicraft Producers

Jessica Bradley
University of Denver

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Abstract
Unlike the exploitative supply chains that exist under neoliberal globalization, where the social conditions of their supply chain are largely hidden; fair trade attempts to reveal the conditions of their supply chains through transparent marketing practices. Transparency is often presented in the form of storytelling wherein fair trade organizations (FTOs) reveal intimate details of the artisans they partner with to educate consumers on the interrelations of their product supply chains. I wanted to explore the implications of sharing artisan stories to further sales of the handicrafts they produced. How does sharing intimate stories of artisans formulate the perceptions Western consumers have upon artisan communities and the regions or countries in which they live? Further, how does storytelling play a role in Western consumers’ decisions to purchase handicrafts? I analyzed the marketing materials and interviewed participants from four FTOs: Ti-a Woven Goods, Fair Anita, Zeal living, and Ten Thousand Villages. My goal was to gain insight into how they incorporated storytelling, primarily through digital marketing, as a means of educating consumers.

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Crafting up a Narrative:
An Ethnographic Study of Fair Trade Marketing Practices and the Representation of Female Handicraft Producers

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of the College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
University of Denver

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Jessica Bradley
June 2022
Advisor: Dr. Kelly Fayard, Ph.D
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Abstract

Unlike the exploitative supply chains that exist under neoliberal globalization, where the social conditions of their supply chain are largely hidden; fair trade attempts to reveal the conditions of their supply chains through transparent marketing practices. Transparency is often presented in the form of storytelling wherein fair trade organizations (FTOs) reveal intimate details of the artisans they partner with to educate consumers on the interrelations of their product supply chains. I wanted to explore the implications of sharing artisan stories to further sales of the handicrafts they produced. How does sharing intimate stories of artisans formulate the perceptions Western consumers have upon artisan communities and the regions or countries in which they live? Further, how does storytelling play a role in Western consumers’ decisions to purchase handicrafts? I analyzed the marketing materials and interviewed participants from four FTOs: Ti-a Woven Goods, Fair Anita, Zeal living, and Ten Thousand Villages. My goal was to gain insight into how they incorporated storytelling, primarily through digital marketing, as a means of educating consumers.
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To my mom, thank you for always supporting my travels and endeavors, which have led me to this point. Thank you Kaitlin for always checking up on me and overall being my best friend and sister. Thank you too, Mike. I am forever grateful for the support of my family.

To Poptart, I love you. You are the best dog in the world.

Finally, to Aaron, I am here because of you. When I moved to Chicago I had lost all desire to become an anthropologist. I decided to try again and when I told you, the excitement and faith you had in me, made me believe it for myself. I was grateful for your friendship then and I am grateful for your love now. Thank you for moving across the country with me in a pickup truck and starting a new experience in Denver. I am very sorry that there was in fact a global pandemic and I ended up going to school online. I love you and my home is wherever you are.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

When we share stories of one another, we become closer. We reveal details of our lives to others in the hopes of them understanding us just a little bit more. Our stories are ours to share, to keep, or to selectively choose to whom we reveal our stories. However, what happens when a person’s history— their successes, their traumas, their joys, their shortcomings, and their deeply personal narratives— become intimately tied to their income? Within the fair trade social movement, transparent marketing practices are commonly used to educate consumers on the interrelations of their product supply chains. Transparency is often presented in the form of storytelling as a means of re-embedding cultural, social, and economic significance to increase sales. However, while fair trade promotes the practice of transparent marketing, the realities of storytelling are oftentimes misleading and have negative consequences. I wanted to explore the implications of sharing artisan stories via the fair trade network to further sales of handicrafts to consumers. How does sharing intimate stories of artisans formulate the perceptions Western consumers have upon artisan communities and the regions or countries in which they live?

As a senior in college, I explored how Western consumption of Zulu beadwork impacted the socio-economic lives of artisans who produced them. At the time, I focused
on the movement of beadwork and the purchasing behaviors of Western tourists in local settings. As years passed, I became further interested in the movement of handicrafts across international settings. However, what interested me the most was not the handicraft itself, but the way marketing played a significant role in our decision to purchase those handicrafts.

Once I became aware of the various handicrafts sold at craft markets, souvenir shops, museum gift stores, and boutiques, I began to notice how often these crafts came with a story card attached. The story card often displayed an image of the artisan or artisan group along with a brief description. I wanted to explore the impact of these story cards and why they were even needed in the first place. However, I also wanted to explore not just story cards but storytelling overall. How did organizations use stories to persuade consumers to purchase their goods? I focused my attention on handicrafts produced and sold through fair trade networks. Fair trade organizations (FTOs) in the global North establish direct trading relations with artisans primarily living in marginalized communities in regions of the global South. The fair trade social movement is perhaps the largest modern consumer movement which aims to economically, and often socially, improve the lives of marginalized producers through ethical and sustainable trade relationships. While their intention is to remain as transparent as possible, FTOs use of storytelling may reinforce negative stereotypes and perceptions towards fair trade artisans.
The commodification of stories is certainly not limited to fair trade. Storytelling, whether in the form of sharing success stories or stories of poverty and trauma, has been ubiquitous throughout mission-driven enterprises, charitable organizations, and development aid agencies. Stories are shared as a means of encouraging a consumer into donating money to a cause or into purchasing an item, often at a higher price than conventional, mass-produced products. In this way, stories are commodified because they add economic and symbolic value to a product that may not have been there without it.

Fair trade marketing differs from mainstream marketing in that it attempts to reveal all aspects of their supply chains as a means of maintaining transparency with their consumers. Their goal is to create human connections between producer and consumer despite geographic distance. However, story sharing is not as two-sided as fair trade often makes it out to be. Can we truly achieve personal human connection through the efforts of marketing, or is this just a ploy of modern capitalism?

I focused on a set of criteria when thinking about handicrafts. I have defined handicrafts using the UNESCO definition as stated at the 1997 symposium:

Products that are produced by artisans, either completely by hand or with the help of hand-tools or even mechanical means, as long as the direct manual contribution of the artisan remains the most substantial component of the finished product... The special nature of artisanal products derives from their distinctive features, which can be utilitarian, aesthetic, artistic, creative, culturally attached, decorative, functional, traditional, religiously and socially symbolic and significant.

(UNESCO and International Trade Center, 1997)
I discovered this definition when reading the USAID Global Market Assessment for Handicrafts (2006) prepared by Barber and Krivoshlykova. They understood the global and local economic impact of handicraft production, particularly in marginalized regions of the Global South, using this definition. A definitive explanation for what can be considered a handicraft varies considerably and depends on market segment, materials used, and if simple machinery is used to produce it (Barber and Krivoshlykova 2006). I felt this explanation clearly described the handicrafts that are most widely produced and sold through the fair trade networks.

I focus specifically on handicrafts produced by marginalized female or female-identifying artisans in countries of the global South, including Africa, Latin America, and South-East Asia. Fair trade largely works with artisans and producers in these regions, particularly focusing on the most marginalized or exploited groups (Who We Are, n.d.; Arnold et. al, 2019). Additionally, within the handcraft sector, women are the largest demographic and simultaneously the most exploited (Littrell and Dickson 1999, 10).

The fair trade social movement is a complex system of organizations, networks, and labels. Following guidelines outlined by the World Fair Trade Organization (WFTO) in the WFTO Fair Trade Standard guidebook, FTOs may refer to producer groups, wholesale groups, and retailers. As I explain below, not all producer groups are FTOs, some may just produce fair trade products for FTOs. All FTOs adhere to the principles of the umbrella organizations to which they are a member of. Umbrella networks refer to the leading fair trade membership and certification organizations that certify and monitor
FTOs and enterprises (WFTO Fair Trade Standard, 2019). The WFTO, Fair Trade Federation, Fair Trade International, and FairTrade USA are all considered umbrella organizations. When discussing involvement with a fair trade umbrella organization, I refer specifically to the WFTO and Fair Trade Federation as they are the two primary organizations to trade handicrafts and work with artisans.

I focused my research on four fair trade organizations: Ti-a Woven Goods (Denver/Vail, Colorado), Zeal Living (Boulder, Colorado), Fair Anita (Minneapolis, Minnesota), Ten Thousand Villages (Akron, Pennsylvania) and Ten Thousand Villages Goshen, a board store of Ten Thousand Villages located in Goshen, Indiana. I interviewed the founders and owners of the first three organizations, Simbala Drammeh, Caitlin Halberstadt, and Joy McBrien, respectively. From there, I interviewed volunteers, former employees, and two current employees of Ten Thousand Villages. Finally, I interviewed an employee of Ti-a Woven Goods, who also allowed me the opportunity to spend time with her at her market stall at a local farmer’s market so I could interview her and conduct participant observation. I kept in mind how each organization operated as well the positionality of those I spoke with, as every person was affiliated with their respective FTO in a unique way.

For my thesis, formal participation in a fair trade umbrella organization was not required. Many FTOs who produce and sell handicrafts are not certified fair trade. This is often due to the costs of certification or membership fees which are required to be affiliated with the WFTO or Fair Trade Federation. Sometimes, producer groups are
simply not large enough or formal enough to meet the required standards. Handicraft 
production is largely part of the informal economy, oftentimes being produced out of the 
household. While many producer groups have become large enough to partner with 
multiple FTOs in the global North or become FTOs themselves, many handicraft 
producer groups do not meet these standards. If fair trade requires all artisan groups to 
become certified, than many artisan groups may not have an equal opportunity to gain 
access to larger markets and benefit from the social services offered by fair trade 
organizations.

Of the four FTOs I observed for my thesis, only two were members of an 
umbrella group. Ten Thousand Villages is both a member of the Fair Trade Federation 
and WFTO, which is unsurprising as they are the largest and oldest North American FTO. 
Fair Anita is also a member of the Fair Trade Federation. Ti-A Woven Goods has no 
affiliation. According to Simbala Dammeh, she had no intention of being affiliated with 
an umbrella organization as she personally did not agree with the way they conducted and 
handled trade relationships. For Simbala, she followed fair trade principles but applied 
them in a way that she and her team felt was ethical and socially responsible. For Zeal 
Living, Caitlin Halberstadt stated that while she was not currently a member of the Fair 
Trade Federation, she would like to be in the future. Additionally, she shared that she did 
not want to exclude partnerships that operated fairly and ethically just because they were 
not certified. I refer to all businesses as FTOs despite two of them not being members or 
certified as they still conducted their businesses according to fair trade principles.
Overview of Thesis:

In chapter two, I provide historical context for the origins of the fair trade social movement and the broader contexts of neoliberal globalization which sparked the creation of the movement. I also discuss socially conscious and ethical consumerism and its significance and relevance to the fair trade social movement. Finally, I discuss storytelling as a marketing strategy and its usage across the fair trade timeline as well as its usage amongst other mission-driven, ethical consumer movements.

In chapter three, I provide the theoretical frameworks which helped guide my research and analysis process. I chose the theory of global cultural economy established by Arjun Appadurai to help me understand the broader, historical processes under which fair trade exists. I originally had intended to use Appadurai’s *Social Life of Things* (1986) but realized that my intended goal was not to focus on the movement of specific commodities, such as handicrafts, but rather to focus on how marketing was used to influence consumer’s understandings of handicrafts through methods of storytelling. Due to this, I found that *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (1996) suited my thesis much better.

I also used two other theories to understand how fair trade used storytelling in their marketing practices. I understood storytelling using theories of visual consumption and romantic commodification. Using both theories, I understood how fair trade used language and imagery to discuss artisan partnerships and market the culturally embedded handicrafts they produced. Additionally, Manpreet Kaur Kalra’s understanding of, and
practice of ethical, and decolonized storytelling helped me understand how ethical storytelling can be conducted in practice. Finally, Teju Cole’s (2012) definition of and analysis of the white savior industrial complex allowed me to understand how aspects of white saviorism plays a significant role, both historically and currently, in fair trade marketing and consumerism. Within this chapter, I also provide a literature review which incorporates the major academic and non-academic literature which I used for my thesis. I incorporated an interdisciplinary approach when reviewing literature, as well as understanding the theories and methodologies used.

In chapter four, I outline the research design and methodologies I used to conduct ethnographic fieldwork for my thesis. Within this chapter, I discuss how COVID-19 impacted my research and forced me to adapt to using almost an entirely virtual methodology. In many ways, this allowed me to understand the complex nature of online cultures and the significance which digital media marketing has upon consumer preferences and even perceptions towards cultural objects, such as handicrafts. I also outline the four FTOs and businesses that I analyzed for my thesis: Ti-a Woven Goods, Zeal Living, Fair Anita, and Ten Thousand Villages and Ten Thousand Villages Goshen, located in Goshen, Indiana.

I outlined my findings into three separate chapters: Storytelling, Empowerment, and COVID-19. In chapter five, I focus on the major themes which I observed during interviews, surveys, and analysis of marketing materials.
Within my storytelling chapter, I observed multiple themes. I explored themes of informed consent and the methods which FTOs used to collect stories to incorporate into their marketing materials. Secondly, I discussed fair trade’s goal of transparent marketing as a means of creating personal, producer-consumer relationships. Feeling a sense of connection with artisans was a major theme amongst several participants I spoke with. I explored what it means to feel a connection to an artisan based on marketing materials. I discussed the implications of this perceived human connection and its one-sidedness that creates unintended power dynamics. Further, I discussed how marketing addresses other relevant topics such as sustainability, supporting small businesses in a time of Amazon, Target, and Walmart, and supporting women-owned, minority-owned, and LGBTQIA+ businesses in a time of racial, gender, and sexual orientation discrimination. In chapter six, I examined the use of the word empowerment and its prolific use within economic development and poverty reduction literature. I wanted to understand the varied meanings of the word empowerment and therefore asked each person I spoke with what the term meant to them, whether in their professional lives or personal lives. I further explored the gender, racial, and class disparities that often come with the use of the word. In chapter seven, I explored how FTOs responded to a global pandemic and how it impacted their relationships with artisan partnerships. Further I examined how they communicated these changes to consumers.

From my findings, I observed that storytelling has evolved as a younger generation has begun to take over the fair trade social movement. Young leaders and
consumers of ethically sourced goods seek transparency just like previous generations did, however, the need for the story is becoming less vital. Rather, emphasis on the quality and aesthetic of the product is prioritized. Consumers like knowing that their purchase contributes towards the economic stability and opportunity for artisans, but the need for intimate stories is not as necessary. However, it does seem that the label and status of purchasing fair trade, as well as other ethically sourced and unique goods are just as relevant. Additionally, focus on small businesses that are women owned, minority owned, or LGBTQIA+ owned is important to the younger generation of socially conscious consumers.

Finally, in chapter eight I provided an overview of my project and a discussion on the main findings of my research. Next, I discussed, based on what I have observed, the potential next steps for fair trade marketing. My primary goal when understanding storytelling within fair trade was to observe the potential flaws and implications of current practices and understand how FTOs going forward could improve the methods which they use to share information about their products and the artisan groups they partner with. My understanding of storytelling is limited to the voices of those involved with fair trade on the retail and consumer end. The biggest drawback of my research and something I feel is imperative to include going forward is incorporating artisan voices. At the end of the day, it should be entirely up to the artisan to determine how they would like to be represented as an employee of an artisan producer group, whether for an FTO or not. Additionally, participants of my research were primarily white, middle-class women.
My research would have benefitted greatly from a more diverse set of participants to understand their perspective of storytelling in fair trade. Finally, my own position as a middle-class, white woman in their late-20s influenced my perspective when conducting and analyzing data.
CHAPTER TWO: BACKGROUND

In this chapter I provide a historical account of the fair trade movement as it pertains to the production and marketing of handicrafts since the 1940s. Fair trade organizations (FTOs) rely on storytelling as their primary form of marketing, particularly in the artisan sector. Since education and advocacy are one of the primary objectives of the movement, aside from selling goods, then storytelling acts as an easily digestible form of educating Western consumers on complex issues of economic disparity, gender inequality, child labor, environmental disaster and degradation, etc. I outline the use of storytelling as a marketing strategy, not just in the fair trade network, but as a marketing strategy in a modern consumerist society. Finally, I summarize the origins of commodity activism and the role consumers play in creating a demand for ethically sourced goods.

Unlike the exploitative supply chains that exist under neoliberal globalization, where the social conditions of their supply chain are largely hidden, fair trade attempts to reveal the conditions of their supply chains through transparent marketing practices (Hudson and Hudson 2003, 413; Lyon 2006, 455; Arnold et.al, 2020). FTOs not only have the task of revealing all aspects of the supply chain, but when dealing with handicrafts, fair trade has the additional task of marketing cultural goods to consumers in cross-cultural settings.
Historically, fair trade networks have primarily conducted equitable trade with the most marginalized communities in the world’s poorest countries (Fridell 2004, p.17). This trend of sending Northern aid to the marginalized South is reflected in most other forms of international development aid agencies (such as non-governmental organizations, non-profit organizations, and religious missionary groups) whose goal was to bring money and social services to local communities in most need. While the origins of the movement focused on providing a source of income for marginalized artisan rather than offering direct charity, the movement was unstandardized and operated through religious non-profits and development aid agencies. While fair trade would no longer describe themselves as a development aid agency, their origins and motivations behind beginning the fair trade movement could be described as such. For the least developed countries, the need for economic aid and development is rooted in 20th century neoliberalism.

International trade in the post-World War II world was designed by the World Bank and leading multilateral lending agencies such as the (IMF) International Monetary Fund to create a new world economy which not only would increase international trade, but allow for developing countries to “catch-up” to the world’s richest nations (Sylla and Leye 2014, 8). In addition to the World Bank and IMF, the World Trade Organization (formerly known as the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) was established to reduce trade barriers (Fridell 2004). Unfortunately, due to the effects of neoliberalism and rules which were written, and broken, by Northern countries, most of the world's least
developed countries (LDCs) remain more dependent and vulnerable to international trade than they did in the 1960s (Sylla and Leye 2014, p.9). According to the traditional theory of international trade, developing countries should have been able to increase their gross domestic product (GDP) and financial independence due to the openness of international trade which allowed countries to export goods to which they had a comparative advantage. For developing countries, exports are most often goods which require a significant labor component such as agriculture (10). On the other hand, exports for developed countries most often require a large amount of capital. In short, “the international trade of goods is a substitute for the movement of labor” (11) For developing countries, unskilled labor becomes their main export and in return should increase their GDP due to global demand; at least in theory. Unfortunately, this was not the reality for most LDCs.

Over the next fifty years, international trade increased but the world’s LDCs only grew more marginalized. A small portion of developing countries were able to increase their GDP because they exported manufactured goods. The remaining developing countries, especially LDCs, grew more dependent and vulnerable to trade openness than in the 1960s (16). There are several factors that explain economic marginalization. The first being that the most marginalized nations that gained their independence after a period of colonization. The world economy that these LDCs were told to integrate into was an “asymmetric” system created by those who colonized them (14-16).
The second reason for economic marginalization can be explained using the theory of unequal exchange. Most developing countries are dependent upon the export of primary products, or products that are sourced directly from the natural environment, and therefore account for over 50% of their exports. However, wealthy nations prior to WWI exported primary products but due to the theory of unequal exchange, developing countries were the only ones to suffer from doing the same thing (Sylla and Leye, 16-17). In the 1950s Raul Prebisch argued that trade openness and comparative advantage “worked to the advantage of the North and detriment of the South” as the price of primary goods declined over time and the price of manufactured goods increased (Fridell 2004). As the export revenue for these countries declined, they became further indebted and penalized by structural adjustment policies under the IMF and World Bank. The IMF’s Structural Adjustment Programs forced developing nations to remove their protective tariffs and restrictions to repay debts back to the IMF, which was, and still is, primarily controlled by the United States (ibid). Furthermore, the World Trade Organization de-regulated trade policies that forced all members to open up their markets and remove all trade barriers (Moberg and Lyon 2010, 2-3).

Fridell (2004) furthers the discussion on the theory of unequal exchange with the dependency theory which was developed in the 1960s and 70s. Dependency theorists argued that due to unequal exchange which “stems from a legacy of colonialism”, developing nations were forced to specialize in the production of primary goods which were then exported to the North (Fridell 2004). These goods were either consumed or
used to further production of manufactured goods. Developing nations became further dependent on the North for technology, capital, and markets which impeded their own development (ibid).

The value of primary products produced by developing nations was determined by global market forces and is spread across the entire global value chain. The global value chain refers to every step of a product’s life, from production to consumption. In developing countries, exports often occur “within value chains where intermediaries seek to increase their share of the pie” (Sylla and Leye 2014, 19). Intermediaries can increase their control over the market through vertical integration which allows intermediaries to control more steps along the value chain and by forming long-term relationships with producers (ibid). This can be seen in larger agrifood multinationals such as Nestlé or Dole. The goal is to reduce costs as much as possible. As a result, producers are paid less wages to cut costs upstream. To increase the price of a product, value is added further down on the value chain. In the 1990s, often referred to as the Coffee Paradox, coffee consumption increased substantially and as a result increased the value of coffee throughout the world. However, while the value of coffee went up, wages paid to producers went down due to the control of intermediaries and lack of workers' rights or unions. The Coffee Paradox is often used as the spark which established fair trade umbrella organizations, such as Fair Trade International.

As value decreases on the labor side, it is created further down the value chain. Value is added using either symbolic or customized value (ibid). Symbolic value, which I
focus my attention on throughout my thesis, often refers to the marketing efforts that are used to create value on a product. As Varul (2008) states “people consume images as much as material products” (Varul 2008, 661). Marketing can mislead a consumer into believing a product is valued at whatever price is given to them.

Artisans and Handicraft Production:

While the pathways of commodified handicrafts from a localized market to a global market have provided socio-economic opportunities for artisans, they have also brought unprecedented challenges unseen prior to the start of neoliberal globalization. Historically, craft production far precedes the neoliberal era of the 20th century, however, for the purpose of this thesis, this understanding of craft production is situated in the commodification of handicrafts beginning in the 1940s.

Handicraft production is a culturally embedded skillset and form of employment for many artisans living in rural and marginalized regions of the global South. Grobar (2019) argued that handicraft production contributes towards the reduction of poverty in developing countries. Agricultural production is one the main forms of employment in rural areas in developing countries and according to a study sponsored by USAID, artisan production is the “second largest sector of employment after agriculture in many regions of the world” (Barber and Krivoshlykova 2006, 2). Handicraft production and agricultural production often go hand-in-hand. As agricultural labor is seasonal, many will turn to handicraft production in the off-season to supplement their income. Additionally, due to the unpredictable nature of environmental disaster and its
impacts on local agriculture, which has only increased with climate change, handicraft production acts a “shock absorber” (Grobar 2019, 8). Handicraft production provides an increase in economic stability when agricultural work is uncertain.

Handicraft production also allows for increased economic opportunity for women and young people, particularly those who are experiencing poverty or marginalization. According to a UNESCO policy paper to promote handicraft production, “the promotion of craft products allows poor and marginalized youth and women to develop marketable skills, protect their cultural heritage, and reinforce their sense of dignity and self-confidence,” (Richard 2007, 30). The policy paper, titled *Handicrafts and Employment Generation for the Poorest Youth and Women* outline the economic, cultural, and social impacts which handicraft production can have on women and younger generations. As Grobar (2019) argues, handicraft production can be done alongside other wage-labor roles, such as agricultural production. Secondly, handicraft production is a traditional and inter-generational activity, meaning the skills used to produce these crafts are often passed down to younger generations. Additionally, craft production is most often done out of the household, which allows for the artisans to maintain other household tasks and childrearing responsibilities. Finally, handicrafts are generally made using local, raw materials and therefore inexpensive and easily accessible (Richard 2007, 4-6). According to Korovkin (1998) market expansion for handicraft production in Otavalo, Ecuador led to an overall positive economic and cultural shift for the Quichua community. Korkvin states that it “gave rise to an Indigenous intelligentsia whose
members redefined Indian identity in accordance with new cultural and economic realities,” (Korokvin 1998, 19). Through an increased access to global markets and an increase in financial stability, artisans in Otavalo experienced a greater sense of agency in their daily lives.

As artisans export their handicrafts to a wider, global market, artisan communities face increased employment opportunities and financial independence, but also the increased risk for manipulation and exploitation due to free-market capitalism and the influence in which large retail corporations and Western consumers have upon localized handicraft production (Barber and Krivoshlykova, 2006). The “relentless commodification of craft production” is in large part due to the globalization of production in general but also due to an increase in international tourism and demand within the home accessory market (Barber and Krivoshlykova 2006; Scrase 2003, 453). Western consumers seek out cultural goods to adorn their homes, which creates a higher demand for handicraft production. However, competition from mass-produced substitutes and relationships with big-box stores creates uncertain challenges for artisans. For big-box stores, such as TJMAXX and Pier-1 Imports (a retail chain which went bankrupt in May 2020) source their handmade home goods from artisan groups. However, their relationships are short lived and payments are often paid long after the handicrafts have been produced. Big-box stores follow the current trends of the global market, and if the handicraft no longer suits the store’s needs or aesthetics, the store will cut ties with the group and move on.
The increasing demand for cultural goods has led to a rise in mass-produced craft substitutes. Scrase (2003) differentiates handicrafts under two categories: quotidian crafts and elite crafts. Quotidian crafts encompass everyday crafts that are smaller in size and lower in price. Scrase argues that it is these types of crafts that are largely produced for mass consumption and therefore are the most at risk for mass-produced imitations (Scrase 2003). The majority of marginalized artisans in the South fall under this category of handicraft production. Mass-production imitations threatens local handicraft products in several ways. First, it displaces the demand for artisans as cheap imitations are rapidly produced for a fraction of the price. Smith and White (2002) explore how Kenyan weavers who produce kiondo bags from sisal are faced against mass-produced imitations imported from Southeast Asia. Kiondo bags were once the fourth-largest export in Kenya, but due to these imitations, the market for kiondo bags has dropped drastically (Smith and White 2002).

Under provisions of the WTO, there is no legal safeguard or intellectual property rights toward handicraft design or production. This means any person, or machine, can reproduce any handicraft, often for a much cheaper price. There are a few exceptions including the Indian Arts and Craft Act of 1990, which prohibits the misrepresentation in marketing of Native American enrolled citizen’s art or the reproduction of this art within the United States (Indian Arts and Craft Act, 1990). While laws such as this protect Indigenous art and designs from being replicated and/or sold by non-Indigenous persons, it only protects the art within the U.S.
(2012) explores Los Angeles based FTO, NOVICA, who partners with Zapotec weavers in Oaxaca, Mexico. NOVICA is a successful FTO whose consumers are more affluent and desire authenticity and “commodified morality” in their purchases (M’closkey 2012, 259). However, while their purchase of NOVICA woven rugs is helping support Indigenous groups in Oaxaca, their designs are not native to Mexico. In fact, their replicated designs are stolen from the Navajo, an Indigenous group located in the Southwest United States. So, while Zapotec weavers within the NOVICA network benefit from the reproduction of Navajo designs and from the social services offered by NOVICA, the sale of woven rugs produced by Diné weavers have declined drastically (M’closkey 2012, 260). Further, rugs produced through NOVICA are generally able to sell for much cheaper than Diné rugs due to the lower cost of living of Oaxaca than in America and due to the higher cost of materials used to make Diné rugs. M’closkey provides a valuable example of how easy it is, even in the fair trade network, to replicate and reproduce stolen art for consumption.

There are a handful of big-box stores who partner directly with artisan groups in the South to sell their handicrafts in their stores. At face value this can provide artisan groups with a valuable opportunity to reach a wide audience of consumers. However, partnering with these corporations can lead to exploitation and vulnerability for artisans. Big-box stores often require high-production capacities and rapid delivery dates which forces groups to immediately hire large quantities of artisans, skilled or un-skilled, and produce crafts that are often lower quality or of simpler design to meet demands (Barber
and Krivoshlykova 2006; M’closkey 2012; Scrase 2003). For example, Clare Wilkinson-Weber (1997) examines the chikan (embroidery) industry in Lucknow, India where artisans have simplified their techniques to produce their pieces quicker, as they are paid per piece (Wilkinson-Weber 1997). Further, big-box stores typically do not pay in advance and their relationship with artisan groups is dependent on the ability of artisan to meet the production demand in a quality they see fit. If trends change or artisan groups cannot produce their handicrafts according to the big-box store’s expectations, the corporation will end their partnership and move on to another group.

There is a demand for handicrafts produced in respect to their cultural origins and not reproduced in factories. However, this demand is often exclusive to those who can afford high-end handicrafts, or what Scrase (2003) calls elite crafts. Elite crafts are those that are “of high quality, rare, with great artistic beauty or intricately constructed,” (Scrase 2003, 456). While this presents opportunity for artisans in developing countries, it is difficult to access these types of markets. Additionally, while consumers seek handicrafts that are not produced within factories in China, the “market for Indigenous designs is limited,” (Barber and Krivoshlykova 2006, 22). Instead, Western consumers seek out constructed, sanitized cultural goods that suit their aesthetics. This ‘global style’ is one that combines “ethnic elements with contemporary designs” (ibid).

Artisans have been able to adapt repeatedly to meet the demands of constantly evolving markets. Artisans differentiate their production to accommodate Western
demands, again creating inferior qualities to meet production deadlines. Handicraft production that is reserved for local consumption is often of much higher quality and uses materials and designs that reflect the current traditions and culture. While the alteration of traditional handicraft production for the purpose of non-native consumption is relatively common, oftentimes FTOs will continue to refer to these handicrafts as being ‘traditional’ or ‘authentic’ without giving context as to how these designs or processes have changed over time or for Western audiences. If the design of a handicraft caters to Western trends, then key words such as ‘traditional’ or ‘authentic’, which are often used to market handicrafts, are misrepresentative and can lead to cultural ignorance. Even without such words, Western perception of what a traditional or authentic handicraft may look like is distorted through a capitalistic lens.

**Fair Trade Origins and Historical Context:**

The fair-trade social movement originated as a response to the effects of 20th century globalization. Social actors of the North grew increasingly aware of the extreme inequalities that many endured in the global South and sought to alleviate such poverty through a different form of globalization, one that promoted a fairer North-South relationship (Sylla and Leye, 34). The goal of fair trade was to create alternative markets for artisans and producers living in marginalized regions of the global South. As Brown (2013) explains, due to globalization many people had a stronger desire to explore cultures beyond their own, which became possible due to more efficient and cheaper transportation and telecommunication systems (Brown 2013, 6). An increased desire to
learn about other cultures resulted in the consumption of other cultures. Globalization had strong influences on trends in fashion and home decor and art. People in Western cultures wanted the unique and aesthetically pleasing designs of authentic art produced in ‘exotic’ countries of the South. On the opposite end, globalization allowed for an increased awareness towards the extreme economic inequalities that were prevalent in these countries. As a result of Northern desire for handmade representations of diverse cultures beyond one’s own and the responsibility which many felt to alleviate poverty in the South, comes the origins of the fair-trade social movement.

The origins of the fair trade social movement began with a development approach, one that reflected the ideology of religious groups and non-governmental agencies who sought to offer charity to poor artisans or producers in the South. The movement began with Edna Ruth Byler who traveled to Puerto Rico in 1946 and purchased a handful of hand embroidered textiles made by women in the La Plata Valley. Byler returned home and began selling the textiles out of the trunk of her car to friends, family, and other members of the Mennonite Church. The Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), an aid and relief agency affiliated with the church, offered their support for Byler and she started selling them in the church’s gift shop and in local women’s sewing circles. Instead of just offering direct charity to the artisans, Byler wanted to establish a sustainable method of improving the socio-economic lives of the women with whom she met in Puerto Rico. Like Byler, other religious organizations and NGOs such as SERRV International (Sales Exchange for Refugee Rehabilitation and Vocation) and British
NGO, Oxfam, all began conducting similar forms of direct trade with artisans in poor communities in the South.

The initial methods of conducting direct trade with artisans were informal and had no standardization. Sylla and Leye (2014) described the movement as the “selective purchase of products made from poor countries” (Sylla and Leye 2014, 35). The important word being ‘selective.’ Whether consciously or not, Northern organizations selected the groups with whom they felt most deserved it and those who produced the craft that would be the most aesthetically pleasing to themselves and other Western consumers. At this time, fair wages were determined by the organization and the method of conducting trade was left almost entirely up to the Northern organization. In this way, development trade practices reflected the systems of the IMF and World Bank in that it created a system where developing nations of the South were constantly indebted and dependent upon the North.

In the 1960s, as the movement began to grow, it entered the next stage of the movement, the solidarity approach. Occurring simultaneously and influencing the movement, was the 1964 United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). Prior to the conference, structuralist economists of the global South, particularly in Latin America, had gained influence across other ‘Third Worldists spheres’ on their critique of unequal exchange and free market capitalism (Sylla and Leye 2014, 38). At the conference, where Raul Prebisch was the first secretary and theorist behind unequal exchange, leaders of the Third Worldist movement “campaigned for a new world
economic order in which the legitimate concerns of developing countries would be taken into account,” (ibid). It was at this conference in which the phrase ‘Trade not Aid' was adopted and would influence the ideology and practices of the fair trade movement moving forward.

Beginning with Oxfam in 1964, alternative trade organizations (ATOs) across Europe opened fair trade shops, often called World Shops, selling handicrafts purchased from the producer cooperatives with whom they had been partnering with over the past few years. Through this time ATOs, which were still largely affiliated with NGOs or religious groups, began forming long-term relationships with producer groups in the South (Jaffee 2007, 12; Sylla and Leye 2014, 37).

Many ATOs began adopting a more activist, solidarity approach with the goals of following the ‘Trade not Aid’ ideology. Within the United States, young, social activists were active participants in movements focused on civil rights, environmentalism, and the Vietnam War and were fueled by the newfound potential to decrease the suffering of persons in distant places (Glickman 2004; Littrell and Dickson 1999, 16). In addition to purchasing handicrafts produced by artisans, ATOs began offering social services which would provide assistance, business advice, and support towards Southern producer organizations (“Who We Are” n.d.).

The first fair trade label originated in 1987 in Oaxaca, Mexico where Southern coffee farmers from the UCIRI cooperative and Solidardiad NGO, a Dutch development aid organization, established the idea to create an ethical label that would ensure safe and
sustainable working conditions and fair wages to farmers. Founders of this label, Dutch priest, Frans van der Hoff and Dutch economist, Nico Roozen wanted to integrate ethically made products into mainstream distribution and sales channels instead of just being sold in niche fair trade shops scattered around Europe and North America.

Solidaridad and the UCIRI cooperative created the first fair trade label, entitled the Max Havelaar label, and ensured consumers that coffee stamped with this label was made under fair conditions. The label initially was met with skepticism amongst consumers and grocery store chains. Many were concerned about the quality of the products, supply chain efficiencies, and the concern that politics should stay out of supermarkets (Sylla and Leye 2014, 38-9). The integration of fair trade coffee into mainstream markets was met with general enthusiasm from consumers, especially as the consumption of coffee was becoming increasingly popular throughout the world (Jaffee 2007, 13). Jaffee argued that it is due to the Max Havelaar foundation that the fair trade movement saw a shift away from alternative trade and towards ‘fair’ trade due to a more formal standard setting and certification system. Due to this certification being designed specifically for coffee and other agri-foods, the movement also saw a shift away from handicraft production and towards agricultural products.

Over the next ten years, independent FTOs created their own labels based off the Max Havelaar label, which was established specifically for coffee and could easily be adapted to other agrifoods. In 1997, independent labeling organizations came together to create a unified, fair trade certification system and standard, the Fair Trade Labeling
Organization International (now called Fair Trade International) (Brown 2013, 9-11; Jaffee 2007, 14-17). Fair Trade International created the ‘fairtrade’ mark, a symbol that is placed on every certified product and informs consumers that the product they are purchasing was produced under fair trade international standards (Arnold et al. 2019).

Certification for handicrafts would come almost fifteen years after the ‘fairtrade’ mark under the World Fair Trade Organization (WFTO). Certification for food crops is easier as the processes are generally homogenized, but with handicrafts, no two products are alike. To attempt to certify over 50,000 types of handicrafts under a homogenous, certification standard proved to be nearly impossible for fair trade labelling organizations. Additionally, because certification labels cost money and most handicrafts are produced out of the household and not part of a larger group, costs for the label can be too expensive (Hill 2012). In 2011, the WFTO began developing a label for handicrafts under a trial system where participants could use an interim craft label for their handicrafts. As of 2013, the WFTO fully implemented the Guaranteed System (GS) mark, where all participating members could use this label on their products or within their store to inform consumers of their affiliation with the WFTO. The Guaranteed System mark differs from the Fair Trade International ‘fairtrade’ mark, as certification is not built around a specific supply chain but around fair trade principles that all fair-trade organizations must abide by (Arnold et al. 2019).

Most recently, the two largest certification organizations, the WFTO and Fair Trade International, joined together to create a homogenous standard for fair trade, the
International Fair Trade Charter. Established in 2018, the International Fair Trade Charter was created as a singular reference document for all FTOs to refer to when advocating for fair trade or implementing policies (International Fair Trade Charter, 2019). Under the new charter, the WFTO and Fair Trade International agreed upon a singular definition of what fair trade means:

Fair trade is a trading partnership, based on dialogue, transparency and respect, that seeks greater equity in international trade. It contributes to sustainable development by offering better trading conditions to, and securing the rights of, marginalized producers and workers - especially in the south. Fair trade organizations, backed by consumers, are engaged actively in supporting producers, awareness raising and in campaigning for changes in the rules and practice of conventional international trade


This definition outlines the basic, overall principle of how fair trade differs from normative, capitalistic trade systems. The definition emphasizes that fair trade is more than just fair wages and aims to create ethical and equitable trading conditions where the producer and consumer are placed at the center. The International Fair Trade Charter is intended to create fewer misinterpretations of what fair trade means, as well as to provide a more organized and clearer standard for all participating members to adhere (Arnold et al. 2019).

The Origins of Consumer Activism in the United States:

The ideologies and practices of the fair trade movement, as well as other consumer-dependent social movements, stem from America’s first boycot, the free produce movement. The free produce movement of the mid-1800s is arguably the first
social movement in North America where consumer citizens used their buying power to support a business that aligned with their morals, rather than avoiding purchases all together.

Historian Lawrence Glickman (2004) defined the free produce movement as being the birth of modern consumer activism. Organized in the early 1820s, Black abolitionists and Quakers encouraged Americans to purchase goods produced by non-enslaved labor. The free produce movement originated the first organized boycott, where unlike a boycott, consumers were encouraged to purchase goods from businesses that aligned with their moral beliefs. In a sense, the free produce movement attempted to challenge normative market systems and create an alternative form of consumption rather than to avoid it altogether.

Operating within a free market system, the free produce movement attempted to challenge and dismantle systems of slavery by providing an alternative option for consumers. As a result, the goal was to reduce the demand for slave-made goods, thereby making the need for enslaved persons obsolete. The movement placed the consumers as critical actors, or “moral agents” in determining the outcome of the producer of the item they were consuming. In this case, by consuming slave-made goods, the consumer became “implicated in the crime of slavery” (Glickman 2004, 894). The consumer was placed on the same moral plane as the enslaver, sometimes even lower, arguing that these consumers perpetuated the entire system of slavery through their purchases.
The free produce movement and the fair trade movement both received initial widespread support from socially conscious consumers who wanted to create positive change through their purchases. However, as both movements grew, consumers began to question the efficiency, quality, and overall authenticity of the ethical products which both movements claimed to make. Criticism regarding labelling, marketing, and overall impact are three key examples of how consumers questioned both the free produce movement and the fair trade movement (Brown 2018, 159; Glickman 2004, 894).

Amongst the plethora of product labels that are stamped on thousands of products in our grocery stores, clothing stores, coffee shops, etc., it is difficult to make sense of and comprehend which item is truly ethically made and which is just a marketing ploy. Even amongst fair trade, there are a handful of fair trade labels from their respective fair trade umbrella organizations which make it confusing for consumers to understand which fair trade label is the most ‘fair.’ As someone who has worked in a mainstream grocery store for the past five years, it has come apparent, from my own interactions with customers and other employees, that the concept of fair trade labels and other socially or eco labels are relatively unknown. At best, consumers recognize the fair-trade label, but could not differentiate between labels or confidently say what each one meant.
In addition to the abundance of labels, there is the dilemma of an organization choosing to not become a member of a fair trade umbrella organization and to not use a label. This is particularly the case for fair trade handicrafts and artisan producer groups. As stated earlier, the certification of handicrafts is only a recent addition to the fair trade movement and is primarily done through the World Fair Trade Organization (WFTO). FTOs can now certify their handicrafts through the certification of the entire organization, from producer group to wholesaler, to retailer. However, membership fees cost money and time. And just like that of the abolitionist groups of the free produce movement, many FTOs disagree on which standards and practices are the most ‘fair’. Further, since handicraft certification and overall certification for FTOs handling handicrafts is so new, many organizations who have long preceded this certification do not feel the need to join a membership now or become certified. This dilemma appeared throughout my research as two out of the four organizations either chose not to become a member of the Fair
Trade Federation out of disagreement towards the Fair Trade Federation or did not have the current means to join the Fair Trade Federation.

Regarding impact, both movements have claimed that through the purchase of free produce items or fair trade items, the consumer is contributing towards poverty reduction. Abolitionists argued that by purchasing items made by enslaved persons, a consumer was perpetuating the need for slavery, however, there is no evidence showing that the free produce movement contributed to the end of slavery (Glickman 2004). Similarly, fair trade claims to be a tool for poverty reduction for producers and artisans in the global South. Few impact studies have been conducted on artisans producing handicrafts through fair trade networks, aside from Ann Le Mare who has published the article, *The Impact of Fair Trade on Social and Economic Development* (2008). The dilemma remains as to whether fair trade and other consumer-dependent social movements can have any real impact on poverty reduction, especially while it exists within free-market capitalism. My goal is not to argue whether fair trade has had a significant impact towards poverty reduction for those in fair trade networks, but to show the similarities between both the free produce movement and the fair trade movement.

Finally, both movements have had the challenge of communicating to consumers why their cause was worth their money. As Brown (2018) states, “they struggled to tell authentic and persuasive stories that conveyed to customers that this is an efficient way to combat slavery and poverty.” (Brown 2018, 159). The choice to purchase a fair trade product is both more expensive and less convenient than purchasing
mainstream products. So, to encourage consumers to spend the extra money, organizations must inform consumers that their purchase goes towards improving the socio-economic lives of the artisans and producers who made that item. This is an example of adding symbolic use value. I discuss fair trade marketing further in the following sections.

**Socially Conscious Consumerism and ‘The Ethical Turn in Markets’:**

The popularity of the fair-trade movement is in large part due to the rise of consumer activism beginning in the 1930s wherein a series of changes occurred that resulted in what Keith Brown (2018) describes as an “ethical turn in markets”. Brown (2018) defines the ethical turn in markets as the “mainstreaming of corporate social responsibility and attempts to make supply chains more eco-friendly,” (Brown 2018, 161). In the 1930s, due to de-industrialization and the outsourcing of local production and farming, many Americans became increasingly unaware of where their products were coming from, how they were made, or who was producing them. Americans became “more self-conscious about their identities and interests as consumers” (Cohen 2003, 187). The citizen and the consumer started to become synonymous as more and more people began asserting their political and social beliefs through their purchases.

In the modern consumerist society in which we live, our roles as citizens have become synonymous with that of consumers. As consumers, our purchasing decisions have gone beyond acquiring material items to satisfy our immediate material needs; and instead have transformed into social, political, environmental, and cultural decisions that
not only transform our own identifies but have, to some extent, an impact on every aspect of the world around us (Brown 2013; Hand 2012, 518; Hudson and Hudson 2003, 420). My goal is not to argue whether our individual purchasing decisions can make any real significant impact, but rather to understand the extent in which fair trade makes the individual consumer believe that they can not only make a positive impact on the world but to actually save a person or persons from poverty. Fair trade marketing, including the use of images and storytelling, may invoke the white savior industrial complex in which middle-class consumers feel as if they can buy a fair trade artisan out of poverty (Cole 2012). I discuss the theory of the white savior industrial complex in chapter three.

Fair trade encourages the consumer to engage in altruistic behaviors by purchasing fair trade goods thus satisfying not only the consumer’s own needs of consuming goods but to fuel their identity as an altruist consumer citizen (Brown 2013, 95-96). The ubiquitous advertising that pervades our daily life convinces us that commodities will fulfill our immediate desires and transform us into our best selves (Hand 2012, 516-17). Arguably, the majority of marketing and advertising encourages the consumer to believe that their product will enhance their own individual life. The goal of fair trade alternatively is to encourage the consumer to believe that their purchase of fair trade will transform them into an altruistic consumer; one that not only cares about their own self-interest but the self-interest of others as well.

For the consumer, I argue that purchasing fair trade products is comparable to purchasing a ‘positional good’ in that this altruistic purchase elevates their status from a
regular consumer to the socially conscious one (Hirsch 1976 as cited in Hand 2012, 520). Hand suggests that the acquisition of positional goods has become more complex as mass-production has increased throughout the 20th century (Hand 2012, 520). In other words, status symbols that once clearly separated the bourgeois from the proletariat, perhaps a fur coat or diamond necklace, have become diluted amidst the mass-producing, capitalistic economy. Additionally, status presents itself in various forms beyond wealth. In the case of the fair trade consumer, status is in the form of ethical consumption. Even objects such as the fur coat or a diamond necklace do not present themselves as positive status symbols in some consumer groups due to the animal abuse and labor exploitation which are often associated with fur coats and diamond mining.

In the 1990s and into the 2000s, socially conscious consumers became even more conscious of their consumption patterns as the rise of the internet and national media outlets exposed the labor exploitation that occurred in production factories across the world, primarily in Asia and Latin America (Littrell and Dickson 1999, 9). Major clothing brands such as Nike and Gap were exposed and boycotted due to exploitative working conditions, child labor, and low wages (ibid). Additionally, consumers became increasingly aware of the negative environmental impacts which their individual purchases made. Documentaries such as Al Gore’s An Inconvenient Truth (2006), films such as the Lorax and Wall-E, and cars such as the Toyota Prius all played a part in this ethical turn in the markets (Brown 2013, 162).
Consumers have begun to seek out businesses that contribute towards a more ethical consumption. In more recent years, consumers have also been encouraged to support small businesses, women-owned businesses, minority owned businesses, and LGBTQIA+ businesses. This became especially true during the pandemic when many small businesses suffered financially.

Due to consumer demand, large corporations have attempted to appear more socially and environmentally conscious, even if they are just ‘green-washing’ for profit. For example, the fast-fashion clothing brand, SHEIN, has been criticized for encouraging overconsumption, rapid overturn of their clothing, and labor exploitation. However, on their website they advertise their sustainability efforts (Barber 2022). It has become easier to spot when large brands such as Nike, Target, and Amazon resort to ‘fairwashing’ and ‘greenwashing,’ especially during Pride Month, Earth Day, and Black History Month, to name a few. However, while consumers have grown aware of these injustices, overconsumption in the United States has almost reach a pinnacle in which the average consumer is very aware of these injustices, but the convenience and affordability of their products outweigh the negatives. Whether or not these retail companies are just pandering to their audiences, the consumer citizen has shown that they are increasingly aware of these injustices and demand impactful change. While perhaps ethical consumerism cannot truly exist within modern capitalistic societies, consumers still have a choice in choosing the, even ever-so slightly, fairer choice when it comes to buying our everyday goods.
**Fair Trade Marketing:**

Education and transparency are two vital components of the fair trade social movement and are essentially the primary goal of fair trade marketing. Aside from actual practices of production and working conditions, leaders of the fair trade movement assert that it is largely their transparent communication to consumers that helps separate them from mainstream, normative supply chains. In fact, one of the main principles of the WFTO is the importance of advocating for and promoting the fair trade movement through honest marketing and advertising techniques. The principle states,

> The organisation raises awareness of the aim of Fair Trade and of the need for greater justice in world trade through Fair Trade. It advocates for the objectives and activities of Fair Trade according to the scope of the organisation. The organisation provides its customers with information about itself, the products it markets, and the produce organisations or members that make or harvest the products. Honest advertising and marketing techniques are always used.

(WFTO Fair Trade Standard 2019)

Through fair trade’s transparent marketing, FTOs hope to educate the consumer on all aspects of their supply chains, which often includes the intimate details of their artisan partnerships. Extensive literature on Fair trade’s attempt at “commodity de-fetishism” is reflected in the works of Lyon (2006), Fridell (2007), and Jaffee (2007). The term commodity fetishism refers to a concept of Marxist theory which states that under capitalism, exploitative supply chains will hide details and social relations of the supply chain to consumer. This is often accomplished through marketing. Marketing allows a company to sell the consumer a story about a product which persuades the consumer into
purchasing the product with no knowledge of how it was produced. Commodity de-
fetishism, then, is revealing all details of the supply chain to consumers.

In addition to revealing the social conditions of production, fair trade handicraft organizations have the additional challenge of educating consumers on the cultural significance that each handicraft possesses and how each purchase impacts the cultural identity of the artisan who made it. FTOs attempt to achieve this goal by sharing the personal narratives of artisans as well as their cultural and socio-economic background. The idea is to connect the producer and consumer despite geographical distance and has been a practice of fair trade since its inception.

During the initial stages of the fair trade movement, many ATOs (now called Fair Trade Organizations FTOs) began implementing marketing practices to reach a wider audience. In the 1960s and 70s, fair trade handicrafts were sold in niche markets in Europe and United States and sold to consumers who were already aware of the injustices of artisans and producers living in marginalized communities of the South. These consumers were often Peace Corps volunteers, missionaries, and other social activists (Littrell and Dickson 1999, 7). It was not enough to just purchase handicrafts from Southern producer organizations and sell them in shops back home; consumers needed a way of learning about the importance of the fair trade movement and why consumers should choose fair trade products. ATOs would use product tags, brochures, and in-store forums as a way of educating consumers about the injustices which producers faced and why their purchasing decision made a difference (Littrell and Dickson 2010, 8).
According to Littrell and Dickson (2010), “through the information ATOs shared with consumers about life conditions and stories of how lives were improved from sales of producers’ products, strong relationships of solidarity were created between consumers and producers,” (Littrell and Dickson 2010, 8). This solidarity, however, is entirely one-sided and reinforces a power dynamic that places the Western consumer in control of the livelihood of the artisan in the South. The traumas and cultural background of the consumer is never reciprocated back to the artisan. Traumas, histories, and cultural identities suddenly become monetized to sell handicrafts in Western markets.

Imagery and stories help create a perception of the cultural identity of the artisan who produced the handicraft for sale. FTOs need to add symbolic use-value to their products to encourage consumers to pay a premium price for products that are easily mass-produced for a fraction of the price. For fair trade handicraft organizations sharing artisan stories adds that symbolic use-value. Looking at Ten Thousand Villages, Brown (2013) argued that the oldest FTO helped popularize what he described as ‘Identity Marketing’, which is the same as sharing artisan stories and imagery, or story cards (Brown 2013, 6). Brown explains “consumers who purchase [fair trade] products are buying much more than handicrafts and coffee. They are buying the stories behind the products, stories that align with the type of person the consumer aspires to become (Brown 2013, 7)”. Sharing the traumas and hardships of the artisan helped motivate the socially conscious consumer into purchasing fair trade handicrafts and believing that they can alleviate the poverty of those in distant places. In my theory chapter, I further discuss
the white savior industrial complex as coined by Teju Cole and how this complex has perpetuated the purchasing behaviors of affluent, socially conscious consumers in the North and the power dynamics at play.
CHAPTER THREE: THEORETICAL APPROACH

Literature Review:

In this chapter, I discuss the relevant literature used within my thesis. In my research, I incorporated a multidisciplinary approach, gathering literature from academics within the fields of anthropology, sociology, economics, marketing, and consumer behaviors. Additionally, I incorporated several non-academic voices, as their work was vital to understanding how fair trade marketing operated in practice and how systems of white saviorism impact consumer’s decisions to purchase mission-driven products. I incorporated the broader historical contexts for which the fair-trade social movement exists so that I could have a deeper understanding of how storytelling was used to appeal to Western consumers. For example, with discussions of poverty and system issues which marginalized artisans often faced, I wanted to understand what broader socio-political systems were in place that led to poverty and marginalization in the first place. Ndongo Sylla and David Clément Leye’s book, *Fair Trade Scandal: Marketing Poverty to Benefit the Rich* provided an explanation of the effects of neo-liberal policies on post-colonial nations and the hypocritical rules which left many of these countries in a constant state of dependency. Sylla and Leye further provided context on the origins of the fair trade movement and its situatedness within these policies. Sylla's perspective as a Senegalese
economist offered a critique on fair trade which is often lacking in research conducted by academics in the North. He points out the obvious benefits of fair trade while offering an in-depth critique on its attempt to create an alternative trade system within the confines and regulations of neoliberalism. Additionally, Daniel Jaffee (2007) and Gavin Fridell (2004) contributed towards my understanding of fair trade and the broader historical processes which fair trade exists.

Lisa A. Grobar (2019), Tomothy Scrase (2003), and Ann Le Mare (2008, 2012) all provided an analysis on artisan labor and the impact that globalization and neoliberal policies have had upon artisans in the global South since the end of World War II. Grobar (2019) and Scrase provided additional context regarding gendered relations within handicraft production.

Most research on fair trade focuses on the production of agri-food, namely coffee, chocolate, and tea with lesser attention focused on handicraft production. *Fair Trade and Social Justice: Global Ethnographies* edited by Mark Moberg and Sarah Lyon provided a valuable resource for the understanding of the fair-trade social movement within historical context. The collection of ethnographies, particularly ones written by Patrick C. Wilson (2012) and Kathy Mcloskey (2012) who both write on handicraft production and fair-trade marketing practices.

I relied on the works of Keith Brown (2013, 2918) and Matthias Zick Varul (2008) to further understand fair trade marketing practices and the commodification of storytelling as a means of marketing handicrafts to consumers. In Keith Brown’s *Buying
into Fair Trade: Culture, Morality, and Consumption (2013), Brown provided an analysis on consumer behaviors towards fair trade products, both coffee and handicrafts. Within this analysis he discussed the role which marketing plays in educating fair trade consumers. He also discussed modern-day ethical consumerism and the role fair trade currently plays, particularly when up against big-box stores such as Walmart and Target.

Additionally, his chapter in the Handbook of Research on Fair Trade (2018), provided an analysis on what he defines as the ethical turn in markets which sparked ethical consumerism in the 1990s. In Consuming the Campesino, Varul provided an in-depth analysis on fair trade marketing and the use of romantic commodification, a theory I outline in the following section.

Outside of the social sciences, I relied heavily on the writings, podcasts, and works done by Manpreet Kaur Kalra, the owner and founder of Art and Citizenry as well as Art of Citizenry is a brand marketing design studio and education initiative which focuses on ethical and decolonized storytelling within fair trade and other social enterprises. I had discovered Art of Citizenry early on in my research after listening to a World Fair Trade Organization podcast episode featuring Kalra entitled “The Trick with Storytelling.” I immediately found Kalra’s work immensely valuable as she had started a business centered around ethical storytelling in fair trade. From there, I listened Kalra’s podcast specifically embracing two episodes “Colonization, Language, and the Role of Visual Storytelling” and “Consent, Power, and Trauma in Ethical Storytelling with Joy McBrien.” The latter is how I discovered Joy McBrien, owner, and founder of Fair Anita,
and why I reached out to her to interview for my thesis. The discussion of white saviorism was a reoccurring theme throughout my thesis. I understood this discussion through Teju Cole’s coinage of the phrase “The White Savior Industrial Complex” which he writes about in an article by the same name.

**Theoretical Approach:**

I have chosen three theoretical frameworks that have allowed me to better understand the marketing practices that fair trade organizations (FTOs) have used to advertise and sell handicrafts produced by female or female identifying artisans living primarily in the global South. I selected the theory of global cultural economy, which provided an essential framework for understanding the broader, historical process under which fair trade exists. The final two theories, romantic commodification and visual consumption, provided a dual understanding for fair trade’s use of storytelling.

Before I expand upon the three frameworks that I have chosen, there is an anecdote that I feel encapsulates the West’s increasing desire for both the unique and the culturally exotic between the traditional past and the modern present. I do not have cable and therefore watch all my TV shows via streaming services such as Hulu or Netflix. I was watching a TV show on Hulu when an ad appeared for TJMaxx: HomeGoods. The advertisement followed a white woman in her 30s shopping for ‘unique’ home decorations across the world only to find out she is actually just shopping at her local HomeGoods. She discovers woven baskets sold out of a trailer by a man in an ambiguous pasture, a pottery vase handmade by a woman at a ‘hut’ up the hill, and lace-edged
blankets sold at an open-air market (Home Goods 2020). The locations of these discoveries are ambiguous and unknowable, so while the viewer understands that you can purchase unique goods from across the world, it is unclear as to where these goods come from. The shopper is symbolically taken from the modern retail store that is HomeGoods and transported to the distant lands of the past. She seeks out the simple, manual labor power of the handmade produced by the individual in the traditional environmental landscape of the ‘Other’ (Varul 2008).

![Figure 2: ‘Something Incredible’ Photos from HomeGoods Commercial, 2020](image)

**Global Cultural Economy:**

Global cultural economy is a theoretical framework by anthropologist Arjun Appadurai and stems from the broader theoretical framework of political economy. In *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalizations* (1996), Appadurai explores the interconnectedness of electronic mass-media and migration and their effort on the
“work of imagination as a constitutive feature of modern subjectivity,” (3). Appadurai argues that through the work of imagination, individuals or groups of individuals are allowed to seek out and create their own understanding of what modernity and modern practices are. Understandings of modernity or the present are rooted in Westernized development theories wherein the modern present lies within the West and separates itself from the traditional past of the South. The modernity of the West is something to seek out and achieve. Appadurai argues that the global cultural economy is a “complex, overlapping, disjunctive order” and made up of the relations between, what he defines as, the five dimensions of global cultural flow (6). These dimensions are: ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, finanscapes, and ideoscapes.

Appadurai (1996) considers the global cultural economy beyond existing center-periphery models, which Immanuel Wallerstein coined in the sixties and refers to the expansion of capitalism from Europe and diffused to the periphery or the ‘traditional’ societies of the South (Wolf 1982: 384-85). Economist, Raul Prebisch’s theory of dependency can also be linked to the center-periphery model, which, similarly refers to the ‘unequal exchange” between low-capital, primary goods produced by low-skilled, exploited laborers in the global South and high-capital, manufactured goods in the North (Fridell 2007). The center-periphery model creates a Eurocentric understanding of the global cultural economy, wherein Southern nation-states remain passive to the effects of neoliberal capitalism. Current academic literature on fair trade primarily emanates from a Northern perspective, often in association with fair trade networks, and therefore places
Northern Fair trade organizations and consumers at the core and Southern producers and organizations at the periphery. I realize my own perspective and understanding of fair trade is arguably no different than most of these academics, however, by incorporating Appadurai’s theory and additional Southern perspectives and understandings of fair trade, I attempt to create a more balanced understanding of the fair trade movement, one that does not place Northern Fair trade at the core.

I focused my attention on the dimensions of the ethnoscape and the mediascape to better understand the global cultural flow of handicrafts across cultural and transnational boundaries. Appadurai defines the ethnoscape as the “landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live,” (33). The ethnoscape can refer to tourists, immigrants, or refugees and whose presence has some discernible impact upon the nation-state in which they have migrated to. Though my research does not focus on the physical migration of persons across boundaries, mass-media contributes to globalization in that it allows persons to transcend localities and enter previously bounded landscapes (3). Globalization has allowed for a dramatic increase in international travel and thus a piqued interest in cultures outside one’s own. With mediums such as television, news broadcasting, movies, and social media, we can virtually experience and consume other cultures without ever leaving the house. This leads to what Appadurai describes as the mediascape.

The mediascape refers to the production and dissemination of images and information via mediations of newspapers, magazines, television, film, etc., which are
increasingly controlled and consumed through “public and private interests” throughout the world (35-6). I include social media platforms as a mediascape, which I believe Appadurai would have included as well if social media had been around in 1996. An important contrast between mediums of television, film, or news broadcasting and social media is that the content on social media is not strictly curated by those in a position of authority or expertise. The dissemination of images and information can be controlled by anyone with internet access. Media has also become synonymous with consumerism with targeted advertising and features that allow users to shop directly from apps.

Appadurai introduces the concept of the ‘imagined world’ which are constructed “historically situated imaginations” of groups of people around the world (296). The mediascape places a significant role in the constructed imagined world and can reinforce misconceptions and stereotypes towards those in distant landscapes. The mediascape is most often “image-centered and narrative based” where various ethnoscapes and landscapes are presented to local, national, and transnational audiences in a constructed manner (299). The further away the audience is from the “direct experiences” of the discussed landscape or ethnoscapes, the more the “lines are blurred between the realistic depiction of these experiences and the fictional landscapes (ibid.) The further away the landscape, the less likely it is for audiences to have any personal experiences or connection to this place. Therefore, their understanding of a particular place is most often constructed by the mediascape. So, while one person can experience
and consume the culture of another country or community without leaving their house, this experience may be distorted and result in the construction of an imagined world.

I apply Appadurai’s theory of the imagined world combined with the mediascape, to understand how fair trade marketing and the use of storytelling may influence a consumer’s understanding of an artisan and the community, region, or country in which they live. The Home Goods commercial is an example of how a television advertisement can influence the consumer’s construction of a non-Westernized landscape. They imagine this area as being stuck in the distant past, far away from the modern Home Goods retail location in the West.

**The Commodification of Handicrafts:**

George Simmell (1907) determined that economic value is created through the economic exchange of an object. Value, therefore, is not inherent to any commodity and is subject to change through the social, cultural, and economic pathways that the commodity follows (Simmel 1907). Handicrafts become commodities as they are produced and sold in exchange for money. Commodities gain economic value through exchange which occurs once there is a mutual understanding of the use-value of that commodity (Marx 1971 [1906], 48). I focus on handicrafts as commodities produced primarily for Western consumers. In this regard, handicrafts fall under what Jacques Maquet (1971) calls commodities by destination, in which objects are produced specifically for exchange (Maquet 1971 as cited in Appadurai 1987, 16). Furthermore, I focus on what Scrase (2003) describes as quotidian crafts, or “everyday crafts”, that
embody the majority of handicrafts produced by marginalized, rural artisans in the global
South, particularly those working within the fair trade network (Scrase 2003, 453).

Quotidian crafts are generally smaller, lower-priced items that can be produced at a rapid
pace. Artisans produce these kinds of crafts due to their feasibility in shipping and for the
wider consumer audience who can afford these items. With this being said, factories in
China and India pick up on current trends in handicrafts and create their own mass-
produced substitutes to be sold at a significantly cheaper price (Grobar, 2019; 519, Scrase
2003, 453).

Handicrafts are handmade items which artisans produce using traditional
techniques and production methods and most often local materials (Barber and
Krivoshlykova, 2006). While the word ‘traditional’ is subjective, I use it here to mean a
process which is passed down generationally or influenced by localized meanings. The
production process of each and every handicraft is unique to the region, community, or
even group in which it is produced. A shared understanding of the social use-value of any
commodity is necessary when determining the economic value of that object (Appadurai
1987, 8). This understanding must be understood across the commodity’s social life in
order for the producer, the trader, and the consumer to benefit equally (3). However, as
handicrafts travel further distances; from its point of production to that of consumption,
that shared understanding, which allowed for the general benefit of all actors in the
supply chain, becomes lost. Determining the economic value becomes increasingly
difficult as commodities travel across cultural boundaries (14). In an equal exchange of
commodities, an artisan would not only be paid for the item that is produced, but also for the labor needed to produce it (Hudson and Hudson 2003, 416). Unfortunately, due to the exploitative nature of modern capitalistic society and functions of commodity fetishism, artisans who produce handicrafts for global markets are most often taken advantage of. Fair trade’s goal is to be the exception by providing an alternative trading network where artisans are paid fairly for their handicrafts and labor while being able to sell their work in a viable market.

Appadurai takes Marx’s commodity fetishism and calls it overly mined and presents instead production fetishism and fetishism of the consumer. Appadurai argues that since Marx’s view of commodity fetishism was written, the global economy has grown further into “one, large interactive system” (Appadurai 1996, 306). Previous understandings of commodity fetishism no longer suffice for the global cultural flow, not just of commodities, but of media, technology, money, humans, and ideologies. Most other literature on fair trade uses commodity fetishism and fair trade’s attempt at commodity de-fetishism and by using it I felt that I was just reiterating what had already been said. Production fetishism refers to the “illusion created by contemporary transnational production loci” which masks relations of production and the external global forces which drive production (ibid). For example, often is the case of artisans within the global South, their relationship with big-box stores may seem like a significant employment opportunity for artisan communities. However, this business relationship is often met with low or delayed payments and short-term relationships which result in
economic instability. In this sense, the production locality is fetishized as the relations of production seem equally beneficial to both the artisans and the company purchasing the handicrafts.

On the other hand, fetishism of the consumer refers to the way that commodity flows and the mediascape, specifically advertising, create a false sense of agency for consumers. Global advertising creates an illusion that the consumer is the “real social agent” when in reality it is the producer and the overall production process which have real agency. Appadurai states, “[t]hese images of agency are increasingly distortions of a world of merchandising so subtle that the consumer is consistently helped to believe that he or she is an actor, where in fact he or she is at best a chooser,” (307). Within the fair trade network, a sense of agency is placed directly upon both producer and consumer. On the consumer end, fair trade advertising and marketing presents the consumers with the ethical and sustainable choice. The fair trade network leads the consumer into believing they have significant agency towards choosing an ethical product that leads to the empowerment, financial stability, and overall poverty reduction of a producer. Arguably, the fair trade network, along with other socially progressive commodity networks, grants the consumer a greater sense of agency in comparison to normative commodity networks. In fair trade, consumers are choosing to not just buy a commodity, they are choosing to better the lives of the producer of the commodity.
Storytelling: Visual Consumption and Romantic Commodification

I combine theories of visual consumption and romantic commodification to best understand the use of storytelling and story cards within the fair trade network. Visual consumption allowed me to understand how images are consumed via marketing within everyday life. Romantic commodification allowed me to further contextualize the marketing of culturally embedded handicrafts produced by marginalized artisans in the global South and purchased by consumers in the North through the fair trade network.

Visual Consumption:

The theory of visual consumption combines aspects of visual culture and consumer culture as means of better understanding the role imagery plays in marketing and consumption (Schroeder 2002, 26). I used visual consumption to analyze the print and digital marketing practices of FTOs. The theory of visual consumption sets a framework for understanding how images of artisans and their handicrafts in the global South are consumed by those in a much different cultural setting. Looking at the visual cultural side of visual consumption, visual culture refers to the interdisciplinary field which combines anthropology, art history, and film studies. Margaret Dikovitskaya (2005) describes the study of visual culture as a research area that “regards the visual image as the focal point in the process through which meaning is made in a cultural context” (Dikovitskaya 2005, 68). The visual image can be presented as fine art or television programs, or in more recent years, a curated Instagram post that provides small or independent business a relatively free platform for advertising your products. Digital
visual images are pervasive in everyday life amongst almost all social and economic classes. As Dikovitskaya puts it, “visuality at present is dominated by the speed, the logic and the ubiquity of the electronic screen. We have all been accustomed to scanning images instantaneously in an environment dominated by sensory overload,” (Dikovitskaya 2005, 69). With the internet there emerged a new environment in which consumerism could proliferate. Online shopping quickly replaced mail order catalogs and is now the preferred choice of shopping amongst many consumers.

Nicholas Mirzoeff (1999) understood visual culture from a postmodern context in which he focused on digital media and the way digital visual images were consumed, rather than who produced them (Mirzoeff 1999). According to Mirzoeff, globalization within visuality, referring to mediations such as television programs or the internet, allows for the connectedness of consumers across the world (Dikovitskaya 78-79).

Essentially, we have the ability to consume cultures from anywhere in the world from the comfort of our homes. Digital visual images can reach a much wider audience at all hours of the day, which has had significant cultural changes throughout the world. Fair trade, for example, can take handicrafts produced in Oaxaca, Mexico or Bolgatanga, Ghana and advertise and sell them to a consumer living in the United States; all from a computer or phone. Fair trade, using online shopping and digital media marketing, can now reach a larger consumer base beyond the niche fair trade consumers who had to actively seek fair trade products or had immediate access to their local fair trade brick-and-mortar shops. As storytelling is fair trade’s prominent marketing strategy, this also creates an
opportunity for fair trade to share artisan stories and images more than ever before. Theories of visual consumption allowed me to understand not just how consumers perceive fair trade images by themselves but the potential implications of having artisan images and stories being broadcasted on the internet. Previously, brick-and-mortar shops would print out a handful of brochures or product tags featuring images and texts, but now, organizations must consistently provide online content for their consumers to maintain active engagement. As a result, more artisan stories and images are able to being shared more often than ever before via the internet and social media.

**Romantic Commodification:**

Fair trade often uses what Colin Campbell (1987) describes as romantic commodification as a means of adding to the handicraft’s use value. Romantic commodification refers to the ways in which “the power of imagination” is used to control the narrative and meaning behind a commodity, rather than revealing the “actualized experiences” of the production process and those who produced the commodity (Campbell 1987, 76). Using romantic commodification and drawing from Appadurai’s theory of imagined worlds, I aimed to understand how fair trade marketing allows for Western consumers to construct an imagined cultural understanding of Indigenous and non-Western artisans.

In an attempt to separate themselves from normative capitalistic modes of production and exchange, fair trade uses transparency as their primary mode of marketing handicrafts to fair trade consumers. Typically, retailers in normative supply chains market
to their consumers via images of the product they are selling and/or an image of a person using that product. Marketing and advertising send a particular message to the consumer that allows them to fulfill their own desires of how this object will enhance their individual life. Marketing and advertising creates a fabricated life-history for a product that is constructed for the benefit of the consumer, rather than the producer (Hand 2012, 517-19). Additionally, this life-history begins at the product’s final stage of consumption and thus, reinforces production fetishism (Hudson and Hudson 2003, 417). Marketing strips the commodity of its life-history including the conditions in which the object was produced and reinvents a life-history for the consumer.

I focus on the use of storytelling within fair trade as a way of linking the producer and consumer and maintaining transparency. Storytelling includes sharing artisan stories to the consumer, which involves using artisan images and detailed information on their life, their traumas, hardships, accomplishments, and the processes they use to produce their craft (Sahan 2002). Storytelling at its best offers the consumer a better understanding of how the product they are purchasing is produced and allows them to see the significant amount of skill and technique required to produce that item. Furthermore, storytelling allows the consumer to understand that by purchasing from fair trade, the artisan who made this craft has been paid fair wages and works in safe conditions (Varul 2008). However, as these stories are most often written by fair trade organizations, and not the artisans themselves, FTOs often reinforce negative stereotypes
and perceptions of Indigenous and non-Western handicraft producers in marginalized communities.

Advocates of fair trade assert that by revealing images of artisans and sharing their stories then "producers and consumers are brought closer together by the information flows that serve to bridge the spatial distance that separates them," (Nichols and Opal, 2005). However, by revealing images and narratives of artisans to consumers, the flow of knowledge becomes one-sided. While we as consumers have access to personal, and often traumatic stories, of the artisan, the artisan(s) are rarely able to learn of the personal lives of the consumers. Additionally, with the increase in use of social media platforms as marketing and advertising tools, images and narratives are now being shared faster than ever before. Bryant and Goodman (2004) express that in its “one-sidedness and incompleteness” fair trade’s use of storytelling has become a commodity in and of itself (Bryant and Goodman 2004, 359). Consumers are purchasing more than just a commodity, they are purchasing the artisan story as well. In this sense, the portrayal of artisans and their narratives have become commodified and are used as a marketing tool to add symbolic use-value to their craft (Varul 2008).

To highlight the cultural traditions of handicrafts in short, concise statements, FTOs often end up making “blanket statements” of entire cultures or countries that they are talking about (Sahan 2002). Manpreet Kaur Kalra offers an example that best highlights this scenario by saying, “Indian women are not allowed to work” then goes on to say,
When in reality the person writing the story is talking more about a particular village or community where that may be how that community operates but you can’t use an example of one community and make it representative of a whole country or culture.

(Sahan 2002)

When an FTO uses a blanket statement, they end up homogenizing entire countries or even continents, in an effort to educate the consumer.

Wilson (2012) argues that FTOs may contribute towards “globally constructed acceptable indigeneities” when marketing handicrafts to consumers (Wilson 2012, 178). The success of fair trade relies on consumer choice and therefore the narratives that are presented to consumers often reflect Western presumptions of what indigeneity is and the type of Indigenous artisan that a Westerner would want to support. Consumers or supporters of a charitable cause want to see the success of their donations reflected in the faces of those they are helping. They want to see gratitude and positivity. Israel’s (1982) description of the “smiling native’ is an imperative example of this. At a sales event showcased at Macy’s department store, an exhibit featuring ‘Amazon Indian Cultures’ was present. As Israel reflected on the images of people on display, smiling against the beautiful backdrop of their environment, she states “[n]ative artifacts are more salable if they come from an idyllic paradise than if they come from hungry, angry, or exploited Indians,” (Israel 1982). Fair trade marketing reflects a similar pattern. FTOs often avoid more "polarizing conversations on structural inequality” that comes as a result of neoliberal globalization and instead offers the romanticized version which constructs a perception of the artisans that is misleading (Johnson 2002, 39). FTOs “sanitize the
socio-economic conditions” of artisan communities with vague, de-politicized sentiments of significant and systemic issues that marginalized artisan communities face (Wilson 177). Further by sharing such images, FTOs allow the consumer to believe that they are “addressing core problems” of the artisans they partner with.

While FTOs are well-intentioned, their constructed narratives and carefully selected photos of artisans can present the artisan in such a way that is ‘othering’ and in need of our saving. Through their storytelling, fair trade often reinforces what Teju Cole (2012) has coined the white savior industrial complex. Cole places the concept of white saviorism, in which white westerners believe they can save impoverished minorities in developing nations, in a post-colonial context. Cole argues that while those whose charitable work or donations to African nations are well intentioned, it is necessary to understand the larger complexities at play and to understand why these nations need help in the first place (Cole 2012). Within their narratives, fair trade often divulges information on the hardships which artisans face in their daily lives, whether it be poverty, lack of resources or education, domestic abuse and so on. The goal of fair trade in discussing these matters is to encourage consumers to purchase fair trade with the knowledge that artisans will be able to escape poverty and lead a better life.

Painting this narrative of hardship presents several problems. First, poverty becomes commodified in that it is used to add value to the handicraft. Artisans, then, get placed in tricky situations in which they feel compelled to share their traumas as they know it will boost sales (Sahan 2002). Second, when short, concise narratives are used to
represent entire communities or cultures, not only is fair trade making blanket statements, but they also create incomplete stereotypes where “one story becomes the only story” (Adichie 2009). The trauma of one artisan becomes the narrative of an entire community, country, or perhaps even continent. Marketing trauma reinforces the idea that Western consumers can buy a marginalized person of color out of poverty. Additionally, these narratives lack context, and the consumer is left without an understanding of why the artisan may be in this position in the first place. The alternative to marketing traumas, then, is to celebrate the artisan and their accomplishments. However, Kalra states that it is necessary to celebrate the artisan without taking credit for the artisan’s success (Sahan, 2002). While understandably an organization would promote the positive impact that their organization has had on a producer group, it is also important to celebrate the artisan’s individual successes. In a way, sharing an artisan’s traumas and an artisan’s success and taking ownership of it, are almost one and the same. In both cases, the FTO, and not the artisan group, is central and insinuates that FTOs can save the artisans from the poor and lead them to success. This relates back to the center periphery model wherein Northern FTOs place themselves at the core and the producers at the periphery.

FTOs promote the experience of tradition and authenticity which are intended to link the producer and consumer despite geographical distance (Scrase 2003; 458). Without focusing too much attention on what is considered to be truly authentic or traditional, I focus on fair trade’s use of these terms as marketing tools to increase sales of cultural goods; regardless of whether their use of the terms is correct or not. According
to Spooner (1986), “the task of authentication is transferred to and appropriated by gatekeeper agencies and organizations” (Spooner 1986, 225). In this regard, fair trade becomes the gatekeeper of authenticity through story cards attached to handicrafts within their stores or used online on their social media platforms. Images and personal narratives, or even direct quotes from the artisans themselves, further reinforce a sense of authenticity to a craft. When consumers have a direct view into the production process of the craft they are buying, they are reminded that they are not purchasing a mass-produced product from a big box store but from a community where this object is understood as being culturally significant (Varul 2008, 662).

Authentic cultural goods are no longer exclusive to the wealthy elites whose acquisition of these goods was a sign of prestige and status. Due to increased access to cultural goods in so-called 'distant lands,' fair trade organizations provide greater access to cultural or 'ethnic' objects. However, questions of authenticity come into play, especially as cheaply made, mass-produced substitutes of these cultural goods, make distinguishing the authentic from the mass-produced, almost impossible (Appadurai 1987, 44; Scrase 2003, 451). In this sense, authentic cultural goods, such as handicrafts, are produced in the country or region that has historically and traditionally produced these crafts.

I argue that Western consumers perceive authenticity as being placed in a pre-colonial time period. Increased travel to post-colonial nations in the South has allowed for Western tourists to become intrigued with these “exotic” cultures in “faraway
lands” (Brown 2013, 5; Moberg and Lyon, 1-2). Increased travel and thus intrigue for other cultures has led to the increased desire for the ‘authentic’ souvenir which embodies the cultural traditions of the country in which the Westerner has visited (Grobar 2019, 519; Stewart 1984, 36). To the Western tourist and consumer, the authentic is rooted in a pre-colonial time in which colonization and modernization have not yet altered the cultural landscape (Varul 2008, 662). Furthermore, while tourists may be aware that the cultural goods that they are purchasing may just be ‘fabrications’ of the truly ‘authentic,’ Westerners “are satisfied when items are produced well and in a way that feels comfortable to the [them]” (Mahoney 2017, 7). In other words, Western tourists want cultural goods that embody the cultural traditions of a specific place, but also fulfill their individual tastes, which often is culturally and socially constructed and plays into their imagined worlds (Appadurai 1987, 32).

A key principle of fair trade organizations when working with artisan groups is the idea of preserving the cultural traditions of the handicraft specific to that artisan group. To understand how FTOs go about preserving traditions, it is necessary to ask the question: What is threatening the existence of cultural handicrafts such that FTOs feel the need to preserve them? Neoliberal globalization has drastically increased the commodification of handmade crafts and thus has created an external pressure on artisans to alter the materials, designs, aesthetics to produce for the ever-shifting consumer demands of the global North (Scrase 2003, 454). Culture is not stagnant; the traditional design of any particular handicraft evolves in-line with the community in which it is
produced. However, when the design or materials used is altered to meet an external demand, the cultural affiliation of this object and perhaps the community itself is transformed (Littrell and Dickson, 1999).

A common misconception amongst Western consumers of cultural goods is that all handicrafts are produced for one common purpose. FTO marketing practices assert that by purchasing from their organization, they are helping to preserve ‘centuries-old-traditions.’ This is arguably a lot of power to place on any individual, socially conscious consumer. Scrase (2003) makes an important distinction by dividing handicraft production into two sectors: the “strategic craft production” and “traditional craft production,” (Scrase, 454). Scrase argues, artisans “often produc[e] inferior crafts for a global market that have little resemblance to the meaning-rich, specialized crafts that are reserved for ceremonies or local consumption” (ibid). The materials, designs, and even colors used to produce a craft vary greatly depending on who the craft is being produced for. Artisans altering designs and colors to meet consumer demands or even changing materials as a cost-effective option does not directly correlate to a loss of cultural tradition in handicrafts. However, this differentiation between types of craft production is not often communicated to the consumer and therefore their perception of the cultural significance is misunderstood.

The cultural significance of a handicraft is often filtered through a Westernized lens. Scrase (2003) argues that FTOs often participate in “selective traditionalizing” as they are in control of determining which handicrafts would sell to Western market based
upon current fashion, art, and home-decor trends (Scrase 2003, 458). From there, FTOs selectively choose, from their own understanding, which cultural statement is the most relevant to share with consumers. FTOs have control over deciding what type of handicraft is considered to be unique or culturally significant to that group of people (ibid.) Often, the cultural identities of artisan communities are directly correlated with their handicrafts. This idea is reinforced through FTOs claiming that by purchasing handicrafts, you as the consumer are helping to preserve the ‘traditional production of’ or the ‘cultural heritage of’ a particular handicraft. The idea that Western consumers play a central role in the preservation of cultural heritage of a community or the cultural identities of artisans through the purchase of their cultural objects, in this case handicrafts, can be viewed as a commodified form of salvage ethnography.

For consumers of Indigenous artisan crafts, the products serve as ‘object lessons’, contributing to a long Western empiricist tradition that has privileged seeing as the pathway to knowing, and an accompanying tradition, emerging from a penchant that European colonizers had for collecting objects of the colonized, that contributed to the categorizations of people in relation to their material possessions or practices. (Wilson 2012, 179)

There has been a long tradition of Westerners participating in the practice of attempting to preserve the cultures they believe are most at risk. These cultures most often belong to those colonized by the very people attempting to preserve their cultural traditions. This remains true for FTOs who partner with artisan groups in marginalized regions of the global South. When FTOs claim that purchasing handicrafts through their business allows the consumer to help preserve the cultural tradition of the artisan and their community, they reinforce the idea that the Western consumer has the responsibility or right to do so.
Further, they reinforce the idea that the handicraft is a vessel of the community or country’s entire culture. As Wilson argued, Indigenous person, or in this case artisans, become directly connected to their material possessions. The handicraft becomes the cultural identity for an entire community or even country.
CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH DESIGN

In this chapter, I present the research design, methodologies, scope and limitations, and ethical considerations for my thesis. First, I will discuss the overall goals of my thesis and the two main types of participants that I interviewed. I also include background information on the four FTOs that I chose to include in my research and why I chose to include them. Second, I explain the ethnographic research methods that I chose, as well as how I analyzed the data that I collected. Finally, I discuss my positionality as a researcher and the limitations I faced while conducting fieldwork and writing my thesis.

Research Design:
Participants:

Fair Trade Organizations (FTOs):

I interviewed owners, employees, and volunteers of four FTOs: Ti-a Woven Goods, Zeal Living, Fair Anita, and Ten Thousand Villages and Ten Thousand Villages Goshen. Overall, I conducted interviews with ten participants. Below I provide a brief synopsis of the four organizations. Prior to conducting ethnographic research, I focused on selecting organizations that were either members of umbrella organizations such as the Fair Trade Federation or the World Fair Trade Organization (WFTO). The WFTO is a
global umbrella organization responsible for setting standards and verifying that their FTOs, including producer and wholesaler organizations, are committed to practicing the ten fair trade principles. The WFTO also certifies FTOs which allows FTOs to use the WFTO Guarantee System label. The Fair Trade Federation is a North American membership organization that advises members on fair trade practices and is itself a member of the WFTO.

Figure 3: The Ten Principles of Fair trade according to the WFTO.

However, as I began preliminary research, I quickly realized that many fair-trade organizations, particularly smaller organizations such as Tia-Woven Goods or Zeal Living, have no membership or affiliation with umbrella organizations. This is due to the cost of certification and membership fees that prevent organizations from being a certified FTO. These organizations, while they are not affiliated with any umbrella group, identify themselves as FTOs and adhere to the ten principles of fair trade. All names have been changed except for retail owners whose identities could not be hidden. All participants were informed and signed consent forms acknowledging this.

Ti-a Woven Goods:
Simbala Drammeh is the owner and founder of Ti-a Woven Goods in Colorado. Ti-a Woven Goods is a for-profit business that partners with women’s co-ops in Bolgatanga, Ghana who produce handwoven baskets. Ti-a Woven Goods does not have a brick-and-mortar shop and sells primarily through e-commerce sales and at craft markets and farmer’s markets around Colorado. Ti-a Woven Goods operates under the guidelines of fair trade practices but is not professionally affiliated with the Fair Trade Federation or WFTO. I interviewed Simbala Drammeh via Zoom. I also interviewed her niece, Bridgette, at the Highlands Farmer’s Market. I spent a few weekends at the market with Bridgette who let me sit at her market stall.

Website: tiawovengoods.com
Instagram: @tiawovengoods

Zeal Living:

Caitlin Halberstadt is the owner and founder of Zeal Living, a for-profit business established in 2015 and located in Boulder, Colorado. Zeal Living partners with over 9,000 artisans, selling a wide range of handicrafts produced in countries throughout seventeen countries in Africa. Halberstadt first started selling crafts from South Africa as she was born in Johannesburg. Zeal Living has no brick-and-mortar shop and sells primarily through e-commerce sales and at craft markets and farmer’s markets around Colorado. Zeal Living operates under the guidelines of fair trade practices but is not professionally affiliated with the Fair Trade Federation or WFTO. I interviewed Caitlin Halberstadt via Zoom, who operates Zeal Living almost entirely by herself.
Fair Anita:

Joy McBrien is the owner and founder of Fair Anita, a for-profit business established in 2015. Fair Anita partners with over 8,000 artisans in Cambodia, Chile, Egypt, Ethiopia, India, Mexico, Peru, South Africa, and Vietnam. As a wholesaler, Fair Anita retails to over 300 shops across the U.S., Europe, Australia, and Canada. Fair Anita is a member of the FTF and Chicago Fair Trade. I interviewed Joy McBrien via Zoom, where we discussed Fair Anita and Joy’s involvement with the Fair Trade Federation.

Ten Thousand Villages:

Ten Thousand Villages was established in 1946 by Edna Ruth Byler and is considered the oldest FTO across North America and Europe. Ten Thousand Villages partners with over 75 artisan groups across 25 countries. Ten Thousand Villages is a member of the Fair Trade Federation and the WFTO. I interviewed multiple people from Ten Thousand Villages. First, I interviewed a woman who was not affiliated with Ten Thousand Villages but shopped regularly at the store in Goshen, Indiana. She introduced me to a volunteer, Kathy, at the Goshen location. I interviewed Kathy next, who then referred me to the former education coordinator for Ten Thousand Villages in Goshen, Mary. Mary then introduced me to Sarah, the current Brand Relations and Media Coordinator for Ten Thousand Villages. The home office of Ten Thousand Villages is in
Akron, Pennsylvania with over 70 brick-and-mortar shops across the U.S. Brick-and-mortar shops are differentiated between board stores and company stores. The location in Goshen, Indiana is a board store, meaning it is funded and operated independently.

Website: tenthousandvillages.com
Instagram: @tenthousandvillages
@villages_goshen

Consumers:

I interviewed consumers of fair trade handicrafts to understand how storytelling as a marketing practice, and fair trade marketing practices overall, influenced their perceptions and purchasing decisions towards fair trade handicrafts. Since meeting consumers in person was extremely limited due to COVID-19, I reached out to all participants electronically via e-mail or social media (Facebook or Instagram). I posted a flyer on two Facebook groups, Fair Trade Shopping Group and Shopping With a Purpose. The flyer encouraged members to fill out the survey and include their e-mail if they wanted to participate in an interview. I interviewed two consumers via Zoom. One consumer was a woman, Margaret, who primarily shopped at Ten Thousand Villages in Goshen and introduced me to other volunteers at that location. The other consumer, a woman named Jacky, operated a website which helped shoppers find trade products from a list of fair trade businesses.

Additionally, I incorporated the use of a survey so I could gain a broader understanding of consumer behaviors towards handicrafts and the influence which storytelling had on their purchases. Unfortunately, the survey did not prove to be as
informative as I had hoped. Not many participants shared detailed information on stories they had observed while shopping fair trade. However, it did bring me to an interview with one consumer, Jacky.

**Research Questions:**

1. How do FTOs market culturally embedded handicrafts to compete and persist within an ever-changing, Western consumer market?
   1a. Specifically, how does the use of storytelling as a marketing strategy create or reinforce Western perceptions towards marginalized artisans living in the global South.

2. What are the motivations behind consumers purchasing handicrafts under the fair trade system, and what are the potential implications?
   2a. What meanings do consumers assign to theses and how does perceived altruism play a role in their purchasing decisions?

3. As fair trade becomes more globalized, how does fair trade maintain producer-consumer relationships and the transparency of knowledge of handicrafts along the product supply chain?

**Research Methods:**

My research methods consisted of both in-person and virtual ethnographic methods including, participant observation, semi-structured interviews, surveys, and visual research methods. I used these methods to understand in-person and online marketing practices of fair trade organizations and consumer perceptions and behaviors towards these marketing practices.
I used participant observation and semi-structured interviews to better understand how retailers constructed and used storytelling as a marketing strategy and how they perceived it to be an effective or ineffective strategy. With consumers, my goal was to understand how storytelling and fair trade marketing overall impacted their purchasing decisions towards fair trade handicrafts. I originally had intended to include interviews with artisans in my research, however, due to COVID-19 gaining access to artisans was not a possibility. I focused on how retailers and consumers constructed narratives regarding artisans and their environment to market their handicrafts to Western consumers. In the future, I would include artisan voices to understand how they view the use of storytelling in marketing.

Conducting ethnographic research during a global pandemic proved to be extremely difficult and therefore most of my research was conducted virtually. I conducted participant observation at the Highlands Farmer’s Market and the South Pearl Street Farmer’s Market, both in Denver. I also conducted one in-person interview at the Highlands Farmer’s Market. The remaining semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom. As I had limited access to potential participants, particularly consumers, I added a survey option for consumers to fill out online. The survey was designed to increase data on consumer behaviors towards fair trade handicrafts. Lastly, I used methods of visual research methods to analyze visual representations of storytelling, both physical and virtual. A significant shift I observed while conducting research was the shift away from printed story cards or narrative cards and towards storytelling via social
media. This observation may be biased considering I primarily observed online marketing plans as opposed to in-person marketing. However, from the retailers I did manage to visit and from several interviews, more and more FTOs seem to view digital storytelling as a better way of communicating to their consumers. For this reason, my research focuses on the use of storytelling as a marketing tool, not just the use of printed story cards.

**Participant Observation:**

This method proved to be the least useful as COVID-19 prevented many in-person interactions. Throughout the summer and early fall of 2020, I managed to spend several weekends at the Highlands Farmers Market in the Highlands neighborhood of Denver and the South Pearl Street Farmers Market in the Washington Park neighborhood of Denver. These farmers markets had strict COVID-19 guidelines where all visitors were required to wear masks, maintain social distancing, and follow a one-way, guided path through the market. This path made lingering at the market difficult and speaking with customers even more so.

I spent several weekends during the fall with Bridgette an employee of Tia Woven. I spent time with her at her stall at the Highland Farmer’s Market. While at this market I was able to speak with Bridgette and observe patrons who walked around the market and those who came into the stall to purchase Tia Woven products. While this method did not lead to any in-depth interviews with consumers, it did allow me to observe their purchasing behaviors towards fair trade handicrafts.
Semi-Structured Interviews:

I conducted semi-structured interviews with participants who were either consumers or retailers of fair trade handicrafts. I used an interview guide that consisted of open-ended questions which allowed for participants to discuss in length the topics on which they were most familiar with or comfortable speaking. Meeting participants did not go as organically as I had hoped and all participants were contacted via the internet, including e-mail, Facebook groups, and Instagram. All interviews were conducted via Zoom.

For consumers, I asked them questions regarding their experiences with purchasing fair trade handicrafts and if advertising had any influence upon this purchasing decision. I further asked them questions regarding their knowledge and understanding of the fair trade movement overall. Lastly, I asked consumers whether COVID-19 had a significant impact upon their purchasing decisions, both general and fair trade purchases.

For retailers, I asked the participants questions based upon their positions at their affiliated fair trade organizations. The goal was to understand how their fair trade organization constructed and marketed stories to consumers and how this has evolved both in recent years and how they adapted this past year during COVID-19. I asked each
participant to share their perspectives on storytelling, focusing on images and language used to construct these stories.

**Survey:**

Meeting potential participants, particularly consumers, was extremely difficult so I added a survey as a means of collecting more data on consumer perceptions and behaviors towards fair trade handicrafts. I used Qualtrics which allowed me to share this survey via Facebook and Instagram. Additionally, I placed a printed QR code in the break room of my job so that my coworkers could participate in the survey as well. I asked similar questions on this survey as I did to the consumers with whom I conducted interviews. Overall, I received around 30 responses. From these responses, I was able to schedule an interview with one consumer, Jacky.

**Visual Research Methods:**

I used visual research methods to understand how FTOs use storytelling on their e-commerce websites and their social media platforms, specifically Instagram. While looking at the e-commerce sites and Instagram accounts, I focused my attention on how storytelling was used to discuss handicrafts and the artisan or artisan groups who made them. Storytelling could be presented in several ways including, Instagram posts, Instagram stories, e-commerce product pages, blog posts within the website, a page dedicated to sharing artisan stories, etc.
The image represents the Ten Thousand Villages website which includes a tab at the top of the homepage that links to a “Maker-to-Market Impact”. Under this tab, the viewer can learn how their purchase impacts artisans and can also read artisan stories.

I chose to analyze the e-commerce websites of the four FTOs as their website is their main point of contact for consumers to learn about that organization’s mission and practices in addition to searching for handicrafts to buy.

The use of social media marketing has increased exponentially over the past 15 years. Social media is a great tool for small businesses as there is no cost to use the platform as opposed to other forms of media advertising or print advertising. Although, businesses can pay for sponsored advertising on social media platforms as well. Business owners or social media managers can promote products and actively engage with their consumers every second of every day. Businesses also choose to invest in promoted ads
that can reach a wider audience. I chose to focus on Instagram, rather than Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, etc., for one main reason. Instagram is a photo and video-sharing social networking service, (Although, the video-sharing feature has only become increasingly popular in the past two years with the introduction of Tik-Tok, a new video-sharing social media app.) FTOs use Instagram as a virtual story card in that each Instagram post is a combination of a photo alongside a written caption.

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**Positionality:**

I studied the perceptions and understandings towards the use of storytelling in the fair trade network and while I attempted to remain as neutral in my data collection and analysis as possible, I am aware of my positionally as a middle-class, white, female student living in the United States. Most of the research conducted on the fair trade social movement, and therefore constitutes the majority of research that I used for my thesis, was done so by white academics in the United States and, to a lesser degree, in Europe. I tried to navigate these potential biases in several ways. First, when seeking references for my research, I always made sure to intentionally seek authors who are BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and Persons of Color) and/or are from countries of the global South to incorporate into my thesis. My thesis discusses themes of gender, race, socioeconomic status, and international relations and to remain as neutral as possible, I attempt to incorporate as many voices as possible from all demographics.

The majority of my participants were white females, ranging from their early 20s to 60s, except for two female participants who were Ghanaian and Ghanaian
American. Although I would have benefitted from participants who were more diverse in race and ethnicity, this does reflect the overall, average demographic of fair trade retailers and consumers, which speaks to a larger issue within the movement about the lack of access to fair trade goods.

**Limitations:**

The first limitation that I encountered was the absence of artisan voices in my thesis. The first is that due to COVID-19, access to artisans was extremely difficult. After speaking with the founders and employees of the four FTOs it was clear that even they struggled to communicate regularly with their artisan co-ops. In the future, I would like to incorporate artisans into my data collection and understand from their perspective how they believe storytelling impacts them. Therefore, while I analyze and discuss the use of storytelling as it pertains to the production of handicrafts and the use of artisan narratives, I do not intend to speak for or on behalf of artisans. Further, several of the participants I interviewed discuss how they perceive aspects such as storytelling or COVID-19 have impacted artisans. While I include these perceptions in my thesis, I am aware that they do not reflect the views of artisans within the fair trade network.

My second limitation was the impact that COVID-19 had upon my fieldwork. Originally, my goal was to split my fieldwork into both in-person and virtual ethnographic research methods. While a small portion of my fieldwork was conducted in person, the majority of it was conducted virtually. Further, I met all participants via e-mail, Facebook, Instagram and conducted their interviews via Zoom. The exception is
Bridgette from Ti-a Woven Goods whom I met at the farmer’s market. This limited the organic encounters and conversations that I may have had if not for COVID-19.

The positive was that it allowed me to explore digital media culture, especially social media marketing which has become so pervasive and impactful over the last 15 years. As I could not explore FTOs in Colorado as much as I had hoped, I was forced to explore elsewhere. As a result, I got the opportunity to meet with the founder of Fair Anita and several employees and volunteers of Ten Thousand Villages.

Despite the limitations which COVID-19 brought upon my fieldwork, I was able to connect with participants of four extremely unique and dedicated FTOs. All ten participants, as well as those who participated in the survey, provided insight into how fair trade marketing used storytelling to promote the fair trade mission and advertise their handicrafts to Western consumers.
CHAPTER FIVE: STORYTELLING

Figure 5: ‘Become Part of the Story.’ Photo from Ten Thousand Villages website.

Within fair trade marketing, storytelling can encompass a wide variety of themes when promoting the fair trade mission and advertising handicrafts to consumers. These themes can include sharing artisan stories, process stories, impact stories, and stories of cultural and historical significance. When sharing stories and images of artisans, FTOs often promote their successes, traumas, and/or the socio-economic struggles of artisans or artisan producer groups in relation to the impact which the fair trade movement has had upon their livelihoods. Process stories refer to sharing stories, videos, or imagery of the production process of a particular handicraft. Fair trade consumers can learn about how a particular handicraft was made and the materials used
to make it. The consumer can also learn how to use the product, if that product is not as commonly used in the United States. FTOs often use impact stories to educate consumers about the impact that their organization has had upon the artisan producer group and often the community they live in. Finally, many stories highlight the cultural and/or historical significance of the handicraft and its relevance to the artisans who produce it and the region where it's produced.

The variety of stories differentiates across a myriad of marketing platforms and target consumer audiences. I observed stories as they were shared on e-commerce sites which, in addition to selling handicrafts, also usually served as an educational platform for consumers to learn more about the fair-trade mission and the various artisan producer groups they partnered with. I also observed the Instagram platforms of the four FTOs I analyzed which included their posts, Instagram stories, and saved stories. The stories that were shared across e-commerce sites and Instagram pages varied to highlight the themes I mentioned above. They also varied to reach different consumer demographics based on gender, age and knowledge of fair trade or socially motivated consumerism.

When reviewing stories and images on Instagram, a website, or a blogpost, I always kept in mind the four core questions that Manpreet Kaur Kalra asks her clients when they are creating their brand narratives. She asks:

- Does my company sound like a savior? Is my company perpetuating the notion that people of color need saving?
- Am I making blanket statements about a community or culture?
• Do I have informed consent to share the information that I am sharing?
• Am I promoting cultural hegemony?

**How are Stories Collected?**

There is a myriad of ways in which stories can be collected in the fair trade network. The topic of story collection was not addressed by every participant as they were not personally involved in the story collection. I wanted to understand how different organizations collected the stories that they then shared in their stores or online. While I was unable to determine how each FTO collected artisan stories, participants from Ten Thousand Villages shared their perspectives.

According to the Media Relations and Brand Manager for Ten Thousand Villages, Sarah, stories are collected by those in direct relations with artisan groups, which are most often the buyers. The buyers are in “constant contact” with artisan groups and travel often to visit the groups to “work on designs together, ensure the workplaces are safe, and [ensure] that their business models are sustainable.” While there, buyers will take photographs or conduct interviews with the artisans and send that information back to the marketing department. When buyers are unable to travel to various locations or the marketing team needs additional content for a new campaign, then Ten Thousand Villages will reach out to an artisan group and ask if they would like to send photographs or answer a few questions. For example, Ten Thousand Villages participated in a campaign with Fashion Revolution, a non-profit organization based in the United Kingdom, that
raises awareness against the fashion industry's exploitation of workers and the environment. The image below showcases this campaign where artisans hold up signs that say, “I made your clothes.” The goal is to educate consumers on knowing where their clothes come from and who made them.

![Image of artisan holding a sign saying 'I made your scarf']

*Figure 6: ‘I Made your Scarf’ Photo taken from Ten Thousand village Instagram.*

**Learning Tours:**

Learning tours are a frequent practice for FTOs, as well as non-profits and other social enterprises, to learn more about the artisans, or communities, with whom you are partnering with. Learning tours can also serve to increase donations from stockholders or large donors who want to see firsthand what their money is being used for. However, the latter is not something that was brought up in my interviews and therefore I cannot speak further on. Participants from Ten Thousand Villages were the only ones to mention the use of learning tours, which makes sense as Ten Thousand
Villages is largest and oldest FTO in North America. Out of the four FTOs I analyzed and interviewed, Ten Thousand Villages was the only non-profit FTO.

For Ten Thousand Villages, a few selected members take an annual trip to visit an artisan group and learn about the group, the handicrafts they are making, and how their work is positively impacting their communities. Members of the home office, managers from the company store network, and members of the board store networks, can apply to join the learning tour. Only a select few are allowed to join as “it's really expensive and also extremely overwhelming to an artisan group to have a couple dozen Americans just drop in.” Sarah explained the difference between board store networks and company store networks. After I told her I had also interviewed volunteers and employees from the Ten Thousand Villages in Goshen, Indiana, Sarah explained that this location was a board store, meaning this location operated privately as their own self-funded, non-profit while remaining part of Ten Thousand Villages. While the home office Ten Thousand Villages established their own learning tours, board stores may also choose to go on their own learning tours if they organized and funded it themselves. After re-examining my conversation with Mary, a former education coordinator for Ten Thousand Villages, it seemed that the learning tours that Ten Thousand Villages Goshen went on were part of the home office learning tours. As Sarah explained,

They go and meet the artisans first-hand and learn how the craft is done and how their work is impacting their communities. They get to take their own photos and
they get to ask the artisans questions and get to build relationships with those folks, even if just for an afternoon. It really helps our staff and our stores to take those stories because they’ve experienced some of it first-hand and share those stories with their customers and their communities. Also, I would say all the reports I've ever heard from our artisan partners is that they enjoy it just as much. [...] it just reiterates that connection and partnership.

It is difficult to know how genuine and meaningful these connections are, especially without hearing the artisan’s perspective. Reading Sarah's statement, I question whether genuine connections can be made just in one afternoon or after one conversation. Later, I discuss how long term relationships help to establish a successful business that has based on mutually beneficial relationships.

After Sarah shared information about the learning tours, I wanted to understand more about how Ten Thousand Villages members gathered information to be used as stories in their home stores. I asked whether they asked artisans specific questions or whether they followed an interview sheet or if it was just an open conversation between Ten Thousand Villages members and the artisans. Sarah herself had not been on a learning tour, so perhaps did not know exactly how those who went on the learning tours interacted with artisans and what sort of questions were asked. However, she did answer the question from a marketing perspective, explaining that questions were asked depending on what the marketing team needed to know based upon the product. For
products with an interesting production process, such as a welcome mat that is made of recycled flip flops that were saved from the landfill, then questions would be asked about that. Sarah said, “that story is really fascinating about the process and so we will talk to that group specifically about how those flip flops were sourced and who came up with that incredible idea and how they made it.” For other products where the process may not be “as much of a hook for customers,” Ten Thousand Villages will focus more on the community impact that the production of that handicraft has had. Story collection depends on what they feel would be valuable for their customers to learn and “so they can connect a little closer to these artisans.”

The former education coordinator for Ten Thousand Villages, Mary, shared her experience with learning tours and the four that she had been on since 1998. As the former education coordinator, sharing stories was a significant part of Mary’s job. She said, “meeting the artisans and hearing their stories and seeing how fair trade had completely changed their lives was so significant.” As education coordinator, Mary took the stories she had collected on her four learning tours and shared them in her local community at schools, clubs, women’s groups, etc. I asked her a similar question that I asked Sarah and asked what kind of stories the artisans would share and what kind of questions did she seek out. Mary said, “The main purpose was to meet the people and learn their stories.” The more learning tours she went on and the more artisans she met, the better her storytelling became because so many of her stories came directly from her interactions with the artisans, rather than hearing stories secondhand. Mary said that she
could learn more about the culture, but also more about where they lived, where they worked, and what the conditions were, both in the workplace and in the community. She said that the main questions she would ask the artisan groups were “Did [fair trade] make a difference?” and “How did [fair trade] make a difference?”

**Informed Consent**

In many cases where story collection was discussed, the topic of consent was mentioned, to varying degrees. I observed a generational difference when referring to consent, or more particularly informed consent. As I mentioned earlier, Sarah, the media relations and brand manager, mentioned how consent was given by the artisans to use their stories and images for marketing purposes. However, and it is important to say that I had not asked her further about it, Sarah did not comment any further on how consent was given or how frequently consent was given. Additionally, it was not under Sarah’s job description to personally interact with artisans and gather stories, and therefore it would not be her job to ask consent anyway. As the former education coordinator with Ten Thousand Villages, Mary’s job also required her to share stories with the public, albeit in a much different way. Sarah shared stories via social media and Mary educated local groups on the importance of fair trade. I had asked Mary what kind of information she shared when giving a presentation. I also asked whether she shared photographs of artisans in addition to sharing photographs of handicrafts. She responded that yes, she did. She shared that she usually used a PowerPoint presentation where she shared images
of artisans and their stories. She said they used images of artisans when she could but sometimes, she could not. She shared,

Some of the women who were in the sex trade, or something, do not want to be identified, so we don’t. So, we try to be very respectful. If they have reasons for us not to show their pictures, we don’t. But we explain to them that when we tell their stories, people buy more of their products. They want us to show their pictures because they want people to buy products. And so, making that connection for our customers often does make a difference when they know how something was made.

Coerced or manipulated consent is not consent. Mary revealed a significant power dynamic that existed between her and the artisans and can be seen across many mission-driven organizations and their relationships with marginalized communities in developing countries. Artisans, who do not have the socio-economic agency are often coerced into sharing their stories, which are often traumatic and deeply personal, for the sake of promoting sales and/or donations. Artisans within the fair-trade network rely on the relationships they have with their Northern FTO partners to earn a sustainable income.

I tried to clarify further on what consent meant and Mary replied “we always make sure. We always ask if we can take their photos or use their pictures.” Simply asking to use photographs or someone’s story is also not consent. I do not know the full process of how consent was given or asked in these scenarios. However, what Mary had described to me was not consent, at least not entirely. From my own perspective,
informed consent requires, in the very least, telling the artisan how their story or image was going to be used, how long it would be used for, and where it would be shared and to whom.

When I spoke with Joy McBrien, of Fair Anita, she began our interview by immediately sharing that she was “super interested in fair trade messaging” and in fact was currently redesigning the Fair Anita website to update and change their current messaging. Additionally, she was working with the Fair Trade Federation on how to have more consent. At the time, Joy was running Fair Anita’s Instagram account. I commented, “I noticed on your Instagram page, that you don’t feature a lot of artisans on your page and instead seem to focus more on featuring models wearing the products.” I asked her why she chose to do that. She said, “[w]e work with about 8,000 women around the world and probably around 100 of those women are excited to have their face shared on social media. Most of them do not want that, so that’s why we don’t do it.” In addition to the simple fact that most of the artisans whom she works with do not want their photographs shared, she also explained that those posts get the lowest engagement from viewers.

Joy explained that she struggled with finding the best way to share some of the [artisan] stories. She said,

I’m still wrestling with what is the best way to share some of those stories.

Before I share anything, I'm trying to get renewed informed consent from artisans.
So, like if an artisan said four years that I could post a picture and this quote, I wanna make sure that is still a thing because I think consent is a very fluid thing.

I had originally reached out to Joy McBrien via direct message on Instagram because of her interview on Manpreet Kaur Kalra’s podcast, entitled *Art of Citizenry*, which is part of Kalra’s larger brand marketing business that focuses on decolonizing storytelling and education within fair trade. The episode was entitled Episode 05: *Consent, Power, and Trauma in Ethical Storytelling*. The episode discussed the importance of how consent alone was not enough. The only way to ethical storytelling is with renewed informed consent (Kalra 2020). The importance of renewed informed consent is that it allows for artisans to understand the full spectrum in which their narratives will be shared. Where are the stories being shared and what are the possible repercussions of having an artisan’s story shared both in print and online? This is especially important in the digital age when narratives can reach a much wider audience at any time. As Kalra pointed out, once something has been posted online, it cannot be taken down. If someone in the artisan’s community views this story online, could it potentially have negative repercussions for them? (ibid).

In our interview, Joy briefly mentioned that she practiced renewed informed consent with artisan partners. In her interview with Kalra she goes further into how she does so. She said previously she would ask artisans “is there something you’d like our customers to know?” She updated her questioning to “[a]re you interested in sharing
something with customers?” If the artisan said yes, then she would dive into the process of how their story would be collected and how it would be shared:

I would sit down with you in the interview and only use what you say in the interview, not whatever else I know about your life. You get to decide what you want to say. I’ll do a writeup, share it with you, and we can change it, edit it, and do with it whatever you want. Ultimately that exact writeup, should you give consent, could potentially be shared on social media seen by thousands of customers, and used on a tag. Or retailers wanna print it out or put it on the internet. So, it’s possible your family members or people in your community could see it (Kalra 2020).

What is particularly important here is that the artisan understands that the exact words shared during the interview will be used and that is it. Their day-to-day conversations with Joy or anyone else will not be interpreted and used in marketing. In discussions about learning tours with members of Ten Thousand Villages, it seemed from my understanding that any conversation was up for grabs. This could potentially deter deeper and two-sided relationships amongst artisans and FTOs because artisans may not know whether the story they are sharing is just for conversation or if it will be an Instagram post viewed by thousands. When any conversation is up for grabs, FTOs ignore the potentially harmful consequences of having family members or members of the community seeing these posts. As an example, many artisan groups, such as those who partner with Joy McBrien and Fair Anita, are survivors of sexual and domestic abuse. If
members of their community, including their partners, see the FTOs post, it could have serious consequences for the artisans and could potentially put their safety and even lives at risk.

"I plan to help my kids and see them succeed. They rely on me and I pray for them every day."

This is our 7th artisan highlight in our new series. Fair Anita values CONSENT in storytelling. All of these stories shared (and the accompanying photos) were approved by the artisan, word-for-word, after an interview where the chose what to share about their lives, knowing where these stories would be shared and how they would be used. They are in charge of their own stories, as it should be!

Edited - 96w

Figure 7: ‘Informed Consent’ Photo taken from Fair Anita Instagram page

The artisan should decide without any influence on whether or not to share their own story. As Joy said, “Our customers wanna know our stories, wanna know who made their products […] but by no means is anyone entitled to know someone’s story.” The
story does not need to be traumatic or deeply personal; it can be a lighthearted narrative, but the artisan is not entitled to share their story. Referring to Kalra’s point about digital narratives, FTOs need to be aware that while renewed informed consent is important, artisans need to understand that it is possible that their story cannot be taken back. Even printed stories are incredibly difficult to take back. If you are a FTO wholesaler distributing product to 500 stores across the U.S., each with their own marketing strategies, it would be incredibly difficult to have them remove each and every product tag, brochure, or printed material with a story on it.

**Human Connection - Stories as Connecting Others:**

Through storytelling, fair trade hopes to connect the producer and consumer together and to create a human connection that is generally absent within normative capitalistic supply chains. However, the sharing of artisan stories is one-sided as intimate details of an artisan’s life are shared to an audience who does not share their story back. When we share those stories as a means of marketing products to consumers, those stories become intertwined with a consumer's purchasing decision. As a result, therein exists a power dynamic where consumers, consciously or not, factor in artisans' stories to make a purchasing decision.

When consumers hear the personal stories of artisans who made their product, they feel a personal connection between them and believe their purchase is making a direct impact upon their life. Storytelling often plays into the identifiable victim effect, a type of heuristic which appeals to a person's emotions or feelings when making decisions.
Personal, relatable stories that appeal to one’s emotions often have more influence than facts or statistics (Jenni and Lowenstein 1997). It is a common tactic in marketing, particularly used by charitable organizations when asking for donations. The same goes for fair trade. The tactic of sharing an artisan’s story to influence people to purchase their products is oftentimes more appealing than saying a plain statistic.

When speaking with Margaret, she shared a story about a time she visited New Mexico and shared a connection with an artisan who sold her a piece of pottery. She shared,

I made a trip to Acoma [an Indigenous reservation near Alburquerque, New Mexico]. […] I was looking at this woman’s pottery that she had made and was admiring it and I picked this one up thinking maybe I can afford this one because it was little, and it was still way more money than what I thought I could spend. It was money that she deserved but I felt like I couldn’t spend that and somehow or other we had made an emotional connection. She was about my age, and we talked. So when I put it down, I said I'm sorry I can't, I think your work is beautiful but I just can't and she said, ‘Well if I knock some money off of it will you take another look.’ […] so, it's not one of the flashy beautiful new Mexican pottery pieces, but she was using traditional paints and traditional designs. I met the woman, it is her work, um was it fair trade that she knocked off some dollars so that I could walk away with it? I don't know. […] Had I seen that that art piece I came home with in a catalog or store,
I wouldn’t have purchased them. It was because of that connection that I had made with the artisan that made the difference.

I share this story because I feel that fair trade often tries to recreate this experience, but marketing perhaps cannot replace true human connection. However, the sharing of stories does not create a two-sided human connection; it is one sided and our expectation as consumers to want the story as a requirement to purchase a handicraft is rooted in colonialism and white saviorism. Kalra argued, “the idea of one-sided relationships leads to problematic marketing rooted in saviorism furthering colonialis power dynamics between the global North and South and it comes out in the form of storytelling (Sahan 2020). The practice of sharing artisan stories, oftentimes without informed consent, creates a power dynamic in which the Western consumer knows intimate details of the artisan’s life. Additionally, artisan stories can reinforce the idea that they are in need of the Westerners saving.

There should be no expectation for any artisan to share their story, traumatic or not, and should have no influence as to whether a consumer purchases from them. However, due to the identifiable victim affect, the personal story makes a significant difference. From several of the participants I spoke with, the story played a significant role in how they chose to shop or promote fair trade. Amongst the ten individuals I interviewed, I noticed a generational divide between why we should consume certain fair trade handicrafts. In general, participants in the older generation felt when it came to purchasing fair trade handicrafts, or any mission-driven product, that it is the mission that
is the most important, while the product itself is second. For example, an avid fair trade consumer, Jacky shared, “it really is with a mission because every single item in there has a story. Usually, you can see a little bit on the website and then when it comes it has a little card that tells you more of the story and so every [product] has like an amazing story behind it.” For Jacky, the story was equally equated with the FTO’s mission and if the story was not there, then the legitimacy of the FTO would be in question. For the younger generation, the priorities were in reverse. They felt that it was the product that was most important and the positive impact that buying this product had on artisans came second. This is not to say that participants felt that purchasing items through the fair trade network was not vitally important, but that to compete in a competitive capitalistic marketplace, the product itself needed to be just as important, if not more important than the mission, for it to successfully compete.

One consumer, Jacky, often purchased a fair trade product for the story just as much as she bought it for the aesthetic or function. Sometimes the story mattered even more. I asked her what she liked most about the stories and she replied “[…] knowing that your purchase made a difference for that one specific person. You know you are impacting that life, there’s something about connecting with somebody.” Jacky shared an example of how a story helped influence her purchase of a basket from a shop called Eternal Threads. She said,

[Eternal Threads] kept telling stories about the Rosemary basket and I don’t even collect baskets, that’s not something I go out and buy. They were beautiful
baskets, but as I followed the story and saw what her family was going through during COVID; just how she adapted and how she was doing, it just inspired me.

I'm like, I want the basket and so I bought the basket.

If it had not been for the story, Jacky probably would not have purchased the basket. She went on to say, “I was on [the website] and was like oh Rosemary made that; I have to have it. And so yeah it was the story that was clencher. I liked it, I thought it was beautiful, but it was knowing who it was from that made it all the more special.” Jacky’s personal investment in this artisan encouraged her to not just buy the one basket but to continue purchasing from her because she felt like she was connected to her. This became especially so when Rosemary’s family went through a particularly challenging time and a donation page was set up to help Rosemary and her family. Jacky’s donation to the family made her feel even more connected to this woman. Jacky felt like she personally knew this woman, despite never having met her.

A volunteer for Ten Thousand Villages, Kathy, shared a similar story, describing how the story and the impact of the purchase is the driving force. She shared, 

Like I wanna buy up everything they’ve ever made because it's so heartwarming and it’s important. I look at it in my house and I think those women have worked so hard to become who they are. They’re heroes. [Referencing blankets made from recycled saris] They stitch them together in pleasing color combinations, so they are pleasing in their culture. Now I don’t actually like those color combinations, but I've got their stuff in my house because I am so excited that
they have found their way back to being wholesome and able to support their kids.

Kathy’s reasoning to purchase the blankets was entirely due to the story and the impact she believed she was making on the artisan’s life. The product itself seemed of little importance especially as she did not like the look of the blanket. Also, it is difficult to understand what Kathy meant by “back to being wholesome” and what it means to be wholesome, but it seems Kathy feels that her purchase contributes towards this idea of the artisan becoming wholesome. Kathy mentioned prior that the group who made the recycled-sari blankets are women who were victims of the “sex trade.” From our conversation, I could not determine whether Kathy meant the artisans were victims of sex trafficking or if the artisans were sex workers due to economic need.

Margaret, an avid consumer of fair trade products, also reflected a similar mindset to Jacky and Kathy. To Margaret, the product was especially important, but it seemed that the story mattered even more.

I like that it’s artsy and the fabric, they tend to hand block the print or do a lot of embellishments or embroidery. I really like that it fits with the kind of sewing that I like to do, but more than that I know that when I purchase something from them, I am helping someone whom I'll never meet in India to better her life and better the lives of her children. It means that in some cases the children can have an education which we know makes a huge difference in the world.
In Margaret’s case, the item she purchased was an item that she found aesthetically pleasing and fit with her own style, which was important. Margaret did not go further into whether she would have purchased the product if the story had not been there. However, the motivation of helping someone, which was placed higher than the motivation to purchase the product itself, may create unintended negative consequences in our perception towards artisans. It potentially places the artisan in a position of inferiority, as their products are being purchased out of a consumer’s desire to help them rather than for the product they’ve handmade.

Margaret, Jacky, and Kathy’s reasoning for purchasing these products may have been well intended, but their motives are reflective of a larger pattern of how shopping out of a charitable mindset may lead to negative consequences for artisans. Ultimately, buying out of a charitable mindset does not contribute towards a sustainable supply chain that can successfully compete in mainstream markets. If the goal is to contribute towards poverty reduction through ethical trade relationships, then consumers need to value the product they are purchasing and needs to fit their needs and aesthetic. Otherwise, the probability of consumers returning to shop from this store again is low because they do not truly value the product, just the story. Storytelling becomes even further complicated, when narratives of trauma and poverty are shared with consumers to draw them in through an “emotional pull” and encourage them to purchase products.
Poverty Porn: The Marketing of Poverty and Traumas

The discussion of poverty and trauma is a complex, yet often oversimplified topic within fair trade storytelling. Like other charitable organizations and social consumer movements, poverty is an emotional tactic that draws the privileged in and influences them into purchasing a product or donating their money. Topics of poverty and trauma are not interchangeable but also not mutually exclusive. Poverty is often at the root of systemic issues faced by marginalized artisan groups in the global South. Poverty is intertwined with aspects of socio-economic status, gender, race, or social status, environmental degradation, and geopolitics. If a primary goal of fair trade is to act as a tool for poverty reduction, then discussion of poverty and traumas are ubiquitous amongst fair trade marketing. Additionally, discussion of poverty is often followed by the positive impact that FTOs have on artisans and their communities, therefore placing them as the saviors of the impoverished artisan.

Marketing trauma or hardships is not unique to fair trade or to charitable organizations. I asked Joy McBrien of Fair Anita why she felt that stories of trauma or hardships appealed to consumers. Joy believes that the story acts as an emotional pull. She explained, [t]he emotional pull is really important to really grab people and keeps people's attention and I think that’s what the trauma has become, the emotional pull.” She further shared,

I think that people generally are interested in knowing trauma and drama. I don’t think that’s specific to a fair trade consumer. It’s probably unique based on
different customers but I think some customers think about their own life and what they’ve overcome so like more of a deep human connection to somebody else when they have heard some of those intimate details. I think for some people it’s more of a white savior complex in that they feel like they’re really helping or saving somebody by purchasing a certain product.

According to Joy, the sharing of traumas or economic hardships acts as an “emotional pull” which lures consumers who either desire personal human connection or have a saviorist mindset and just want to feel like they are saving the poor and needy. For the fair trade movement, Joy argued,

I think it’s also a learned [behavior], like this is how non-profits have been since non-profits have been a thing and fair trade in some ways was born out of a non-profit movement […] The second wave of fair trade starting with Edna Ruth Byler of TTV- I mean from the very beginning [fair trade] was built on ‘you can help someone’. I think it's just an emotional pull.

When FTOs use narratives of poverty or trauma as marketing tools, there is an unintended risk of poverty and trauma becoming intertwined with a consumer’s purchasing decisions thereby commodifying poverty or someone’s trauma.

Oftentimes, poverty or hardships are romanticized wherein the hardships of the artisan in a distant landscape are ‘otherized.’ When speaking with the former education
coordinator for TTV Goshen, Mary, she speaks on how learning tours influenced how she
told stories to the local groups in Goshen. Reflecting on the learning tours she said,

I think that most of [artisans] weren’t greedy at all. They wanted enough for
themselves. [At the end we asked] is there anything else you wanted to ask us,
and they would say please go home and sell more product, because I have a
neighbor who needs a job too. They weren't saying, you know, please order more
stuff so that I can get richer. They were saying please order more stuff so that my
neighbor can also work. We learned a lot from our artisans. I think the more you
have, the more you think you deserve or want. And these people were living a
pretty – in what we would call- meager lifestyle, but most of them were very
happy and joyful. Sharing the generosity of these people is amazing.

Mary’s statement is reflective of Israel’s argument on the ‘smiling native” wherein
“[n]ative artifacts are more salable when they come from an idyllic paradise rather than
from hungry, angry, or exploited Indians” (Israel 1982). Indigenous persons, or in this
case artisans, are only deserving of support if they are humble and grateful. According to
Mary, despite the impoverished lives these artisans led they were still ‘happy’ and ‘joyful’
and never ‘greedy.’ The artisans were humble with their earnings; never wanting to
become ‘richer.’ Mary’s response strips agency of the artisans she is referring to. What
would Mary’s response have been if the artisan's expressed frustration with their current
situation, or even complained about it? Would the artisan still be deserving of their
earnings? What if an artisan expressed that she wanted to take her earnings and spend it
just on herself? There is a constant theme amongst fair trade literature which says that women give back to their communities far more than men do. If women were selfish with their earnings, would they no longer be deserving? For non-white women from the Global South, the way artisans should accept money and spend it is scrutinized. Similar patterns occur in the U.S, when lower-income persons spend money, especially government aid, in a way that is considered inappropriate by those with higher incomes.

Additionally, the context of the word ‘rich’ is undefined. It is unclear as to what Mary believed to be considered rich. There is a considerable gap between extreme poverty and being rich. There is even a gap between being financially stable and being extremely rich. This understanding stems back again to the white savior industrial complex in which the non-white marginalized person of the South should want enough, but never too much. They should only want for their communities, but never for themselves, especially if you are a woman; ultimately remaining dependent upon the Western non-profit or FTO who is kind enough to help you. As stated by Lyon (2006) in her ethnography of a fair trade cooperative in Guatemala, “earnings enabled them to maintain their families, not necessarily get ahead.” Lyon’s argument reinforces the idea that the artisan or producer will always remain in a state of inferiority or dependency on the FTO or non-profit organization who is helping or working with them.

Discussion of the artisans’ livelihoods is romanticized. The artisans lived a “meager lifestyle” but were happy and joyful and only wanted to spread opportunity to their neighbors. This analysis reflects a common theme amongst FTOs who discuss
complex issues of poverty or hardships in non-polarizing way. It is discussed in a way that will make all people want to support this organization through donations or purchasing a product. It invokes guilt and sympathy towards a group of people and influences you to want to help or save them.

Mary’s statement was not an official marketing material presented to consumers; however, she was a former education coordinator who gave PowerPoint presentations to local groups in Goshen. She also handled marketing material for a brief period for her local Ten Thousand Villages. The language and way she presented stories is similar to how she shared these stories with me. The way Mary discussed the artisan groups that Ten Thousand Villages partnered with has an impact on how the consumers in Goshen, Indiana perceived these artisan groups as well as their communities, and often the countries in which they live.

*Oversimplification:*

Oversimplifying complex issues such as poverty or traumas can lead to what Kalra described as making “blanket statements” where entire cultures or communities are homogenized (Sahan 2020). Speaking with Caitlin Halberstadt of Zeal Living about product tags, she shared that on every gift sent out to customers, each product is attached with a physical story card. Caitlin shared that she produced each of the cards herself. She shared that on every card, the front will have an image of an artisan and the region they are from. Additionally, the front will have her name as well as contact information for Zeal Living. On the back of the card there are four to six bullet points that go through “in
a quick manner where the group is located, how many people are employed, and the impact of what that employment is.” She is the one who creates these bullet points and said, “I researched the average number of dependents in the country just to kind of estimate how many people are positively impacted by that person’s employment.” The biggest issue with Caitlin’s statement is that she incorporated the average number of dependents for the country, not the local region where the group is located. This statement is reflective of Kalra’s question, “am I making blanket statements about the community or culture that I am talking about?” (ibid). For consumers to genuinely understand the economic impact which this company has upon an artisan group, then the information given to them needs to reflect that. How does an artisan working with Zeal Living positively impact their direct community? Knowing the average number of dependents for an entire country is not useful and potentially harmful.

Kalra provided a similar example to further this point; an example I shared in chapter four. In a podcast on WFTOs Fair Tradio she said,

Oftentimes people will make a statement like ‘Indian women are not allowed to work.’ The person is talking about a particular village that they might be working in where that may be the way that community operates, but you can’t make an example of one community and make it representative of a whole culture or country.

(ibid)

Consumers may generate a negative perception that women in India are not allowed to work, when that certainly is not the case. Similarly, Caitlin’s statement may create an unintended consequence in which her customers believe that their purchase of a product from Zeal Living contributes towards the financial support of all dependents for
an entire African country. I do not feel that this was Caitlin's intent, however word choice is important.

Caitlin’s additional comment provided more specific and detailed explanations of how she discussed artisan groups on story cards. She said, “each group has a couple of things that are worth explaining. Sometimes there is a green story or environmental story. Or, if it is local materials or an Indigenous craft. And then maybe the group does medical, or they do some kind of business training.” Here, Caitlin provided examples that are specific and relevant to each group. Customers can learn more about the product and the community impact without generalizing entire cultures or creative perceptions towards a culture or community that is stereotypical.

Media relations and brand manager, Sarah, talked about how discussions of poverty are often oversimplified, creating negative perceptions and stereotypes for artisan partners. When I asked Sarah what she believed were the possible benefits or consequences of sharing stories via social media which reaches a wider range of people than print media does. On the positive end, Sarah shared that any FTO who was “in it for the right reasons” wants to change the “global conversation around trade.” Social media allows FTOs to have a louder voice in a “room full of Targets or Walmarts.” On the negative side, she said that there are some brands out there that ‘lean a little white saviory” because their language and communication “doesn’t really fully engage with the transparency because either they just do not know how to do it well or they lack transparency to begin with.” Brands, perhaps who are trying to take the easy way out or
do not take the time to fully do their research, simplify complex issues in generalized marketing statements. On the other hand, Sarah argued that brands overgeneralize issues because they are not as transparent in practice as they should be.

Sarah spoke further on the difficulties of trying to communicate complex issues on social media and said, “It’s really difficult. The attention span of someone on Instagram is what, like three seconds? To try and distill something as complex as poverty or how fair trade positively impacts communities into a caption is complicated.”

Transparent marketing arguably goes against normative marketing practices which try to say as much as they can in as little words as possible. As explained by Kalra, “there’s this need for simplification, because we feel that the work we’re doing is just so complicated people won’t understand, so let’s just keep it as simple as possible. And marketers are to blame because we love really short and concise statements” (Sahan 2020). Communicating the complexities of poverty and systemic injustices is difficult. Kalra argues that brands will often take the easy way out because they feel that either the consumer cannot comprehend such complexities or that they just unconcerned.

Sarah argued further that when the discussion of poverty is oversimplified, it can create a position where artisans are placed in a position of inferiority and ‘otherized’ by Western consumers. Sarah explained,

When you oversimplify something like fair trade or oversimplify what poverty means to people or how it affects lives [of] totally different cultures, cultures all
over the world. It's going to be different in every community, and when you oversimplify things like that it can start to feel a little like us versus them.

Sarah discussed an important aspect in which the lives of impoverished or marginalized communities tend to be homogenized in the perceptions of Westerners. Take for example, a commercial that appeared on cable television in the early 2000s which dictated an elderly, white man holding a child as he walked through the streets of Africa, because it was not specifically shared as to where this man was. He said that by donating today, you could help a starving child in Africa. Again, not a specific place or even country, just Africa. This is an extreme example that occurred over 15 years ago, but I still remember that commercial clearly. Poverty is homogenized and is used to describe the entire culture of a community, or country, or even continent. If fair trade is going to take part in a system which claims to improve the socio-economic lives of marginalized artisans, then it needs to take the time and effort to communicate this to consumers. For example, when I spoke with Kathy about how she encouraged customers to purchase fair trade products she replied,

I try to emphasize the good things that are happening in another community as a result of the purchase. That people are living a better life as a result of their purchase. These are very quick interactions. I try to explain that it's more than just a fair wage. We have little pamphlets and if someone gets interested, I will offer them one of those and say it's not only helping this person have a better sense of
self, a better way of life. I mean people who have visited in the areas can say you know this person had a two-room shack when I visited and now, they have a business that employs so many people and instead of having a shack they have a better house and they're not cooking over an outside fire, they’re cooking inside using pots and pans.

Looking at Kathy’s statements, I am reminded of a statement made by Varul (2008), “the post-colonial citizen of the Third World is imagined as suffering, simple, and benevolent-Third World intellectuality, for instance, is predominantly, systemically denied” (Varul 2008). Not only are the socio-economic conditions in which the artisan is living oversimplified, but seemingly so is their intelligence. From Kathy’s depiction of an unnamed impoverished community, these complex issues can be boiled down to a simple explanation that the artisan no longer lives in a shack and now uses pots and pans. As argued by Sarah,

You know we're not doing the easy thing we're doing the right thing. The easy way to communicate that might put our artisan partners in a position of inferiority. We always strive to not do that. And I hope and pray that we are successful. I think that it depends on the person looking at it and how they receive that information. We're open to feedback from our customers and our artisan partners frankly.
FTOs need to take the time to understand each artisan group and the extremely specific and relevant issues which they presently face in their communities. While many FTOs do have a genuine understanding of these issues, there is a disconnect with how they communicate this information to consumers. As Kalra argued, they believe that either their consumers do not care or are incapable of understanding (Kalra 2020). After discussion with Kathy and Sarah, it is evident how far the spectrum can be across a single organization, albeit a large organization, in understanding how to communicate complex issues such as poverty and systemic issues regarding socio-economic status, gender, race, etc.

It is valid for consumers to want to know how their purchasing decisions positively impact the producers or artisans who made that product. On the positive end, consumers want to know that the organization or business that they are supporting is not just making vapid statements to sell more products. In short, consumers want to know a business is not just ‘fair-washing’ to make a profit. FTOs should discuss the details of how they operate supply chains, how the conduct business with artisan partnerships, and if they are involved with additional social services, then FTOs should discuss how those services are positively impacting the communities. However, this impact should be framed in a way that credits the artisan group. When FTOs take credit for the success of artisan groups and their communities, FTOs situate themselves as the saviors; responsible for pulling the artisans out of poverty (Sahan 2020).
Several FTOs have combatted this by offering blog posts on their websites to provide more detailed information which often cannot be effectively communicated on social media or through other marketing materials which rely on short, concise statements. Zeal living and Ti-a Woven Goods do not actively offer educational blogs or other detailed methods of explaining poverty or systemic issues. I use the word actively, as Zeal Living does have a blog, however, it has not been updated since October 2020. This is understandable as there has been a pandemic and Zeal Living is operated solely by Caitlin. Ti-a Woven does have a page on their website entitled “Our Impact” (Ti-a Woven Goods, n.d.). which shares information on the artisan co-operatives Simbala employs and the process of basket weaving. Since Ti-a Woven Goods works solely with basket weavers in Bolgatanga Ghana, Simbala and her team can focus their attention on one place.

Ten Thousand Villages has a blog on their website entitled, MOSAIC, where readers can learn all about fair trade products, from their function to the resources used, historical and cultural significance, and possibly even how to style the product in your home. Readers can also learn about various artisan groups, how each organization is operated, and how artisans have improved their lives, and possibly the lives of their families and communities, through employment with Ten Thousand Villages. The tagline of the blog reads, “Mosaic brings you stories that help you make fair trade and global culture part of your style, home and life.” In a positive way, the blog dedicates the
majority of its posts towards educating consumers on how they can better incorporate fair trade into their lives, rather than how they can save artisan groups out of poverty.

Overall, I felt their blog posts gave a more detailed and holistic explanation of how and why artisans and their communities experienced poverty. As stated by Johnston (2002), FTOs often shy away from more ‘polarizing conversations on structural inequality” which comes as a result of neoliberal globalization. These blogs allow Ten Thousand Villages to delve deeper into the cultural and historical background of a handicraft as well as the broader socio-political, economic, cultural, gender based and race-based issues which an artisan group may face in their daily lives. In an article written on July 23, 2021, Erica Martin shared the historical and cultural significance of Jamdani a weaving, a technique which originated in the Bengali region sometime in the 9-12th century (Martin 2021). The article goes into the historical context of Jamdani weaving and how the technique has been used to create a variety of woven fabrics since its origination. Oftentimes FTOs will share with consumers that supporting fair trade means helping to preserve the cultural traditions of a specific handicraft production. However, it is often never explained as to what threatened production of that handicraft in the first place. What is crucial in this article is how Martin discussed how Jamdani weaving, and thus employment for Jamdani weavers, was threatened due to British colonialism in the 19th century. The artisan group, JRC exports, was formed as a response to industrialization which favored the mass production of cheap textiles, therefore replacing artisans in the textile craft industry who could not compete (ibid). This article
allowed consumers to gain a more holistic understanding of Jamdani weaving and how external forces such as industrialization and British colonialism were the primary causes. Fair Anita also has a blog; however, posts are not dedicated to artisan stories or community impact instead they focus on the importance of shopping fair trade and highlight various products for consumers to get excited about in their daily life.

Joy McBrien advocated strongly against the use of poverty or traumas to market handicrafts or represent artisans due to her own experiences with rape and sexual assault. Joy began Fair Anita as a way of helping women who were survivors of sexual and domestic violence. She said, “I learned that financial insecurity was the main reason that women stay in an abusive partnership, so I really sought to create economic self-sufficiency for women and that’s what we’ve been doing.” Joy chose to travel to Peru as a freshman in college, because at the time Peru had the highest rate of sexual and domestic violence in the world, where around 70% of women experience this violence. She wanted to go and help women who had experience similar traumas as she had, but also said, “I absolutely had a white savior mindset in that like I could go somewhere and make a difference and whatever.” Often called voluntourism, the concept of travelling to developing countries or impoverished communities to help the poor and needy as a means of healing our own selves or feeling good about oneself, is common in the United States (Bandyopadhyay 2019). Americans will raise thousands of dollars to visit a poor country, build a shelter or a school, take a few photos with ‘orphaned’ children, sight see for a couple of days, and then leave a week later. Ultimately, the trip serves to boost the
ego and self-righteousness of the American, while the community is generally left with little to no sustained improvement. In fact, kids who are often visited by Americans at group homes develop strong abandonment issues due to the constant coming and going of Americans who stay for a week then leave (Rosenburg 2018). Joy shared,

I think I had just always wanted to travel more and hadn’t had the opportunity to do so. You know, like a lot of kids would go on mission trips through church and I never go to do anything like that. I think part of it was just like general curiosity for a world and other cultures, I think part of it was yeah, a white savior complex and also understanding that a dollar could go further in another community than in my own.

Joy’s initial motivations, as declared by Joy herself, were a mixture of having a white savior complex, but also grappling with mental health issues and not having an emotional outlet.

I was just really struggling honestly at the time. I hadn’t told anyone in my life that I had experienced rape or sexual violence and so I didn’t feel like I had that community here; I didn’t feel like I had any of the right connections. I didn’t want to like out myself for that at the time. I just had a lot of shame about it, and I think you know sometimes it’s easier to process some of those things when you’re outside of your regular community. I think that’s part of why I did it too. I definitely didn’t think that I had a white savior complex at the time but now, I’m like oh I for sure did.
Joy went back to Chimbote, Peru the following year to help build a battered women’s shelter with the help of Anita, a social worker in Chimbote who would also help Joy start Fair Anita. She shared that being there and learning from the community helped to “decenter it from [herself]. She said, I went down there the second time just being like I’m trying to learn as much as I can about this community, what’s happening in the community, and I think that really informed a lot of the work that I’ve done after that.”

From Joy’s conversations with myself and Manpreet Kaur Kalra on the *Art of Citizenry* podcast, it was clear that she wanted to create a business that was built on the equal, mutually beneficial relationship of women, which included the artisans and herself. Joy formed relationships with artisans based on the shared experience of sexual violence and felt this relationship helped “breakdown down those power dynamics and some of those colonialist structures and systems that exist inevitably when a white woman goes to a foreign country and starts buying their product.” She clarified further that she understood there were still power dynamics in place and that as the owner of Fair Anita, her purchasing of the artisan’s handicrafts had an impact on their income and livelihood. Joy wanted to ensure her messaging placed the artisans in a positive light, rather than in a place of inferiority which comes as a result of exploiting traumas for profit.

In the same vein as to why consumers should not purchase handicrafts purely to feel like they are saving someone from poverty or hardship, artisans should not feel that they are only being valued for their hardships. On Kalra’s podcast she shared, I think that is why I am extra sensitive to consent in storytelling with our artisan partners because how many times have articles been written about me as
like ‘rape survivor helps other rape victims.’ It’s detrimental to my mental health to wake up to a Google alert and have my name as this headline and it feels like I have just been boiled down to this singular identity ultimately being valued just for my trauma. And artisans may feel like ‘I am able to sell this because I went through this hardship.

(Kalra 2020)

Joy provided a valuable example of how traumas or hardships can become commodified when they are used to influence consumer’s purchasing decisions. Referring back the topic of informed consent, an artisan may feel coerced into sharing their personal stories because they are told it will help them sell more products. inadvertently, an artisan may feel that it is due to their traumas or hardships that they can sell handicrafts and earn a higher income. Joy shared that some artisans do want to share their hardships because they want to share their narrative of overcoming that hardship. Americans do love a good underdog story. Joy was hesitant to share those overcoming stories and has even refrained from sharing stories in the past few years, because, once those stories are out, they cannot be taken back. In Joy's case, continuously being referred to as ‘rape victim’ was detrimental to her health and while she consented to sharing that story in the first place, the ongoing effects of sharing it has affected her mental health. For Fair Anita’s customers, many are still interested in knowing more about the artisans Fair Anita partners with. I asked Joy what she thought her customers were most interested in learning and Joy replied,

I think a lot of times what our customers most want to know is what artisans have overcome and that’s what I’m most hesitant to share, because they are not my stories to share. Sometimes when we have consent, we’ll share quips of stories
but for the most part I just like talking about how women are strong and creative and changemakers and silly and compassionate and similar to how I hope they would talk about me.

Referring to the discussion of consent in storytelling, even if consumers are interested in artisan stories, no matter the context, it is not their story to know and should not influence whether to purchase a specific handicraft. Even with informed consent, sharing one’s story could have potentially harmful effects in the future.

Instead of sharing intimate stories of trauma or hardship, I asked Joy what she liked to share with her customers instead. Instead of focusing on the traumas and hardship, Joy said,

I wish it were more celebrating aspects of women that they are proud of; that they have intentionally decided about themselves or intentionally worked hard to build. As opposed to the most traumatic memories of people's lives that were determined by outside forces. I would like to see those human connections built more on a celebration of one another as opposed to poverty porn or trauma porn.

Joy revealed a necessary point about agency and having autonomy. Our trauma’s often come as a result of forces we have no control over. Instead of highlighting these details to consumers, why not highlight artisans' success that they have worked hard to accomplish.
Additionally, Joy brought up a crucial point about our motivations in trying to create human connection through storytelling in fair trade. If we are to foster human connections, even one-sided connections, do it through positive human experiences. We as consumers can relate to artisans through universal life experiences such as dancing, playing games, going back to school, spending time with family, celebrating holidays or special events, etc. I asked Joy what she liked sharing best with her customers “My favorite thing to share is dance videos of artisans because I feel like dance is a universal language and they are just fun and then you see them as being human as opposed to- I don’t know- whatever other lens you want to put on things.” On Fair Anita’s Instagram page, I tried to find a video or photo to provide as an example to what Joy shared, however could not find any. It seems that Fair Anita has not posted a video or photo of an artisan in over two years. However, Fair Anita does regularly post videos of her and her team dancing along to music and sharing fun facts or information about the organization. I share an example of this in chapter six.

**Human Connection through Universal Experiences:**

FTOs, through imagery and language, often reinforce the idea that artisans are in constant need of our help. In doing so, artisans are permanently situated in a place of inferiority (Varul 2008). Scrolling through the Instagram accounts of the four FTOs I observed for my thesis, organizations generally have two major themes of marketing styles. On the one hand, FTOs showcase their products with models either using the item or wearing the item. On the other hand, FTOs educate consumers about their
organizations through images of artisan partners which either detailed information about themselves or the group or information on how to produce the handicraft. In many cases, it was not the photo of the artisan or artisan group that was the issue, but rather the caption that went alongside it. As an organization, if you are primarily sharing photographs of artisans with a caption that details how you, an organization, or you, as a consumer, are supporting that artisan or enabling them to have a better life; you are creating a perception of artisans as being inferior and in need of saving. As argued by Varul (2008) “the recognition achieved by producers is not that of equal commercial partners, it is more similar to that of the deserving poor.” Ten Thousand Villages, out of every FTO I observed, used artisan photos the most and very frequently did these photos come with captions detailing how supporting Ten Thousand Villages helped support artisans.

The following story was shared by Sarah and delves into how consumer perception towards imagery can be just as meaningful.

I have since learned to never post a picture of an artisan not wearing shoes. There was this one time early on in my career here at TTV when I posted a picture of an artisan not wearing shoes. There was this ceramics workshop and the workshop needed to be clean and they have plastic tarps all over the floor to keep the clay-like obviously it’s a ceramics workshop. The artisans didn’t have shoes on because I don’t think they wanted to wear [them] because a: they don’t want to wear their shoes in there because there’s clay everywhere and b: I don’t know, I didn’t ask but they may not even want to wear shoes in there because it would potentially soil what they were working on so they just want to keep everything clean. So, I posted this picture with an artisan not wearing shoes in like a tropical country like no one’s cold, it’s fine. And oh my gosh a customer laid into us like how dare you not provide shoes. We were like you have it all wrong. I was on the receiving end of it because I’m pretty sure it was on Instagram, and I had to take a minute and I had to remove myself because
this wasn’t against me. They think what they’re seeing is like essentially an unsafe workplace and worker abuse. How do we now hopefully reassure them that, first of all, we don’t provide shoes, that’s not what fair trade is. It's not even a thing we do. So, we explain why that’s not a thing we do in a non-combative way. But also explain different cultures are different. I don’t know what the culture of Indonesia is regarding wearing shoes inside. So, it’s funny to work on the internet because you think you’re doing a good job, and someone somewhere has an opinion about it and ruins your whole day. […] on the one hand, in some ways it is easier to do [share information] on social media because you can not only continue to evolve but you can stay up to speed on what folks are talking about. You can avoid being insensitive, hopefully, because you’re aware of the cultural conversations that are currently happening. On the other hand, you can get people that are mad that artisans aren’t wearing shoes and I’m like I can’t tell a man how to dress.

Sarah’s story is a valuable example on the significance of how the viewer perceives language or imagery that is revealed to them. Regardless of what Sarah intended when she posted this photo, the viewer perceived it in an entirely different way. It is necessary to take into account how every image and caption you write is going to be perceived by your audience who have inherent cultural biases and cultural misunderstandings. From the viewer’s point of view, there seemed to be a lack of cultural understanding from the viewer who may have been imposing Western norms on the artisan.

Zeal Living shared significantly less artisan photos, instead relying on promoting the products. However, she did occasionally share artisan photos and while they do not highlight poverty or traumatic stories, they do associate artisan photos in conjunction with captions that detailed how Zeal Living or consumer purchases of Zeal Living products improved the artisan’s life.
While talking about how she selected artisan groups to work with, Caitlin Halberstadt, shared that.

It’s really important to me that as much as is in my control and it is in my control that I work with groups that are really doing good work. And if they’re respecting artisans and they’re treating them with respect. Also, the way that they talk about them [in a way that’s not] poverty porn; like where you feel sorry for these communities so buy this thing. I’m not interested in that, and neither are my customers.

It was important to Caitlin that she did not rely on the use of poverty porn to sell products, nor did she want to work with artisan groups, especially those who operate the artisan groups, to speak about their artisans in a way that was demeaning. As Caitlin is not part of any membership organization, she vets every organization she works with herself, and it seemed that language was just as important as practice when it came to
selecting artisan partnerships. She goes on to share that the quality and aesthetic of the item is important to draw customers in.

They want something beautiful that they are inspired by and that it’s unique for their home. The thing has to be beautiful. The glassware, the basket, you know, whatever it is that they want. That has to really draw [the customers] in, but then right after that they want to know that this item is providing for this specific woman’s family and making sure she can take care of her kids on her own. And she's empowered or he’s empowered.

Differing from older generations of fair trade advocates, Caitlin spoke on the importance of selling an item that consumers will want to buy. As I discuss later in chapter seven, connecting with her customers has allowed her to gain a loyal consumer base who increased Joy’s sales at Fair Anita during COVID-19. It was connecting with her customers, not highlighting artisan traumas or hardships, which led to an increase in sales.

Ti-a Woven Goods also infrequently shared artisan photos, however, when they do, they do not include captions that share how Ti-a Woven supports artisans or how customers of Ti-a Woven Goods supports customers.
Caption: Saturday’s morning has us feeling like....Will you be relaxing or footloose and fancy free? (Ti-a Woven Goods, 2021).

Caption: This International Women's Day (and every day) we are thankful for all our weavers in Bolgatanga. These hardworking and industrious ladies have not only allowed
us a small window into their lives, they have chosen to be partners in our mission to lift women up. Between helping their husbands tend crops, household chores, child care, and gathering water daily (sometimes from miles away), the ladies of Bolgatanga have little extra free time in their day-to-day lives. But they choose to keep working with us, coming back again and again to weave baskets, knowing they are making an investment in their own lives as well as the lives of their children and community. We are truly in awe.

Today we've been meditating on one particular quote, "Here's to strong women. May we be them, may we know them, may we raise them." The fact that this quote's origin is unknown despite its popularity is perhaps as moving as the words themselves. Strong women all over the world have given countless hours, unyielding vision, and optimism in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds to the mission of making those odds a bit better for future generations. So as we close out International Women's Day we'll leave you with one last thought. Here's to strong women. May we support them, may we uplift them, may we invest in them (Ti-a Woven Goods, 2021).

The first photo allows viewers to connect with artisans on a positive, shared human experience, dancing. Dancing is a universally shared experienced, even if the steps and rhythms vary. The imagery invoked happiness and while you are not being advertised a product, it made the viewer want to know more about this fun business. The second photo also allowed viewers, particularly women, to connect with artisans based on shared human experiences of doing chores, having jobs, and raising children. What I found most important about this caption was how Ti-a Woven Goods framed the perception of artisans as having agency in their own life. The artisans have chosen to work for Ti-a Woven Goods and have chosen to make investments in their own lives.

It should be said that due to the global pandemic, FTOs may not have been sharing as many photos because many photos may not have been taken during this time.
So, while FTOs decisions to not incorporate photos may be an intentional decision, it also may influenced by COVID-19.

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**Preserving Traditional Design vs. Catering to Western Trends:**

Western consumers are not the gatekeepers of the cultural traditions of any community, region, or country; meaning our desire to preserve the cultural traditions of handicraft with the fair trade network is rooted in colonialism. Within fair trade and other networks of cultural goods, there is often a museumification of handicrafts. Except unlike museums, the goods are up for purchase. The perception of what a traditional handicraft is, from the exact design, color scheme, material use and even function of the handicraft is frozen in time, unchanging. There is a desire to maintain or preserve what we feel is the traditional or authentic design of some particular handicraft. Any threat of outside influence could potentially cause this meaningful practice that is so wholly connected to the cultural identity of an entire group to suddenly become obsolete. However, according to Ranger and Hobsbawm (2012) in *The Invention of Tradition*, our perception of what we believe as traditional does not trace as far back as we often believe.

There is debate in the fair trade community on whether handicrafts should be altered to meet Western consumer demands. FTOs commonly send in marketers, designers, or buyers to artisan groups to assist with the designs of their handicrafts. The goal is to create a viable market for these artisans to sell their products, which means catering to the current fashion or home-décor trends. If an FTO in the United States is helping to create a product for consumers in the U.S., then that product must meet current
demands of U.S consumers. However, unlike big-box stores, FTOs do try to create a product that will not be out of style within a few months. FTOs will continuously assist artisan groups with designs and materials so that their products continue to remain in-style. At least that is the goal.

Mary explained product designs further, she shared,

We have designers who go and work with the artisans. We go to trade shows, and you find out what is going to be the next big thing and you translate that. Sometimes it’s hard because trends go so quickly and sometimes artisans need more time. We provide design assistance and many of these places have people in the country who have this experience and can work with some of the artisan groups and we can help if we are needed to make those kind of connections.

According to Mary, designers from both Ten Thousand Villages and the host country will work together to create a product that exemplifies the artisan’s talent but also caters to consumer demands. Going forward, I would like to understand how artistic creativity is incorporated into these designs and whether the artisans themselves are allowed to implement their own designs.

Kathy understood why fair trade helped artisans with product design but was not entirely in favor it. She explained,

[TTV] has marketers that actually go out and work with groups and help them create a product that people in the U.S. will want to buy, which is kind of disappointing but on the other hand, they gotta make a living. […] You know
those marketers will even figure out what colors are gonna be in style so that the scarves will be what people are buying at the stores and mass-market stores. But there’s also the other side which is people who are retaining an ancient craft and then fair trade enables that crafter to have a wider market so that it is sustainable.

In Kathy’s quote, she reinforces the concept of museumification. To Kathy, tradition is static and does not evolve and change over time. The design and production of a handicraft should remain as is, frozen in time. I am reminded of a statement made by Wilson (2012). He argued that Westerners oftentimes create an “indexical relationship between handicraft items and Indigenous peoples” (Wilson 2012). Referring to a quote I shared in chapter three, Wilson argued,

For consumers of Indigenous artisan crafts, the products serve as object lessons, contributing to a long, Western empiricist tradition that has privileged seeing as the pathway to knowing and an accompanying tradition that European colonizers had for collecting objects of the colonized that contributed towards categorizations of people to their material possessions or practices.

(Wilson 2012, 179)

What was considered colonization then and can be considered as white saviorism now, there is a desire to attach the cultural traditions of persons living in the global South to inanimate objects. This is not to say that objects and handicrafts cannot contain cultural significance nor that the production of these items cannot be connected to the construction of cultural identities. However, handicrafts are not vessels of entire cultures and the alteration of these crafts, especially ones designed for Western consumption, does not result in the destruction of the cultural traditions of an entire group of people.
The photo shared above is taken from the Ten Thousand Villages Instagram page. The caption celebrates Indigenous People’s day and emphasizes the importance of preserving craft and culture. Further down, the caption also states that “we work together to presence these indigenous legacies because they have irreplaceable value.” This first paragraph reinforces the idea that Ten Thousand Villages and its consumers are responsible for the preservation of Indigenous culture and art forms. Instead of focusing on the word preservation, they could have discussed how purchasing handicrafts from Ten Thousand Villages helps to celebrate and respect Indigenous art. Additionally, the second paragraph also creates a negative implication by stating that women “still wear traditional Mayan dress,” as if their style, and thus their traditions, are stuck in the distant past.

As I shared above, Ti-a Woven holds training workshops to ensure all weavers are meeting the standards which Ti-a Woven expects in their baskets. It is at these workshops where Simbala will go in and say “this is what we are looking for in the quality of the
basket. This is the style. These are the patterns. These are the colors.” Simbala and group leaders will work with the weavers to ensure they produce a product that will sell back in the U.S. Later, I asked Simbala what the next goal for Tia-Woven was in the next five to ten years. Her goal was to expand her business and bring more opportunity to both artisans in Ghana, but to her employees here in the U.S. as well. She said, “Always the bottom line is always producing more products, reinventing our products to have new styles, new shapes, new sizes, new colors.” In 2019, they began working more on home décor items, which ultimately worked out well for Tia-Woven during COVID-19 when stay-at-home orders influenced a lot of financially able consumers to purchase more home décor. Simbala shared, “In 2019, we developed a product called a wave sculpture, and it’s a basket that’s more like a piece of art and it’s more for home décor purposes.” 

Farmer’s market baskets are their most popular item, but items such as wave sculpture baskets, Moses beds, dog beds, bicycle baskets, etc, are all new products that consumers can get excited about.
Caitlin Halberstadt provided another example of catering to Western trends in the form of pre-made gift boxes. Caitlin’s idea to pursue gift boxes came during COVID-19 when many people could not or did not feel comfortable shopping in-person. She said it was an easy way "if you wanna buy fun gifts for your friends who are having babies and getting married or trying to get married [referring to weddings being canceled due to COVID-19] and someone else has already done all of the thought.” Currently, Zeal Living has three gift boxes up for purchase. I have highlighted one of them below.
Pre-made boxes, whether as gift boxes or subscription services, have become increasingly popular in the past several years. From IPSY’s monthly makeup subscription to wine and liquor subscriptions, they all cater to a new form of gift-giving to friends, family, or even to yourself. In the fair trade world, GlobeIn is a subscription company that specializes in fair trade handmade goods that come in a fun box every month. Members pay a monthly fee and each month get a surprise of handcrafted goods from across the world. With each box comes a story card to “meet the artisans you’re supporting.”

In this chapter, I observed several major themes which explain the significance of storytelling within the fair trade network. First and foremost, storytelling is intended to serve as a bridge between producer and consumer, creating a sense of human connection. I observed a generational divide when discussing whether or not artisan stories are a necessary component of fair trade marketing. On the one hand, older fair trade supporters felt the story of artisans connected them to the artisan and helped them feel that their purchase was contributing towards their economic advancement in some way. White saviorism played a vital role in wanting to know the artisan’s story and feeling that the story contributed towards the overall value of the handicraft and the legitimacy of the FTO. However, some participants failed to recognize that these stories are one-sided and ultimately, no one is entitled to know an artisan’s story. Stories of poverty and trauma further reinforce power dynamics as these personal narratives place the artisan in
positions of inferiority where their personal and trauma histories are put on display, becoming deeply intertwined with their income and source of livelihoods.

I further observed how notions of human connection could be used to celebrate positive and universal life experiences, such as dancing. Participants such as Joy McBrien of Fair Anita and Simbala Drammeh discuss how if they do share photos or stories of artisans, they like to show them in a way that celebrates their accomplishments and joyful life experiences.

Finally, I observed how the four FTOs contributed to discussions of tradition in handicraft design and production and how Western trends played a contributing role. Home decor and fashion trends are constantly evolving and if an FTO is to successfully compete in an ever-changing Western consumer market, they need to work with artisan to design products that will appeal to the current desires of the consumer. The artisan will be able to showcase their complex skills, a skill which may have been passed gender inter-generationally, and produce a quality product that the consumer will want to buy. While some participants felt that tradition was static and that the design of certain handicraft should remain unchanged, most participants felt that artisans had the agency to produce handicrafts that were specifically intended for Western consumers. Some participants felt the need to preserve the cultural traditions of particular handicrafts/However, FTOs must ask themselves whether it is their responsibility to be preserving traditions in the first place and to take away the artisan’s agency and limit them from producing the handicraft which will be the most successful.
CHAPTER SIX: BIG-BOX STORES AND SHOPPING LOCAL

A significant theme which I observed across all four FTOs was the importance of shopping ‘fair’ but also shopping locally. During a global pandemic where the forerunners of late-stage capitalism and the leaders of mass-produced cheap goods, Amazon, Target, and Walmart all thrived, FTOs encouraged consumers to make ethical choice. In Brown (2013), the company to boycott was Walmart (Brown 2013,12). Ethical consumer movements revolved around a unified stand against Walmart and its exploitation of factory workers across the world but also, towards employees whose minimum wage salary was barely livable. The big-box store was a reoccurring theme across all participants. FTOs struggled to compete against them and consumers struggled to shop ethically when Amazon, Target, and Walmart were so pervasive in their every-day lives.

I asked Simbala what her goal was for Ti-a Woven Goods in the next five years. One of her responses was that she was thinking about whether to partner with a big box store, such as Target, and whether that was an effective way to expand her business, amongst the other opportunities she faced. She was very hesitant as she explained that while she had initially wanted to work with a big box store, she realized they were exceedingly difficult to work with. Drammeh argued that they would want to “direct the
cost” of the baskets at the expense of artisans. She shares that because they are so used to purchasing mass-produced goods from factories made by exploited laborers in places like China, that paying fair wages is not a priority. For these big-box stores, increasing profits is the most important aspect. Simbala reflects an important aspect that Sylla and Leye (2014) discussed wherein value is decreased at the start of the value chain and added later down the line to increase profits (Sylla and Leye 2014, 24). As Simbala states, “this while social consciousness is not part of their strategy.” Simbala stated she did not want to be a part of this type of relationship and says,

That would be so hypocritical of me to bargain [artisans] down to like pennies on the dollar for their product and then come here and be like heyyy I'm a minority that’s not being treated fairly, so buy my stuff at this price because I deserve it.

And then I'm stepping on someone's neck to create that, so I don’t want it.

Partnering with a big box store, such as Target or Walmart, may allow Tia Woven Goods to expand to a much wider audience, however, for Simbala, she did not want to compromise the income and job security of the artisans she works with as well as the employees in Colorado to do so.

At Zeal Living, Caitlin shared that she does use Amazon to supplement her sales from her e-commerce site and in-person markets. Amazon allows independent sellers to open a storefront and sell their products through the site. A consumer can discover small businesses through the ‘Small Business’ hub or more specifically they can look under the ‘Amazon Handmade Section’ which allows the consumer to find
handmade products. Zeal Living has an Amazon storefront, but Halberstadt stated that she was trying to “move away from”. She said, “Amazon is not about the small guy at all. It's been really hard putting those listings out there and then having somebody jump on and price war me to the bottom. I can't do it. I can't afford to totally shut the tap off.”

Selling through Amazon allows a store owner to reach a wider audience and sell more products than they could currently do on their own. For Halberstadt, using the Amazon storefront was done out of necessity to maintain sales, especially during COVID-19 when many supply chains were disrupted or halted. Caitlin stated that she previously sold through Etsy, but due to changing policies, the site no longer allows artisan representatives, meaning she cannot sell handicrafts made by artisan producer groups that she partners with on the site. While this policy could potentially protect the art or labor of independent artists or producers, it does prevent businesses such as Zeal Living and every other FTO from selling through the site. Zeal Living is not the only FTO that I interviewed that sold through Amazon. The Media relations and marketing manager, Sarah shared that Ten Thousand Villages also sells through Amazon, but like Zeal Living, it is something they are trying to move away from and use the site out of necessity.

For Ten Thousand Villages, their reasoning to use Amazon to sell their products is similar to Zeal Living. Sarah discussed how they attempt to take advantage of Amazon’s services in the hopes that it will benefit the artisan groups than if they were to not use it at all. She explained, “we realized the behemoth that is Amazon and the shift
that consumers have made to only wanting to shop at one place.” While they use
Amazon, Sarah explained that Ten Thousand Villages opted out of using a lot of the
services that “just couldn’t get behind.” This included not using Prime, a paid
subscription service that allows deliveries to be shipped faster, in addition to other
benefits. She argued that using Prime was not a sustainable option for the environment.
Additionally, Ten Thousand Villages handles all shipping and returns on the site. Sarah
finished her explanation by saying “At the end of the day we have to ask ourselves, who
benefits the most? Is it the artisans? It’s true, it’s so hard for small or ethical businesses to
get ahead when Amazon even exists. So, I hope that shifts but we will see.” Sarah

Ten Thousand Villages and Zeal Living both reveal the dilemma for many
small businesses who want to operate an ethical and socially responsible business while
also being able to successfully compete against normative, capitalistic modes of
production. Entering mainstream markets is a point of contention within the fair trade
universe. According to Brown (2013), In 2011, Fair Trade USA wanted to appeal to a
wider consumer audience and believed fair trade should become more mainstream. Under
Fair Trade USA, corporations such as Starbucks and Nestlé began to sell fair trade
products (Brown 2013, p13). Many supporters of fair trade argue that these large
corporations selling fair trade products are just a fair-washing marketing ploy used to
manipulate consumers into believing their products are ethically sourced (Canning 2020).
Brown states that while Starbucks displays the Fair Trade USA logo on their packaging,
less than 10 percent of Starbucks coffee is fair trade certified. However, the logo is
enough to mislead consumers into believing that Starbucks engages in ethical sourcing of their coffee far more than they really do (Brown 2013, 14).

Both Zeal Living and Ten Thousand Villages use Amazon to sell products to a wider audience so they can maintain their relationships with artisan partners. Neither Zeal Living nor Ten Thousand Villages operate at the same level as Starbucks or Nestlé and are using Amazon more out of necessity rather than using fair trade to appear ethical to consumers. The point here is that Amazon is ubiquitous. Sometimes, even if you want to abstain from using Amazon, it can be difficult not to. Is it better to engage with corporations such as Amazon or Target in order to reach a wider audience, or should businesses remain completely separate? Sometimes, as in Zeal living’s case, it is not feasible to not use Amazon and therefore we should not cast judgement on those that do out of financial necessity. As an update, about a year after my conversation with Sarah, Ten Thousand Villages announced via social media, that it had decided to stop using Amazon due to customer demand.

Big-box Stores often purchase mass-produced goods to sell at a low cost to consumers. When big-box stores are not purchasing mass-produced craft substitutes, they do partner directly with handicraft producers in the global South. I am unaware as to the details of these relationships and to what extent fair wages are paid to artisan groups, or lack of fair wages. Speaking with a former Education Coordinator at Ten Thousand Villages, Mary talks about the importance of consistency and long-term relationships in
fair trade because relationships with big box stores can be unpredictable and at the expense of artisan groups.

Mary outlined the nature of these relationships and explains that often stores who have a focus in handicrafts or home goods will spend time seeking out handicrafts that suit their needs and aesthetics and then reach out to the artisan group to see if they would like to produce a specific quantity of products for the company. However, stores will order a substantial quantity of products to be produced in a brief period. Typically, payments for these handicrafts are not made until the order is complete and meets quality standards set by the company. However, these artisan groups often do not have the labor, materials, or equipment to produce enough handicrafts to meet these deadlines. Groups will then hire more artisans to help fulfill the order and find a way to purchase a large quantity of materials and invest in more equipment if necessary. Since payment for the handicrafts does not come until after the order is made, often being sent long after the order is made, artisan groups must produce the money themselves.

Big box stores could argue that they are helping to expand employment for artisan groups in marginalized communities, and while this may be true, the employment and benefits are often short lived. Due to rapid changes in Western fashion and home-decor trends, companies will often choose to terminate their business relationship with artisan groups since their product no longer meets their aesthetic requirements. Artisan groups are then left with an overabundance of artisans, machinery, or space and essentially no external markets to produce for. Additionally, big-box stores may argue
that the artisan groups agree to the terms and conditions of the contract, however, artisans often have little choice in the matter regarding wages and conditions of their labor. Mary also provides a more specific example of a big-box store who partnered with an artisan group but chose not to go through with the order due to unmet satisfactions.

According to Mary, The Body Shop, a British cosmetics, skincare, and perfume company, went to Bangladesh and found an artisan group who made handicrafts using jute, a fiber that is grown in India. The Body Shop wanted to purchase small soap bags made of jute to sell in their stores. The buyer for The Body Shop ordered 5,000 bags and designers from the producer group and designers from The Body Shop worked together to design a product that met the needs of the store. Once the bags were finished, the buyer went back to Bangladesh to inspect the bags and unfortunately did not meet their expectations and decided to not purchase the bags. Fortunately, in this scenario, the buyer reached out to Ten Thousand Villages and asked if they would purchase the bags, which they did. Ten Thousand Villages worked with the artisan group to alter the bags to make them sellable in their stores. The Body Shop did go back to the artisan group and replaced an order which was then produced to the satisfaction of the store. Mary’s story is a secondhand account of this scenario and therefore I do not have the exact details of this business relationship. However, this example shows how artisan groups are subject to the whims of volatile global markets and fleeting trends.

When looking up jute bags sold at The Body Shop, I found the store established what they have called “Community Fair Trade” which began in 1987 (The Body Shop,
n.d.). The concept is nearly identical to practices established by fair trade certification organizations such as the WFTO and Fair Trade International, however they are independently run and have no affiliation to the WFTO, Fair Trade International, etc. Mary had insinuated that the company was not a fair trade organization and in some ways she is correct. Many smaller organizations, such as Zeal Living and Tia-Woven Goods are not affiliated with any umbrella organization but still identify as a fair trade business. The biggest difference is that The Body Shop is under the parent company Natura and Co., a billion-dollar company which owns other brands such Aesop and Avon. Meaning, the Body Shop could probably afford the certification and membership fees needed to be affiliated with an umbrella group. While The Body Shop identifies themselves as fair trade, their practices require no third-party auditing and can operate to whatever standards they define as fair trade.

**Long Term Relationships and Local Solutions:**

The importance of long-term relationships within the fair-trade network is more evident when compared to the short-term relationships seen in big-box stores above. All four organizations spoke on the importance of long-term relationships, with some partnerships expanding over 30 years. Additionally, several organizations spoke on the importance of their business relationships as being mutually beneficial.

For Ti-a Woven Goods, who employs cooperatives from seven different villages in Bolgatanga, Ghana, Simbala works with these cooperatives and said that the relationship she has with them is not conventional in terms of how work relationships are
often structured in the U.S. She said it is less about having a boss and an employee, but a partnership where she hopes to help create autonomy for the artisan cooperatives. To reiterate, the cooperatives that Simbala works with are self-directed and have group leaders. Tia-Woven holds regular workshops, where all cooperatives are invited to take part in training.

Whenever I go, I meet with every individual member of the cooperative. We have group meetings and I tell them the things I am happy with, the things I'm disappointed with. I tell them the direction we’re taking our business and I explain why. Like one time, they were telling me it was really hard to get materials and that was really making it difficult for them to weave baskets in a timely fashion because the price of the bundles of grass was increasing and causing them to need to go up in price. My answer was why don’t we grow our own grass. We bought 40 acres of land so we could start growing our own grass and then we wouldn’t need to buy it from someone else. It's things like that that I address. One time we built a work center because as they are making their baskets, they want somewhere to store them in because their homes are kinda small. Sometimes they're weaving a thousand baskets, so we built a work center because so they could meet there and work together. Because sometimes you’re splitting, twisting, and dying the grass then weaving and everybody is in participation to get this basket wove, so we built a work center. So now they can store their baskets whether they’re completely finished or if they're in the
middle of finishing. How can we make it better for them so they can produce better quality baskets and keep growing their side of the business as well as mine.

Simbala discussed the importance of mutually beneficial relationships and how local and long-term solutions help grow a business.

For Fair Anita, Joy set up an emergency relief fund during COVID-19 to help financially support artisans who needed extra support. As I mention in the following chapter, the relief fund accumulated a significant amount for the various artisan groups. According to Joy, once the money is sent to the artisan groups, “the artisans get to distribute [the money] in their own community in a way they see the most need.” I told Joy that it was great that the artisans had the agency to spend the money as they see fit as opposed to Fair Anita deciding for them. Joy responded with an anecdote that helped her explain why she believed this was the best decision.

We sell a bunch of masks. One of the retailers was like can we make sure that the profits for the sales of your masks [are being used to donate] masks to women in the other countries then. And I’m like no. It’s so much easier to say if you buy a mask then you’re donating a mask. I get that that’s easier, but I don’t care because I’m like most of these people can’t leave their homes. They’re still so quarantined that they can’t leave their homes, so they don’t want a mask, they want food. Like they have one mask and it's getting the job done.

Ultimately, we all always need to be following the local leadership of kick ass
women and I think that’s why Fair Anita has continued to grow because I love all these women and that’s what we are: we’re a partnership. I’m one aspect of the supply chain, they are another aspect and we’re both doing the parts that were best at and trying to make it happen in that way. So anyways yeah it is definitely the local leadership that is deciding that because that would be crazy. I just think it's ridiculous that I would potentially think that I would know what is best.

While it should not be a surprise that artisan groups had the agency to spend the money that was sent to them in a way they saw fit, however as I discussed earlier, oftentimes when money is donated to another group of people the donor feels the need to control how that money is spent. Additionally, Joy makes a point of saying how Fair Anita’s relationship with artisan groups is a mutually beneficial, business relationship. Finally, Joy’s anecdote brings up the infamous, one-for-one marketing ploy, which retailers and consumers have often been intrigued by.

Perhaps the most famous, recent example of the cause-related marketing (CRM) one-for-one marking tactic is TOMS. Hitting peak popularity in the 2010s, TOMS shoe company promoted the concept that for every pair of shoes you purchased, a pair would be donated to a child in need, most often to a developing country in the global South. However, after looking up TOMS, it seems they too have rebranded and ditched the one-for-one campaign. Instead, TOMS has refocused their efforts and now invests one-third of their profits towards grassroots organizations. The decision, according
Maggy Wolanski in an article published in Texas MOODY, a magazine published by Moody College of Communication at the University of Texas at Austin, that this decision was to appeal to Gen-Z consumers who are more “socially conscious and willing to invest in businesses that promote a greater message,” (Wolanske n.d). Wolankse provides a telling example of a larger brand altered their marketing and overall business practices to appeal to the socially conscious consumer.

From a marketing perspective, the one-for-one is a fun and convenient way to purchase an item for yourself and also feel like you are doing good in the world. However, the one-for-one does not address the local needs of the recipients. For items such as TOMS, which are non-essential, fashion items, the product is designed to suit the aesthetics and needs of the consumer, not the recipient. While shoes may be essential, one-for-one does not consider what a specific community needs before shipping out a box.

Sarah also discussed how consumers are often “trained by the one-for-brands” and communicating how Ten Thousand Villages conducts business with artisan partners can be difficult.

We think of our artisan, no we know, we don’t even think, we know our artisan partners are our equals. We're in this together. We’re in a business relationship; this isn’t a charity. So, trying to convert that same sense of connectedness and partnership to our customers who may want us to simplify because they’ve been trained by the one-for-one brands where they’re like ‘If I buy these shoes,
they’ll get a pair of shoes too’. That’s not who we are, so we have to work harder to reset the expectations of what a brand that’s purpose driven looks like.

Referring to the theme of oversimplification, marketing ploys such as one-for-one oversimplify complex issues of poverty and dismiss the needs of local communities. In Joy’s case, the retailer wanted a quippy marketing device to lure in customers during a pandemic. In Sarahs case, the one-for-one has become so popular in that mainstream consumers feel it is an effective way of supporting those in need. As Sarah argued, fair trade is not charity, it is a partnership.

In this chapter, I observed how Ti-a Woven Goods, Zeal Living, Ten Thousand Villages, and Fair Anita communicated the importance of shopping fair trade and shopping locally. The overarching theme in this chapter was the importance of long-term relationships, which all four FTOs were committed to, especially during COVID-19. Several participants spoke on how fair trade conducts business and establishes relationships with artisan groups in contrast to big-box stores who often cut ties with artisan groups when their handicraft is no longer in style or does not meet quality standards or expectations. Sarah of Ten Thousand Villages and Caitlin of Zeal Living also discuss how their respective FTOs have had to use services such as Amazon out of financial need and to ensure they could maintain sales. The FTOs encouraged their consumers via Instagram and e-commerce blog posts to continue to purchase from their businesses so they could maintain these relationships with their artisan partners.

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CHAPTER SEVEN: THE NEW GENERATION OF FAIR TRADE

It seems that the younger generation of socially conscious consumers is creating demand for marketing practices that emphasize the product, not the story. They want quality, fashionable, and unique items that differ from the homogenous goods that are seen at Target and Walmart (Brown 2013). Even if mass-produced craft substitutes continuously appear on the shelves of Target, there is an appeal for consumers to support small businesses and purchase items that were handmade. Additionally, some consumers want to be more intentional with their purchases; buying items that they strongly connect with. Not only do consumers want to support businesses who produce sustainable products, but also companies who align with their morals. Particularly through COVID-19, there has been a surge in consumers wanting to support small business, as well as businesses that are women owned, minority owned, and owned by members of the LGBTQIA+ community. While there has been a surge in ethical consumerism, there has also been a simultaneous rise in overconsumption as the convenience and affordability of shopping at Amazon, SHEIN, or Target have outweighed the negative consequences.

Several participants commented on the younger generation and observed their increasing desire to shop more consciously than in generations past. When speaking
about the younger generation, Kathy agreed that, “they do care where their stuff comes from and people are concerned about the environment. They are concerned about whether this stuff is good. So, the whole push for shopping local; […] it is all part of this whole movement and I think fair trade fits in there.” Another consumer, Margaret, also agreed, and shared,

I think it’s really pivoted towards a new generation of shoppers. You look at fair trade ten years ago and it was mostly [marketed] towards the hippie generation, which is when it started so it makes sense. You see everything marketed towards them whereas now it seems to be switching more towards the millennial generation and more of a focus on the eco-friendly and you see a shift that way, especially how its marketed.

Margaret commented on how fair trade has started to market their products towards the millennial generation so I asked her how she had seen the marketing styles shift over time. She replied,

I’ve seen two big things. One, like I said, more of an emphasis on- and fair trade is intended to be eco-friendly anyways-but they’re really emphasizing that because the younger generation cares about that a lot more. Also, I’ve noticed that there is more emphasis on the person like ‘you can make a difference’ and ‘this is what it does for you’ kind of thing. There is still some-but I don’t think there is as much of the stories and the behind the product which is disappointing to me

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because that is what I love looking for. I like the stories; I like connecting with the people but I feel like that’s being less emphasized.

Perhaps, younger generations understand that we cannot truly connect with producers, especially through marketing. Our desire to connect with others, particularly in a way that cannot be reciprocated, creates a system where we, as consumers, know details about artisans while they know nothing of us. The goal should not be to purchase an item based off the story, but rather because we value the item. However, when given the choice, consumers should purchase ethical choice or the sustainable choice. On the other hand, perhaps the younger generation’s decreased desire for the story is not as altruistic and their motivations for purchasing handicrafts is more centered on acquiring unique items that are not some homogenous item from Target. Additionally, their actions might even be performative, wherein the younger generations wants to support businesses such as fair trade or a black owned businesses simply to appear as someone who support these businesses.

At the head office, Ten Thousand Villages is trying to reach a younger demographic through active engagement on social media and revamped product designs. Social media, specifically Instagram, has helped Ten Thousand Villages reach that goal. When Sarah first started at Ten Thousand Villages, she said, “our marketing was focused on women that were an age group that would soon not be purchasing anymore,” meaning their target demographic was a much older generation. In fact, in her first months, a customer had come up to Sarah and said “Ten Thousand Villages is my grandmother’s
favorite brand” to which Sarah replied, “I was like okay, we got work to do, we gotta change that.” The marketing team decided they needed to revamp their marketing strategies in order to “maintain [their] mission.” Sarah explained,

We just had to shift the perception of who Villages is and who should be excited to shop there and who should be involved in the fair trade global movement. We were missing out on a significant audience because millennial shoppers have typically more interest in shopping sustainably and ethically than generations that came before us. So, I think social media has done a tremendous job for us in that regard, helping to shift our perception, helping to get our brand in front of a different audience, a millennial audience. Hopefully in the future a younger audience.

Ten Thousand Villages put an effort into updating product designs to appeal to younger audiences, which also meant making their e-commerce site “more useable and accessible.”

Social media, it seemed, was the biggest shift. Consumers are not only following their favorite brands, they are following their favorite influencers to see not just what the trendiest products are, but also, what the best ethical or environmentally friendly brands are out there. Sarah mentioned how part of her role was to partner with influencers who were into the “sustainable, ethical, type of content creator or life-style creators” or influencers who promoted ethical practices, especially ethical fashion. Social media influencers are vital to millennial and Gen-Z consumers who often make purchasing
decisions based on influencer recommendations. As shared by Joy McBrien earlier, influencers also bring a personal aspect to marketing, oftentimes sharing personal details about themselves to gain followers. The goal, much like in fair trade transparency marketing, is to create a sense of personal, human connection between the content creator and the viewer. She explained,

People crave human connection and because people are personal and share so much of their personal story, it’s why people are flocking to them and feeling like they’re connected to them. I think its easy for us as brands to want to do something similar and be like, we got a ton of personal stories, let’s build that human connection but I would like to see it based on celebration as opposed to trauma.

Social media influencers have become a popular marketing strategy for brands, especially as a means of catering to a younger audience. Joy relates the idea of the consumer feeling connected to the influencer and the implications of FTOs trying to do the same with Artisan partners. The biggest difference of an influencer sharing their personal narratives as opposed to an artisan, is that the influencer has much more control of the content of their story and how it is shared to an audience.

Joy also shared a similar experience as Sarah. She too felt that fair trade jewelry and accessories were largely for an older generation and if fair trade was going to continue and be successful, they needed to make changes. When Joy was in the initial stages of Fair Anita she had met with artisan groups but who had discussed with her the
possibility of buying their products to be sold back in the U.S. initially, Joy had declined because she did not have the platform to sell any products but then thought “all of the fair trade brands that make jewelry look like they’re for my grandma or my mom. Or, they’re like super expensive. So, it was like how can I create something that I would actually be excited about?” Joy reached back out to the artisan groups and asked if they could work together on designs and thus Fair Anita began.

From an ethical standpoint, choosing a mass-produced item off Amazon where labor has been exploited, and a handmade item produced by an artisan whose been paid a living wage, may seem like the easy choice. However, factors of convenience and affordability stand in the way of many consumers who may want to shop more ethically or sustainably but feel it is inaccessible.

Two of Fair Anita’s biggest goals are to sell jewelry that is both beautiful and high quality, but also affordable. Joy felt that affordability was necessary for Fair Anita to create an inclusive consumer base. She said, “[w]e wanna make it mainstream; that you can go out and you can buy the better for the planet option and for that to happen it has to be competitive in your regular capitalist system.” She argued that even just five years ago fair trade was far lesser known than what it is now, at least for handicrafts. Due to the limited availability of fair trade in the U.S., organizations could sell their products for a steep price. However, the high price of fair trade products created a system that was elitist. Joy said,
200 dollars for a necklace? It makes me feel kinda gross to think that it's an elitist community here in the U.S. who can afford it. Typically, it’s white, wealthy women and the artisans are not making 200 dollars off of that. The main misconception about fair trade is that people assume that all the money is going back to the artisan.

Joy shared she was against the reality of fair trade being an elitist system, especially due to the misconception around pricing. Joy explained, “fair trade brands almost exploit the fair trade mission and put a higher price tag on it because they have proof that customers will pay it because there's this associated mission. [Consumers] want the product, but they also see it as a charitable act.” Consumers feel that the inflated is equated to a higher income for artisans. Additionally, Joy’s comment may refer to Hand’s (2012) argument on purchasing items considered to be positional goods (Hand 2012, 520). Those who can afford fair trade products are elevated in status, from a regular consumer to a socially conscious one. When ethically sourced goods are limited to the wealthy, access to these goods becomes a sign of prestige.

Joy shared a sentiment that resonated with other FTOs, where marketing should emphasize the quality and affordability of a product to truly draw consumers in. This what will increase a brand’s retainability rate. Joy shared,

We want you to first love the product, love the designs, because the price points fits you and because we’re doing business in what I believe is the right way and that’s the icing on the cake. Accessibility is important, going back to the white
savior complex. We wanna be more mainstream, we wanna see more brands prioritizing ethics and sustainability into their supply chains.

Previous efforts of the fair trade social movement promoted the idea that it created an alternative international trade system which placed the producers and consumers first, rather than exploiting them under normative capitalistic modes of production. However, fair trade cannot exist outside of capitalism. As it currently stands, fair trade networks must create a product that is well-made, functional, aesthetically pleasing, and at a price point that can successfully compete in a market system. FTOs must work hard to find the balance between selling a product at a price point that will sell in the U.S while maintaining fair wages paid to artisans.

Caitlin also reflected on accessibility and affordability of fair trade products. She shared,

I definitely don’t want to disparage design for everyone because I do think there’s something really lovely about all levels of income being able to afford beautiful things for their home. However, if someone is in a position where they can afford to pay a little bit more for something that’s been made by an individual or something over something that may have also been made by an individual, but it's really hard to know when something comes from Target or Walmart or Amazon. Is that person being treated with respect? Are they being treated fairly? Is their culture being appropriated, that’s being disrespectful to them.
Caitlin’s comment is indicative of fetishism of the producer in that corporations hide details of their product supply chains to mask the fact that they engage in labor exploitation and environmental degradation, to name a few. Caitlin also discussed how corporations no only engage in labor exploitation but also in the reproduction of stolen designs. She expressed,

There's a lot of ‘we see this as a trend so we’re going to take parts of it and we’re going to make it into this mass-produced item that is just devoid of the story and the history and the energy of it. So what I love about what I have with Zeal is that, there’s this beautiful item that the person want’s because it’s gorgeous but it also honors the maker’s culture because in most cases basket weaving or beaded jewelry is part of the culture they come from and to be able to say as a Western consumer I love what you do and what your culture is so much I’m willing to pay more for it.

Caitlin brought up a topic that was not touched on by anyone else. Mass-produced items are oftentimes reproduced, stolen art. Corporations mass-produce a replica and sell it for a fraction of the price. Consumers then purchase this item out of ignorance, because they did not know it was a stolen design. Or, they choose to purchase the item always because its low-cost. I do not want to claim that those who purchase home decor, jewelry, or clothing from Amazon, SHEIN, or Target are inherently evil. Again, there is no ethical consumerism under capitalism and all persons deserve access to clothing and goods, whether necessary or not. It is on the corporation for engaging in this behavior in the first
place. Additionally, Caitlin brought up a critical point about respecting cultures. If we, as consumers, truly want to respect other cultures, then purchase art produced directly from the artisan, or the FTOs who retail their products.

On the topic of affordability, Jacky brought up a key point about the convenience of fair trade, or perhaps, the lack thereof. As mother of six kids, Jacky confirmed that a lot of fair trade items are out of her price range and spends a lot of time searching for affordable products or waiting for those products to go on sale before purchasing them. As a reminder, Jacky runs a fair trade blog, almost like a search engine, which helps consumers find fair trade organizations that sell items that they are looking for. Jacky spends a considerable amount of time researching fair trade organizations and researching products; time that many consumers may have to spend, or even want to spend doing. Amazon allows a consumer to buy almost any item imaginable off their website and it will show up at your door two days later. Target and Walmart both have same-day delivery and pick-up options, which again, sell everything from clothing, to food, to cleaning products. Affordability may be one of the biggest benefits of big-box stores, but so is convenience. To Jacky’s credit, she had established a solution to this problem by creating a search engine for consumers to freely use. She said, “there is the inconvenience, but that’s kinda one of my things because I spend so much time researching my website. I share my research with everybody else to make it easier for them.”
I had asked Kathy whether she felt the story card influenced consumer’s shopping habits. She explained while they interest people, they are still choosing the item based on their personal needs. She said, “not many people come in with the money to be altruistic enough to choose based on the people who created it. Do you know what I mean, that takes a certain amount of income and altruistic level.” Consumer’s motivations are generally not altruistic enough to purchase solely for the mission. The product, in some fashion, has to suit their needs. Kathy continued by saying, “I think people choose to shop there because they are interested in having a society that is different than a mass-produced society that eats away at the personal identity. I think coming into the shop is that statement but it's not necessarily what helps them choose a product.

I asked Simbala how she might go about encouraging someone to purchase a basket from Ti-a Woven as opposed to purchasing a cheaper basket at Target. Simbala understood that her baskets are non-essential items and that some customers cannot afford to spend money on a basket when “there are more essential things in life.” She said, “Customers, they want a deal. They want to get something that they think is functional, long lasting, beautiful, and at a price point that they can afford. Understanding all this, Simbala urged her customers to support businesses that aligned with their morals.

I’m asking my customers whatever they buy, whether it's a Ti-a basket or its tomatoes, buy with consciousness. Buy what you agree for yourself so that when you align yourself with a company you hold them responsible for doing the things
that you agree with. Don’t buy with the company that’s going to build a wall, okay? Don’t buy from a company that’s going to support a candidate that sends national guards to put tear gas on citizens that are trying to have a voice. Do things with companies and hold them responsible. Ask representatives for the company, are you doing things that help the community, or help the planet, or are you just blindly buying stuff and you don’t even have a clue where your dollars are supporting.

Simbala then shared how she communicated this with her customers.

In my marketing techniques, in the branding of my company I try to relay that message that Tia Woven Goods has a responsibility on environmental issues, our product is environmentally friendly, its 100% biodegradable. Our product is socially responsible, we don’t think only about profit and loss, we think about people that we employ. I try to relay that branding and marketing to the consumer so that when they buy they can buy with confidence I’m on the same page that they are at with some topics that may be important to them.

Simbala clearly explained how she intentionally thought about socially conscious consumerism and then detailed how she communicated this information to consumers.

Storytelling here is used as means to discuss important socio-political and environmental issues that are pertinent in America. By sharing this information, the consumer understands that Ti-a Woven Goods is not just a brand that pays fair wages to weavers in Ghana; it is also a brand that supports the lives of Ti-a Woven employees in America, as
well as all marginalized persons in this country as well. Younger consumers want to know that the brands they are shopping from align with their socio-political and environmental beliefs.

Black Lives Matter and Representation of BIPOC:

Speaking with Simbala, she discussed at length about how her perspectives and her lived experiences have impacted her role as owner and founder of Ti-a Woven Goods. She said, “I’m trying to pass on equality- economic equality for women in Ghana while I’m socially working on social equality for me here in America.” I spoke with Simbala in August of 2020 and reflected on the impact of the murder of George Floyd and the subsequent rise of the BLM (Black Lives Matter) Movement. A movement which certainly did not begin in 2020, but with the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery, many took to the streets to protest police brutality and the inherent, institutionalized racism which has always existed in America. Simbala reflected on the BLM movement that gained momentum in June 2020. She expressed that,

I’m 57, I lived through Jim Crow, I lived through ‘separate but equal’. I’ve lived through affirmative action, I’ve lived through all these things - the Civil Rights movement - and I’ve seen America change as a child and as an adult and now like I’m looking at this and and thinking this feels different. This feels like the young people are not resisting to change and the older people are just scared to death and they’re calling groups like BLM, ANTIFA and all this kinda crazy stuff and its
like - its kinda weird because when I look at what I’m doing in Ghana and I see the conditions that I live in sometimes feel like I’m just as bad off as the women in Ghana to a certain degree- I mean I have resources here and electricity and running water and toilets but now I’m scared to death to go out and get stopped by police. You know what happens to me? […] In some ways Black America is still third world. What we deal with, the economic lack of opportunities here in America, how we live, how we don’t have the same health care, the institutions that we have to deal with-like the judicious systems, its very third world for us. It lacks the resources for us to advance and that’s what I mean by third world. Its just -I wanna stress the importance of even though I’m not in a third world country I deal with third world issues everyday as an African American woman.

During this time, many Coloradans, who were already eager to support local businesses because of COVID-19, suddenly wanted to support Black-owned businesses as well. 303 Magazine had issued an article that listed Black-owned businesses to support in Denver and it was due to this article that I discovered Ti-a Woven Goods. Several other articles had reached out to Simbala to interview her and spread the word about Ti-a Woven Goods. She said, “I’ve been trying to speak up and some things I might say may make some people uncomfortable but its not intended to make people uncomfortable, its intended to make people think.” As her business has gained attention, albeit under extreme circumstances, Simbala took the opportunity to speak up about institutionalized racism and her experiences as living as a Black woman in America. Finally, she shared,
I realize I’m not conventional in my thinking and it is from my perspective as an African American woman. It’s not to exclude anyone else but being that I’ve not felt that I’ve had an equal opportunity at the table for my opinion to be included I’ve become rally passionate and somewhat you know idk I feel like its our time to speak up and i don’t know Im just trying to take every opportunity to share my opinions right about now.

Simbala also shared her opinion on young, white activists in America, and more specifically in Denver.

The consciousness of white young people in America right now is turning on an axel, I mean they’re not doing what their parents did. They’re like hey - and this is my perception - I’m not saying my parents were monsters but they created institutionalized racism that has had an impact on these marginalized people. I am conscious enough to see that and I’m not participating in that.

Simbala references the impact of the younger generation; ones who want to participate in the dismantling of institutionalized racism. There is a separate conversation to be had for white activism that is more performative than production. However, Simbala observed while working the various farmer’s markets in Denver and attending the various BLM protests, that many young, white activist, had good intentions wanted to listen to black voices and support Black owners, such as Simbala, whenever they could.

Zeal Living, Fair Anita, and Ten Thousand Villages did not explicitly discuss matters relating to BLM in our interviews, however, they all showed support for the
movement in their marketing. Supporting the BLM movement is a divisive choice and could potentially have negative consequences for a person’s business. However, for fair trade, it is a movement that should not and cannot remain neutral. If it is a movement that aims to increase economic access and opportunity for marginalized persons in the global South, who are primarily BIPOC, then fair trade must maintain that support for all BIPOC in America as well.
While some corporations support for various social movements such as BIPOC rights or LGBTQIA+ rights are oftentimes performative and generally used to earn a profit, decisions by small and independent businesses to support these social movements reflects the internal morals and beliefs of the owners and operators. Small businesses can create a space that is welcoming to all and many customers may feel more inclined to shop at these locations because they feel seen and respected as an individual.

Again, if a consumer has the option and financial means to do so, choose the more ethical business and product. It is important to note that performative activism on social media does not count as supporting social justice movements. It is easy to share images Instagram to appear one way, but unless your practices reflect words, then it means nothing.
Reflexivity in Fair Trade Marketing:

As the fair trade social movement grows, reflexivity is necessary. Organizations should be open to adapting and growing to ensure their messaging is representing themselves and artisan partnerships in a respectful and culturally responsible way.

After speaking with Sarah about discussions of poverty on social media, she shared that while her and the marketing team and the rest of Ten Thousand Villages are constantly evolving the way they communicated information to their consumers. Sarah shared that while some members were more hesitant to change the way they always shared stories, she shared, “[w]e have a lot of conversations at the national level. Everybody [at Ten Thousand Villages] is doing the best they can to educate themselves and to communicate about our artisan partners and our mission in a way that upholds the respect that we feel.” Additionally, they consider customer feedback when they feel that what has been said is culturally insensitive or just incorrect. Sarah said, “people will be like you know when you say this-I'm from that country and we don’t actually love that phrase and we will be like oh thank you for that. And we will do a little research. We’ve consulted with our artisan partners, or we do our own research and we shifted something.” While it is necessary to try and remain as culturally knowledgeable as possible, it is nearly impossible to perfectly understand every culture in the world. That is why it is necessary to continuously listen to the suggestions and understanding of others so that you are always being respectful.
Simbala also shared how she and Ti-a Woven were constantly working to improve their practices and messaging to ensure they were conducting a business that was socially and environmentally responsible.

Ti-a Woven Goods wants to be challenged by our consumers because we have not always done exactly the same thing that we’re doing today. We’ve transformed over the years to become better at trying to get to the standard where we are proud, and we know that in five years we’re going to be at a different place. We're going to have new growth, we're going to have new consciousness, we're going to have new challenges that we're answering. That’s life. You hope that you’re not in the same place in five years. You grow, you change, you develop. And you have a team of people that help you to keep asking those questions, you have customers that keep asking those questions and helping you to refocus and come up with new ways to be a better company and a better organization. That’s how I want Ti-a to grow.

Simbala expressed how through community and team effort, Ti-a Woven would continue to grow.

For Joy, not only was she working to update all Fair Anita’s marketing materials, but she was working towards improving polices and messaging at the Fair Trade Federation as well. In October 2020, Joy was in the process of updating all the messaging on her website and any permanent marketing materials she was using.
Additionally, she was focusing on anti-racism training within her team. She said, “I feel quite confident in how I relate to artisan partners, but I want to make sure that when any single representative of Fair Anita is talking with artisans that they are dealing with respect and appreciation, that has been an ongoing challenge but diversifying our team is necessary.” In chapter six, I discuss further how Joy has updated messaging including removing the word empowerment from all marketing materials.

Outside of Fair Anita, Joy had just helped initiate a committee under the Fair Trade Federation, called the JEDI Committee. JEDI stood for Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion. As Joy explained, “ultimately Fair Trade Federation is difficult, because they’re a trade association and so they’re not a governing body and they can’t force you to do this or that.” The Fair Trade Federation sets requirements which members must adhere to, however, there is no external auditing processes to govern how members conduct fair trade. Members submit a self-reported evaluation of their business practices (“The Difference: Verification & Certification” 2020). As a member of the Fair Trade Federation, Joy explained, “[t]here are a decent number of us that are struggling with the way fair trade is often communicated and the way it will often exploit the trauma of artisans to sell products. I personally think that’s messed up and I'm not interested in having that happen.” Other members of Fair Trade Federation, including the director of the Fair Tarde Federation and Manpreet Kaur Kalra, whose work I reference frequently throughout my thesis.
The JEDI committee is intended to review the internal processes of the Fair Trade Federation and determine what should be changed to create a more inclusive and responsible membership organization. Joy said the goal of the committee was to review membership requirements and application processes with an anti-racism lens, as well as advocate for anti-racist ideals to be integrated into an additional fair trade principle. The committee intended to hold roundtable discussions on the use of the word empowerment and the Black Lives Matter movement and how the movement relates to fair trade. Also, they intended to have discussions on cultural appropriation. As Joy said, “You can’t just put Namaste on all your shit and think you’re doing good in the world. That’s cultural appropriation.” The committee also intended to look at external processes and challenge Fair Trade Federation members to evolve their messaging and practices as well.

From my observations, it seems that the fair trade movement is entering into a new wave and and it is in large part due to the younger generation of socially conscious consumers. As younger leaders take on leadership roles in their brands, whether in ownership or as a manager, they create a positive change for brands to rethink and revamp their overall messaging. Not only are brands reflexive in how they share information on their artisan partners; they are also increasingly vocal about significant issues here in America, such as the Black Lives Matter movement. On the consumer end, there is an increasing demand for brands to be vocal about these issues if brands are going to keep their support. While messaging across Zeal Living, Ten Thousand Villages, Fair Anita, and Ti-a Woven Goods is not perfect, participants from all four FTOs were actively
evolving their messaging to ensure they were representing everyone involved in their businesses in a respectful way.
CHAPTER EIGHT: EMPOWERMENT

Experience shows that economic growth on its own is not sufficient. We must do more to empower individuals through decent work, support people through social protection, and ensure the voices of the poor and marginalized are heard.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, World Day of Social Justice 2014

In this chapter, I analyze and discuss the word empowerment and its ubiquitousness across fair trade marketing platforms. After observing the term used, in some way or another, across all four FTOs’s marketing materials, I wanted to understand how the participants interpreted and used the word in their personal and professional lives. Further, I observed how the term might influence consumers to purchase handicrafts from a particular FTO and whether this term would reinforce negative implications of purchasing handicrafts out of a charitable mindset. Finally, I hoped to understand how empowerment, when used in storytelling, could create unintended power dynamics wherein artisans are placed in positions of inferiority due to use of the word.

The term empowerment has become a catch-all term to describe women’s rights movements and organizations in Western countries. During the ‘Girl-boss’ era, women were encouraged to take control of their own life and fight against systemic patriarchal structures. The term Girl-Boss was coined in 2014 by Nasty Gal founder and former CEO, Sophia Amoruso (Mukhopadhyay 2021). This girl-boss era saw a sudden influx of
phrases such as ‘Empowered Women, Empower Women’ and “Empower all Women”
printed across T-Shirt, banners, stickers, buttons, and really anything that could be printed
or posted on social media. I attended an all-women, liberal arts college during this era,
and from first-hand experience, I saw these sorts of phrases everywhere. What began as a
feminist movement led by white female CEOs quickly turned into an overabundance of
businesses capitalizing off this movement. (ibid). Women in this context most often refers
to white, cisgender women. This is primarily due to the lack of intersectionality within
feminist or women’s movements, historically. Suddenly motivational quips were
everywhere, and the meaning of the word became lost in a sea of buzzwords.

While the word empowerment is still used widely across marketing platforms
and inspirational stories on Instagram, its usage, and perhaps over-usage, has gotten many
people thinking about what empowerment really means. On one end, some have begun to
question its over-usage while others have questioned the context in which the word is
often used. For example, if a label states that your purchase empowers women in another
country does that mean we, the consumer, control the power and how it is allocated to
another group of women?

As I began research, the first question I was curious about was why the word
empowerment was everywhere. Particularly in the context of NGOs or International
development agencies, I saw a strong pattern of organizations and agencies using the
word empowerment to refer to marginalized women in the global South. I aimed to
explore the gender, racial and class disparities that come with the word as well as the power dynamics at play.

Prior to the girl-boss era, the word empowerment was still a motivational symbol for women’s development, but its usage was directed more towards international development agencies promoting top-down development policies aimed at women and marginalized persons primarily in the global South. USAID, The United Nations, The World Bank, and even the Fair Trade Movement, all have principles or policies addressing their mission towards the economic, social, political empowerment of women.

Historically, however, the term has a more grassroots origin. Beginning in the 1970s by Dr. Barbara Solomon, a social worker whose book, *Black Empowerment: Social Work in Oppressed Communities* (1976), formalized the use of the term empowerment amongst researchers and social service providers in the United States. The usage of the term was meant to support marginalized groups such as African Americans, LGBTQIA+ persons, and those with disabilities and became widespread throughout social movement protests of the time. At the time, theories surrounding the term empowerment meant giving “priority to the points of view held by oppressed peoples, enabling them not only to express themselves, but also to gain power and overcome the domination to which they were subject” (Wise 2005). Around the same time Dr. Paulo Freire, in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968) produced a similar argument as Solomon where he aimed to achieve “critical consciousness,” (Freire 1965). The idea was that through education those who were oppressed or marginalized could become active participants in decision making.
American researchers, activists, aid workers, and international development NGOs attempted to adopt Freire's philosophy as many were dissatisfied with current international development policies which took a ‘top-down’ approach and left aid recipients as passive actors (Calvés 2009). International development agencies hoped to achieve empowerment through active participation of local communities and individuals in decision making.

While empowerment began making a more formalized appearance, particularly amongst activists and development professionals specifically within the International Foundation for Development Alternatives (IFDA), it is due to feminist grassroots organizations in the global South that the usage of empowerment became more widespread. In 1984, a Southern network in Bangalore called the Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN) introduced a new development model named the Empowerment approach. This approach suggested that economic independence and addressing basic survival needs are not enough to “reinforce women’s power” and to go further to include the “radical transformation of economic, legal, and social structures that perpetuate race, gender, and class dominations” (ibid). In the 1990s, feminist and researchers such as Srilatha Batliwala (1993), Naila Kabeer (1994), Magdalena Leon (1997), and Jo Rowlands (1995) all produced a similar argument as the women from Bangalore and defined empowerment as a “multifaceted process” and not simply just increasing a woman’s economic stability. To these women,

Empowerment differs from holding “power of domination” over someone else (power over); it is more of a creative power that can be used to accomplish
things (power to) a collective political power used by grassroots organizations (power with) and also a power from within, referring to self-confidence and the capacity to undo the effects of internalized oppression (Calvès 2009, 5).

As I analyzed the responses of all participants who answered this question, I kept in mind Batliwala’s emphasis on the ways in which power was translated when using the term empowerment. I kept in mind “power over”, “power to”, “power with”, and “power within” (Batliwala 1993, 147). In our interviews, participants discussed the word empower and what it meant in their own lives or professional lives and specifically how they discussed it in relation to artisan partnerships.

Criticism of the term comes from a lack of a clear definition towards the term, particularly referring to women’s empowerment. Despite the vague and unclear definition of the word empowerment, its usage is still prolific, appearing not just in international development publications or academic conferences, but in mainstream marketing as well. The vagueness of the word, perhaps, is one reason why businesses or organizations have latched on to the word so much. The word is optimistic, without being too divisive or political and in the fair trade network, that is exactly the type of marketing strategies they are looking for (Johnston 2002).

Just like international development and multilateral agencies, the fair trade universe uses empowerment to refer to gender equity and women’s development in the global South. Under the World Fair Trade Organization’s (WFTO) 10 principles for fair trade, women’s economic empowerment comes in as the 6th principle. The principle specifically says, "Commitment to Non Discrimination, Gender Equity and Women’s
Economic Empowerment, and Freedom of Association,” (“Our Fair Trade System” 2021). The 6th principle states that all persons have the ability to make decisions and the ability to “influence wider policy, regulatory, and institutional environment that shapes their livelihoods and lives,” (ibid). The International Fair Trade Charter, which was produced by the world’s largest fair trade membership and standard setting organizations, including the WFTO and Fair Trade International, includes a sub-section entitled ‘Empowering Women’ which states that Fair Trade seeks to ensure gender equity by including women in decision making in fair trade projects. It also claims that fair trade has provided the “first opportunity to make decision about household income” for millions of women (Fair Trade Charter 2018).

Due to the ubiquitous use of the term empower or empowerment within the fair trade network, especially within female-led fair trade organizations including artisan groups and cooperatives, retailers, and wholesalers, many fair trade organizations incorporate empowerment into their marketing strategy as a means of educating consumers on fair trade principles. I asked every participant what the term empower and/or empowerment meant to them. I intentionally left the question open-ended and allowed the participant to associate the term with however they felt it most important. Every participant I interviewed was a woman and therefore it seemed, to some degree, their response to this question reflected their own lived experiences of being a woman. Every woman had a personal connection to the word empowerment and several internally struggled with the term as they felt divisive over its definition and usage. I almost always
asked this question last but often a participant would bring up the term on their own and therefore would give further insight to how they thought about this term and how they used it in their professional or personal life.

For Simbala, of Ti-a Woven Goods, the term empowerment had a positive meaning that resonated within her business and in her personal life as well. The word empowerment or empowering is seen frequently across Tia-Woven Goods marketing materials; from the tags on their baskets to their personal bio on their Instagram page, which states *Weaving our Way to Ghanian Women’s Empowerment*.

Figure 15: ‘Weaving is Empowerment’ Photos from Ti-a Woven Goods Instagram.
Simbala’s reflections on empowerment resembled that of early grassroots definitions, wherein she felt empowerment meant being “to express [oneself], but also to gain power and overcome the domination to which [one is] subject” (Batliwala 1993). At the start of our interview, I asked Simbala how she began Tia-Woven Goods and said,

I became passionate about creating industry for women in developing countries because, well, industry is already a challenge in developing countries and women are typically the last to get [paid] jobs. My goal was, how can I encourage women to empower themselves with skills they already had, that can be flexible in their household and to perform the service or to use their skill and it can be based on their need for income.

Simbala’s initial use of the word emphasizes her dedication towards women empowering themselves using the skills, resources, and lifestyle they already had. We talked in depth about how prior to COVID-19, she regularly visited Ghana and held training workshops for the artisan co-ops to both teach and improve the artisans' weaving skills.

Figure 16: ‘Empowerment’ Photo taken from Ti-a Woven Goods Instagram page
The quote shown is above is shared on the Ti-a Woven Goods homepage and describes how Ti-a Woven Goods has not just helped improve the income of the artisans Simbala has employed, but also, it seems, the decision-making capacities of the artisans and gendered relations which exist in these communities. The website does not mention how, if at all, Tia-Woven Goods has directly impacted gendered relations within Bolgatanga, Ghana, nor am I implying that they do. The final sentence says, “Thank you for being a part of empowerment.” From this sentence, I interpret empowerment to be used in the “power with” meaning. Empowerment, here, is a process which over time has improved the income, gendered-relations, and socio-economic status for female artisans in Bolgatanga. Tia-Woven and its consumers are part of this process and their involvement has contributed towards this positive impact on some level.

Empowerment is not just reserved for artisans. For Simbala, empowerment extends to her staff here in the U.S. Simbala also explained, “I want you to buy [from Ti-a Woven] because I want to empower my own community. I want to change the direction of my own community so that the eight people I hired have more opportunity; they have more building wealth and education and health in our community.” At Tia-Woven Goods, Simbala shared that she tries to employ those who are often marginalized in the U.S. based on race, gender, age, and religious backgrounds. As she said, ‘you’re not valued the same as a white man, you’re not paid the same as the white man, your voice is not as strong, and so within my company I’m able to provide those things to other marginalized groups of people.
Towards the end of our interview, I asked Simbala what the word empowerment meant to her. She took the word and internalized its meaning, reflecting on her own experiences as being a Black woman in America. She shared,

When you’re not seen, when you’re not heard and you have no voice, when decisions are being made on how your communities are going to be developed, your education, your healthcare, the rules that makeup society, you feel disempowered. You feel like no one knows what you need or want or desire. All of a sudden someone turns around and says what do you want. I remember the first time a person said to me if you had a million dollars what would you do, they were asking me if I had a million dollars to put into Tia what would I do with it. Well I was so used to not having any I had not a clue what I would do with it. Like, I would just roll into having economic equality and I would just know what to do. Well I’ve realized that sometimes when you have not had power and then all of a sudden you have power, it takes a while to even know what you want because right now people are saying ‘what does BLM want, what type of equality are you asking for, like I had to sit and think about institutional racism because no one’s ever - I would say it hasn't been blatant. Racism has been all very covert. It’s been not being included, not having a voice, having laws that make it difficult for me to thrive, or having institutions that don’t include people like me. So I felt disempowered most of my life and having power now, having a voice, having a platform, having you listen to me, I mean you spent an hour of your time listening
to me say this is what I want and need. Now that to me is me being empowered.
Someone listening, someone taking what I say seriously and possibly creating a
platform where it includes what I have mentioned that feels like I have been
empowered. And if our country is doing that, if they’re actually listening, if they
actually seriously intend to include the things that we say we need, then yes I feel
empowered because all I’ve ever known is not feeling empowered. No one has
seriously ever asked me what I want or what is best for my family or what’s going
to make my job easier by having a business. No I just ride on the backside of
whatever white people have established for them and try to make it work for me.
That’s typically how I live so if they have a rule that says this is what you do and
it doesn’t fit me perfectly I just have to figure out how to make myself fit in that
cookie cutter. And it may or may not be a perfect fit and most of the time it’s not a
perfect fit. But people are now saying well we’re not going to try to fit you into a
cookie cutter. You have a voice, tell us what you want. That feels like I’m
beginning to have some empowerment that I’ve never had before, and I plan to
use that empowerment not only here in the States but also in Ghana. That’s what I
try to do in Ghana, I try to give women economic empowerment so that they can
have a positive impact upon their community and their family. So every time that
I get a little bit more resources and a little bit more empowered I try to share that
with my business. I try to make sure it gets all the way to Ghana, all the way to
Bolgatanga, all the way to those 7 villages that I work with.
I incorporated Simbala’s entire quote because I felt it was important to understand how she interpreted being empowered or feeling disempowered throughout her life. Her statement showed a process and it was powerful to hear her progression of feeling disempowered all the way to gaining power and then choosing to help others feel empowered as well. Simabala wanted to create a business that would help not just the artisans she employed in Ghana, but those employed in America as well. So, that they too would feel seen, heard, and treated with respect in a world where they are often largely ignored. To me, it seemed Simbala had a genuine connection to the word and therefore used the term in her marketing intentionally rather than just as a buzzword to draw customers in.

Prior to speaking with Joy McBrien of Fair Anita, I listened to a podcast with her and Manpreet Kaur Kalra of Art and Citizenry, whose work I have referenced through my thesis. Within the episode, Joy speaks on “the power of agency” and the positive impact that agency can have on one’s mental health. Joy shared that she centered the idea of Fair Anita around the idea of agency and “having the agency to determine what your own identities are” (Kalra 2020). Manpreet took notice of Joy’s use of agency as opposed to the more commonly used word, empowerment. Manpreet voiced a common critique of the word saying it is problematic because “it reinforces the idea that the person on the other end […] has no power to begin with, essentially discounting any form of agency” (ibid). Joy replied,
When I think about the word empowerment especially as a white woman who’s running a FTO and what does it mean as a white woman working with woman almost exclusively of color. What am I saying with that word because ultimately the word means to give power to, and I don’t feel like that’s what it is. There’s power in our combined relationships and our shared experiences. I don’t feel like its one-sided like the word empower suggests.

The word empower here reinforces the power dynamics that exist between FTOs in the North and the artisan partnerships in the South. As Manpreet pointed out in the podcast, “relationships with artisans are mutually beneficial. Without them, you have no business” (Kalra 2020). Oftentimes FTOs, along with other mission-driven supply chains, use language that suggests the idea that it operates purely to support marginalized artisan groups. While this is obviously a key factor, it takes away the agency of artisans. Supply is important, but without demand you do not have a business. The importance of language is necessary to ensure that a FTO, particularly one that is operated by a white American, does not reinforce unintentional power dynamics.

When I spoke with Joy McBrien it was relatively soon after her interview on the *Art of Citizenry* podcast. She began our interview by telling me that she was currently working on changing the messaging across all Fair Anita marketing platforms and e-commerce sites and changing any language that promotes the idea of power being given or handed to the artisan partners. Essentially avoiding any chance of insinuating her or her team at Fair Anita have ‘power over’ anyone else. She shared,
I still feel like empower on its own is not a bad word, it’s about context and I am realizing when customers are purchasing those earrings, they believe that they -American consumer- are giving power to artisan and I didn’t understand that until recently. […] We’re trying to make sure that we're bringing our customers along for the ride because I think that is just as important as the actual change, the why, so customers understand that its intentional.

When listening to the podcast, Joy shared similar information saying that they were changing their messaging including their previous tagline for Fair Anita which was, *Designed to Empower*. When you look at the website now, the tagline has changed to *Always Sustainable, Always Affordable. Wear your Values.*

*Figure 17: ‘Always Sustainable. Always Affordable’ Photos from Fair Anita.*
The first photo above is a screenshot I had taken in September 2020 of a catalog on the Fair Anita website before listening to the podcast and before ever speaking with Joy. If you were to go to the Fair Anita website or their social media page now, you would not find the word empower anywhere. The website and messaging have been completely updated. In fact, there is even a blog post which goes into the importance of language and how Fair Anita actively chooses to not use words or phrases such as “helps” or “saves” artisans because it implies that artisans are in need of a Westerner’s saving. Additionally, the article says Fair Anita refrains from using ‘our’ artisans and instead uses artisans partners, because using ‘our artisans’ implies that Fair Anita has ownership of a group of people. I believe that I interviewed Joy at the right time, because seeing how Fair Anita’s messaging changed showed the reflexivity of Joy and her staff to create a brand that reflected a more equal, ethical and de-colonized narrative that better represented the artisan groups.

Figure 18: ‘Language’ Photos taken from Fair Anita Instagram page.
Since Joy had already shared her opinions on the word empowerment, I altered the question slightly to gain a further insight into the use of the word empowerment and asked her if she felt there were better words to be used. I also asked her why she thought empowerment was often associated with women. After asking the last question, I realized I should have asked it in a different way. Joy had never said that the word empowerment is associated with women. I may have unintentionally associated the word with women that she may not have spoken on had I not asked the question in the way that I had. When I asked why the word was associated with women, she responded that it probably had to do with “sexism and internalized misogyny” and said “we believe that we can help women more easily than men or they’re more malleable or submissive. I don’t know. I obviously don’t believe those things.” She goes further on to say

It’s difficult because I know why we use the word and it's because it feels so relevant. When you’re working with artisans, you’re like these are empowered women, and they are. It doesn’t mean that our customers are empowering those women, but they’re absolutely empowered women. And when you see them especially in a community, especially where you might have a contrast to other women in the community, I mean there’s just like slap in your face difference. There's a level of dignity that comes with this work, there’s definitely pride, and ultimately there’s agency and that’s a word that I think of a lot. I hope that our supply chains are giving women the agency to make the decisions that are
best for them in their own lives. […] I guess I just think of agency as my preferred word, but I would also get really pissed if everyone just changed to, you know, this product empowers women in blah blah blah’ to ‘this product provides agency to women in blah blah.’ I’d hate that too. I’m not interested in that.

Here, Joy differentiates between ‘power with’ and ‘power to’. Through their involvement in handicraft production for Fair Anita (and presumably the other wholesalers whom they partner with) the artisans have a greater agency in their lives, both in financial independence and in personal identity. It is important to say here that it is Joy who says she has observed a greater sense of identity and pride amongst the artisans, not the artisans themselves. I use the quote above and the following explanation to share Joy’s beliefs on the word empowerment and her perception of what empowerment means to the artisan partnerships. She shared,

I guess I just think about agency a lot and I think about it in my own life in terms of like - I’m regularly referred to as victim or rape survivor or whatever. Like that title just feels like it strips me of my agency, like now I just feel like this meek little human. I’m like, I’m over 6ft tall. I’m loud as all get out as you’ve noticed. I feel like through this work, through these supply chains, through partnering with these women I’ve been able to regain a lot of that agency. [It’s] knowing that I have this power to make my own decisions that are best for me to reframe my own identity. I’m not a victim, I’m an
entrepreneur or whatever the heck it is, we’re all multifaceted. Some days I’m like yeah you know I was a victim, that’s a part of it.

Through Fair Anita and the partnerships and friendships she has made, Joy has regained her own agency which has allowed her to control her own identity beyond just a victim. What she has hoped to do for artisans she partners with, she has also done for herself. Joy's reflection on empowerment and agency speaks to the importance of mutually beneficial relationships that are necessary in FTOs and in all mission-driven supply chains. Much like Simbala and Ti-a Woven Goods, operating Fair Anita has fostered 'power within’ for Joy and helped her gain the “self-confidence and the capacity to undo the effects of internalized oppression” (Batliwala 1993).

The volunteers and employees of Ten Thousand Villages all had differing opinions of the word empowerment. For Sarah, Media Relations and Brand Management, she was against the use of the word and made an active attempt to keep it out of any marketing materials which she had control over. For one of the volunteers of the Goshen, Indiana Ten Thousand Villages location, she felt conflicted on the term; wanting to believe that it was positive, but understanding that the connotation of the word is often negative. Finally, the education coordinator did not have much to say on the word and simply said, “Empower means for me- it means doing what it takes to allow them to become who they want to be.”
Speaking with Sarah, she spoke on the ongoing debate at Ten Thousand Villages on whether the use of empowerment is beneficial or not to their marketing campaigns. She explained,

I actually don’t love [empowerment]. And there are differing opinions about that in our organization. So, on a personal level, I don’t like the term because I don’t –not because I disagree with the word but- because meanings are in people not in words. I think that word has been manipulated over the years. I think when we say empower what a lot of organizations or folks that say that word implies that you are giving someone power. And I don’t necessarily think that’s the actual definition of the word, but I think that’s the way the word has been used in the past maybe ten years. That’s my personal opinion. There are
people that I work with that disagree and we have very healthy debates about it because it is still used in our marketing materials.

Later in our conversation, Sarah re-emphasized the point of “meanings are in people, not in words.” I believe this one sentence encapsulates the entire argument for the use of the word empowerment. It does not matter what is the true definition of the word or even what we want to believe about the definition of the word, but it is ultimately how others perceive the word that matters. If the general connotation of the word means that an organization in the global North possess the power to give out on their own free will to another group of marginalized persons who need that power, then that it how it is going to be perceived. It is important that if you are going to use empowerment then clearly define what you mean when you use that word. Or, perhaps, instead of using an oftentimes meaningless word, clearly define what you are trying to communicate with your consumers. Sarah shared,

Personally, when I’m in charge of writing or communicating something, I try to say instead of saying we empower women in Bangladesh, I’ll say something like our fair trade relationships provide access to fair employment. Which then allows women in Bangladesh to blah blah blah. I try to make it more equal. Empowerment- I honestly think that word has been manipulated.

Sarah shared how she tried to avoid the word and instead clearly defined what she was trying to communicate with Ten Thousand Villages consumers. A single word such as
empower cannot be the catchall term. It is often vague and devoid of any meaning. It is more informative for Sarah to share how exactly Ten Thousand Villages is helping artisan partnerships through economic advancement or greater access to education or healthcare.

On the opposite end, emphasis on the products and discussion of how artisans produce their products allows for the consumer to understand just how artisans positively impact Ten Thousand Villages, or any other FTO.

Kathy, a volunteer for the Goshen, Indiana location had conflicts with the term due to its general connotation. She, herself, found the word to still be a positive term but said “I think sociologists and social workers don’t use it anymore because empower implies that it's given to you rather than something one does one's self.” Kathy’s internal conflicts reflect many other’s concerns with the connotation that is often associated with the word. She said further,

I don’t know what word to use instead, because that hasn’t drifted down to the customer, you know. No customer comes in and I say, well this really empowered women to do their own thing and they’re like but yeah don’t wanna do that. Not very many people have come in and said that’s a horrible word, why are you using that?

For the consumer demographic in Goshen, specifically those who shop at Ten Thousand Villages, the connotation for the word empower is not a negative one. In her environment, the word is not challenged nor is it considered overused, or even unethical.
She wondered what word she should use instead, but again maybe having a catch-all term to describe such a complex system is not possible.

Similarly, two consumers, Jacky and Margaret, had similar thoughts as Kathy. Jacky shared,

I don’t like that word because I think it’s overused. And I think the reason is there isn’t a good word in the English language to describe what fair trade does. You know to me empowering somebody is almost like giving them the power so they can be somebody else. I don’t know that’s the connotation in my head but I know why they use it because the closest word that I can come up with is enabled but that has really negative connotations too. So there’s not like that word- the perfect word.

Jacky contemplated the word for a bit because she wanted to express that fair trade is not about a “hand out” but rather a “hand up” She did not want people to perceive fair trade as being a charity and therefore was conflicted on what words to use to ensure people did not perceive that. Jacky also took the word and considered how she felt when purchasing handicrafts. She shared,

I feel incredibly blessed that I get to buy these things. Because instead of something from the dollar store, you get something that somebody just poured hours of work into. And you just look at it. I like to go to fair trade stores (when they’re open) and just go through and just touch the stuff, because its just amazes me the handicraft. The work that went into them. It becomes something really
special. Its cool. I think because we live in such an industrialized age where everything is coming from machines and factories, there’s something about getting handicrafts that makes it special.

While Jacky was conflicted with the word, overall, she felt that it meant to allow artisans to lead a better life and have more choices, in some way. Empowered, additionally, meant being able to buy handmade products in an industrialized world where everything is made in a factory.

Speaking with another consumer, Margaret, she too used the word enable, but in a more positive context. She said, “I think it boils down to enabling other people to make choices, to have choices in life.” Not being empowered is about not having choices and said

I’ve never been stuck in the poverty that we’re talking about, but my assumption is that when you’re living in that kind of poverty, your choices are limited to ‘Do I walk for water now or in half an hour. You know its, I think when you have the ability- a little more money at your discretion so you can choose.

Margaret’s depiction of poverty is oversimplified, however, her point was that being empowered was about have increased choices in your life. Additionally, it meant to “have an improved sense of self and being proud of what you have to offer and the ability to offer it and knowing somebody wants to purchase it.” Margaret ended her statement with, “when your self esteem has risen to closer to where maybe ours would be, maybe that also gives the person the ability to put themselves out there more.” Margaret’s overall
statement had notions of white saviorism, particularly in her depiction of poverty and
comparing the dignity and self-esteem of artisans in the global South to that of
Americans. The goal should not be to lift up communities so that they can become
Westernized. The goal should be to create an ethical supply chain in a global system that
has long exploited marginalized communities of the South.

For Caitlin Halberstadt, the meaning of empowerment is vague but is aware of
how the use of the term can be misconstrued. Her response reflects perhaps what many
FTOs hope to say when they use the word empower. She shared,

I think to empower someone is to be able to take the privilege that I have and
the funding that I have and the resources that I have and invest in someone's
life so that they can choose for themselves. So that they’re not trapped in a
cycle of poverty and that they’re able to have the opportunity that I have in that
I can create something and sell it to someone who wants it. I want my artisans
to have that power. I’m sure the definition of it is you know the transfer of
power or the rising of power of somewhat. […]Empowering artisans for Zeal
Living means investing in them so that they can rise to the level that they want
to rise to, so that they can have the lifestyle that they want, they can support
themselves financially, can support their families, and they can choose and say
I’m going to stay and be a weaver or I’m going to take this money that I’ve
earned as a weaver and go get myself an education so that I can be a nurse or
whatever else I want. I want investing in their work to be a stepping stone so
that they can move to the next level for themselves and on their own terms. So, empowerment is kind of providing that connection so that they can sell to a greater audience and so they’re not limited to selling to the tourists that happen to come by their village or that happened to stop on whatever bus tour or the areas that they’re able to get to within a certain bus route. I want them to have a bigger audience and they should be able to charge more, and they can when they sell to me. So, its empowering to be able to take charge of your own future and your own destiny and I want my artisans to feel that, and I want them to be in an organization where they feel that.

Caitlin’s responses reflects both a ‘power with’ and a ‘power over,’ although her language which reflects a ‘power over’ seems unintended. Her statement “I want my artisans to have that power,” reflects, albeit unintended, a savior complex. The use of ‘our’ is possessive and “can imply ownership” of the artisan groups rather than a mutually beneficial relationship (Short 2022). However, I do not think was her intent, nor do I believe that her use of ‘our’ was meant to imply ownership. However, it is important to recognize that words as simple as ‘our’ or ‘my’ can create negative perceptions. The statement also reflects a ‘power with.’ For Joy, empower meant to invest in artisans so they had the agency to determine their own paths in life, whether that meant being a weaver or going on to do something else.

She ends her statement by saying she uses the phrase a lot on her website and said “I should probably get a little bit clearer about that.” It seems that maybe, just like
many other FTO owners, the conversation of empowerment and its definition, had not been brought up very often. Although she did say at the beginning of her statement that she had just been thinking about the word today, though she did not say what occurred for her to think about it. Referring back to her point of using it a lot on her website. Our interview was in August 2020 and when I looked recently on her website in March 2022, I noticed that the word empower was only used once. I also noticed that on her Instagram page, she only seemed to use the word empower once over the course of two years. She may use the word more in other marketing practices, such as e-mail, but from my observation, I only saw it used twice.

Almost every participant I spoke with had a unique and personal connection to the word empowerment. With its association with women’s rights and women’s social and economic development, perhaps it is not surprising that all the female participants I spoke with felt connected, in some way, to the word. Overall, it seemed that to feel empowered was a positive emotion and being empowered meant to have greater agency and choices in one’s life. A person should then do what they can to help others have greater agency and choices in life, either through economic or social advancement. To many, that is what empowerment meant.

In addition to being strongly associated with gendered meanings, the word empowerment was also connected to racial meanings as well. For Simbala, she reflected on the term from the perspective of a Black woman in America. Her feeling of empowerment came from feeling disempowered for most of her life. Through these life
experiences, she wanted to create Ti-a Woven Goods, so that she could create industry and opportunity for hundreds of weavers so that they too could feel a greater sense of empowerment in their own lives. Joy McBrien of Fair Anita shared a similar sentiment. For Joy, feeling disempowered came from her experiences with rape and sexual assault. She began Fair Anita as a way to help survivors of sexual and domestic abuse. Joy and Simbala both emphasized the importance of having greater agency in one’s life.

However, aspects of white saviorism played a vital role in several participant’s understanding of the word and understood that by using empowerment in their marketing materials, they could create unintended power dynamics that placed artisan partnerships in positions of inferiority. Participants such Joy, Sarah, the media and brand relations manager of Ten Thousand Villages, and Caitlin of Zeal Living all struggled with the word, especially as they were all directly involved with the marketing materials of their brands. They understood that while at its core empower may be a positive term, its use could insinuate that they as a manager or owner of a FTO are responsible for giving power to artisans. Thus further implying that the artisans are powerless to being with. Joy specifically commented on the implications of being a white woman who primarily worked with artisans who were women of color, and therefore understood that every image and word she used could be perceived as her trying to save these women from poverty. I felt that by asking participants on what empowerment meant to them, all participants from the four FTOs were able to think critically and have a discussion about the word in a way that they may not have otherwise. I feel that it allowed for these
businesses to think of whether they were using the word intentionally or if it was just another buzzword. Finally, if FTOs are using this word to represent their relationship with the artisans they work with, is it creating an unintended power dynamic that implies the artisans are in need of their saving? Or, such as the case with Ti-a Woven Goods, does the term empower or empowerment imply a mutually beneficial relationship?
CHAPTER NINE: FAIR TRADE IN A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

If I found one silver lining of conducting research amid a global pandemic (and it is a privilege for me to be able to say that I found any silver linings) is that I found a unique opportunity to explore how fair trade organizations (FTOs) responded to a global crisis such as COVID-19. I observed from afar the impact that COVID-19 had upon four FTOs and their partnerships with artisan groups throughout the global South. Each person that I interviewed played a different role in their organization’s operation and therefore their response to how COVID-19 had impacted them, their organization, and the artisans with whom they partnered, varied extensively.

When discussing how COVID-19 impacted fair trade supply chains, I can only speak on the latter half of the fair-trade supply chain, which includes wholesalers and consumers. Several of the participants spoke about how COVID-19 impacted the artisan groups with whom they partner with. In my discussion of this, I acknowledge that these responses do not directly indicate how these artisan groups have been impacted by COVID-19 and how this affected their business partnerships with their affiliated fair-trade organizations. I can only speak on what was told to me by the Fair Trade wholesalers and consumers with whom I spoke and is in no way intended to speak on behalf of or for fair trade artisans or artisan groups. My main goal was to understand how
FTOs felt that they responded to the pandemic and how they communicated these changes to their consumers.

Joy McBrien, of Fair Anita, was in Peru visiting with an artisan group and friend, Anita, whom the company is named after, when the country went into lockdown.

I was actually trapped in Peru for a month in a concrete room with Anita when the pandemic hit. I was leaving Peru and they only had three cases in the country, for the record, and then that day I was very violently robbed and dragged behind a taxi. No money, no passport, no phone. I’ve never experienced that before and then the next night the president of Peru banned all travel in and out of the country. I still don’t know how to talk about this, but I guess blessing in disguise would be the cliché, but kind of a privilege to just, as a white American, to really experience the effects of a pandemic in a community like that one, especially like the impacts of the economic shutdown that came as a result of the pandemic. It was a lot to take in, but I feel like I just evolved so much as a person in that month. Like I was literally stuck in a concrete room. I couldn’t go outside, or the military had license to shoot me because I didn’t have any form of identification or [they would] bring me to prison or whatever. But legally they were allowed to shoot me, so I was like I’m just gonna stay in here.

For Joy, this experience gave her a more in-depth understanding of how those in the community with whom she partnered were impacted by the pandemic, at least in the
initial month. Below is an Instagram photo of Joy and Anita, whom Joy stayed with, and a caption updating her followers on her situation.

![Instagram photo of Joy and Anita](image.png)

Figure 20: ‘Trapped in Peru’ Photo taken from Fair Anita Instagram page.

After Joy told me her story, she shared that the artisan partners in all seven countries, not just Peru, were doing fine and were healthy. At Fair Anita they aim to pay their artisan partners 2-4x times the local minimum wage and provide health endurance and educational scholarships. This did not change during COVID-19. Joy explained,

The women themselves are fine, however they’re looking at their neighbors in their community and just being horrified, and really wanting to be able to take care of everyone and that makes sense. That’s what women do with money. The UN states that for every dollar that a woman makes, between 80-90 cents goes back to their families and communities and 30-40 cents by men. So, they wanna do great things with money.
In addition to continuing the standard rate of pay and social services offered to their artisan partners, Fair Anita also began an emergency relief fund where customers could donate money or purchase face masks from Fair Anita. The proceeds were then allocated to the various artisan groups. Fair Anita does not operate as a non-profit organization but introduced this relief fund as a means of providing additional support to their artisan groups and their communities. When we spoke, Fair Anita had donated upwards of $60,000 US dollars to their artisan groups. This number had grown to $75,000 by the end of 2020.

This year has absolutely changed my perception of the work we do. I did believe that we were running business in one of the most ethical ways that I could brainstorm, and I think this year has solidified that. I’m like especially in contrast to more traditional supply chains and seeing how those have
completely failed in this pandemic and just default payments all over the place—what a complete nightmare it's been. I feel pretty good that everybody is up and running and most importantly healthy.

Ten Thousand Villages partners with roughly 75 artisan groups and approximately 20 thousand artisans. I spoke with three participants who were directly involved with Ten Thousand Villages and one consumer who shopped almost exclusively with Ten Thousand Villages and therefore had extensive knowledge of the shop. Their roles did not include conducting direct trade with artisans nor did they have any role in the production of handicrafts and how COVID-19 impacted handicraft production or artisan relations. Their answers therefore reflected their own individual experiences with how COVID-19 impacted Ten Thousand Villages.

Just like most small business and brick-and-mortar shops across the country, Ten Thousand Villages shops suffered throughout COVID-19. Three of the participants I spoke with were involved at various levels with a Ten Thousand Villages shop in Goshen, Indiana. In January 2021, they spoke directly on how COVID-19 had been impacting their store.

In March 2020, state and federal regulations forced all brick-and-mortar shops to close in compliance with stay-at-home mandates. In Goshen, Indiana the Ten Thousand Villages shop closed for four months. The store strongly encouraged curbside pickups, but the store suffered extreme revenue loss due to the lack of in-store shopping. And since most Ten Thousand Villages stores rely on volunteers who are older, stores faced a
shortage of volunteer labor since CDC guidelines encouraged those over the age of 65 to stay home.

Goshen is a small town with a large Mennonite community. There is a strong link between the community and Ten Thousand Villages as it was founded by Edna Ruth Byler and operated under the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) in the 1940s. While Ten Thousand Villages is no longer run by the MCC, many of the original Ten Thousand Villages brick-and-mortar shops remain in Mennonite communities. As one consumer put it, “I shop here in town at a store occasionally called Ten Thousand Villages […] I take some ownership in it though I have no right to do that just because it was started by a Mennonite woman and yeah, I love to go into that store.”

The Ten Thousand Villages store is relatively well known to the community. But with the impact of COVID-19, many who would normally shop in the store no longer were able or felt comfortable doing so. One volunteer said, “[p]eople were just hunkering down for a while and Goshen is a hot spot for the entire nation in terms of COVID, so if there’s a correlation between people who buy fair trade and people who were careful with COVID, that has really cut down on shopping I think.” The altruism in consumers which would normally be beneficial for fair trade may have had negative effects for brick-and-mortar shops during COVID-19.

Throughout COVID-19, FTOs such as Ten Thousand Villages relied heavily on the use of social media marketing, e-mail marketing and other online marketing efforts to encourage sales. These efforts benefitted Ten Thousand Villages as a whole but did little
to benefit the individual Ten Thousand Villages brick-and-mortar shops. At Ten Thousand Villages, all brick-and-mortar shops are operated independently and therefore only make money off in-store purchases. Customers could place orders online with a newly designed website created during COVID-19 which allowed customers to shop from specific stores, but orders had to be picked up at the store. The lack of in-store shopping presented several problems for Ten Thousand Villages brick-and-mortar shops and their customers. Shopping in-person allows the customer to have a curated experience, all of which carefully plays a role in influencing their decision.

![Image: 'Sorry We’re Mostly Closed' Photo take from TTV Instagram.]

From my interviews with Ten Thousand Villages volunteers, employees, and customers, I noticed three benefits to in-store shopping that either cannot be replicated or are difficult to replicate with online shopping. The first is personal connection, which is strongly related to the use of storytelling in fair trade. A personal connection can be made between the consumer and employee or volunteer and/or a personal connection between the consumer and the material item. Ten Thousand Villages marketing and brand manager shares, “Part of the story for our customers pre-2020 was that they would go to our stores...
and like touch things, feel things, and hear directly from the sales associate about that thing.” Online shopping is an efficient and convenient way of doing your shopping but shopping online only appeals to one sense whereas shopping in-person allows a customer to use all five senses to influence their purchasing decision. As a Ten Thousand Villages customer puts it, “I like to see it, I need to touch and to feel it. Sometimes it’s important to smell it.”

Finally, because every item is handmade and not mass-produced their uniqueness is a quality which can only really be experienced in-person. One volunteer explains, “A lot of our things--like our recycled sari products for example-- are completely varied. There are no two alike, so shopping online isn’t the same as going to the store and picking out the one you want.” FTOs like Ten Thousand Villages often put a disclaimer on their online websites that while you are purchasing this particular item, it may look different when delivered. Other FTOs, such as Tia-Woven Goods, find it difficult to post items on their websites because of how uniquely made each item is. When your shop is designed to cater to an in-person experience and is suddenly shifted to an online and curbside pickup system, it can be difficult to maintain sales. The Goshen store had the additional problem of customers who minimized their purchasing and adopted a more minimalist lifestyle.

Many customers of the Ten Thousand Villages Goshen location fall into a category of consumers who may have wanted to continue supporting fair trade businesses or local and small businesses, but were not able due to financial insecurities brought on
by COVID-19. Just like most other fair-trade shops, Ten Thousand Villages does not sell items that would be categorized as necessities. A Ten Thousand Villages volunteer explained that many of their customers view the Ten Thousand Villages shop as a “gift store or extras store” and due to COVID-19, many felt that purchasing these items was not a necessity in their lives. She says that many of the Mennonites in the area were “trying to accumulate less” which could be attributed to the “more is less movement, the simple living movement, or [Marie Kondo]”. One customer, Margaret, explains,

Well, I don’t go into Ten Thousand Villages just willy nilly anymore and make an unplanned purchase. I guess the biggest difference is I’m more careful about what I’m purchasing. That said, I think my purchasing is less overall but I am more deliberate about what I purchase and so you know I do look for gifts that are fair trade.

It is unclear whether Mennonites in the area had already adopted a minimalist lifestyle prior to COVID-19 and it just strengthened because of the pandemic, or their adoption of a more minimalist lifestyle is a direct result of COVID-19. These customers’ purchasing behaviors contrasted to the behaviors of customers who shopped at Zeal Living and Tia-Woven, which is further discussed in the sections below. While customers at the Goshen store took on a more minimalist lifestyle whether due to financial insecurities or due to the Marie Kondo show on Netflix, customers for Tia-Woven and Zeal Living adopted an opposite approach. These consumers who were now suddenly at home all the time and had the financial means to do so continued to shop at these fair trade shops. Several
factors played into this. One is financial freedom. The second is want versus need and the role which consumers felt they needed to play in supporting a fair trade or ethical business. Is it better for customers to continue to support and purchase items from a fair-trade shop and continue to consume items that are not necessarily essential? Or, is it better to consume less and when a consumer needs to go out and shop, they choose fair trade?
Beginning on March 16, 2020, the Ten Thousand Villages USA Instagram page, addressed COVID-19 concerns to customers by updating them on measures happening across the TTV brick-and-mortar locations. On March 16, Ten Thousand Villages addressed concerns with customers and information regarding their stores and immediate actions taken. The second post, on March 21, addressed artisan partnerships and encouraged consumers to continue to “support global and local communities.” The final photo, posted on April 2, is more of an advertising photo, in which a model is promoting a basket. This photo is particularly important as woven baskets have been extremely popular in the past several years as confirmed by Simbala and Brand Manager and Media Relations, Sarah, of Ten Thousand Villages. Farmers market baskets, as they are sometimes called, were particularly popular as as farmers markets were a popular outing for people as they remained open during COVID-19.
For Zeal Living, Caitlin had an optimistic outlook regarding her business during COVID-19. At the time of the interview, COVID-19 and subsequent lockdown orders had been in the U.S. for around 6 months. When discussing the impacts of COVID-19, Caitlin focused on disrupted supply chains, her loyal customers, and the unseen benefits of COVID-19 thus far.

Due to disrupted supply chains, many of Caitlin’s artisan partnerships were unable to produce or ship out their orders for an extended period.

It’s been good for me to remember that the way that I see my job is a facilitator to get work to people who need work. So, if I’m busy then they’re busy. I can keep placing orders with them. I can send them an order even though I know and that they know that they can’t fulfill that order for many months because at least sending them a deposit on that order means they’re literally feeding their families. That’s been awesome to do. […] It’s been inspiring for me to be like alright, I can send you this order, so I’m going to send it to you, and that’s what I’m trying to do: just be really busy and sell the product and keep placing orders.

It is unclear as to whether the orders placed were distributed evenly across all artisan partnerships and whether the number of orders placed was the same as they would have normally been. However, it is important to note that Zeal Living followed one of the WFTO’s main principles which is maintaining long term relationships. Caitlin maintained relationships with all of her artisan partnerships and continued to place orders even if
those orders could not be fulfilled immediately. I observed this trend across all four fair trade organizations that I analyzed.

Caitlin’s attention and loyalty to her customers had a significant impact upon her sales as many felt a responsibility to continue shopping with Zeal Living during COVID-19. Reflecting on the impact of COVID-19 thus far Caitlin stated,

In March when things were looking really bad I got very nervous because markets are getting cancelled and it just looked like things were going to be really awful but within a few weeks I began to really notice that my customers were making an intentional effort, they were telling me hey ‘I’m ordering this right now because I know you probably need this’ or like this sort of support small [businesses] movement was really popular in March and April.

Zeal Living fits into an opportune category where not only is Zeal Living a FTO, but it is also a local, small business in Denver. On top of that, the demographic of Zeal Living’s customers allowed them the finical freedom to continue to support local businesses such as Zeal Living. According to Caitlin she said, “I’m a little up on the year so far because my customers are incredible and I’m working really hard on online [marketing], so for me it’s been a cool opportunity to dig in and get creative.”

At the start of the pandemic, many who were fortunate to still have jobs but were now working from home had an ardent desire to redecorate since this is where they would now spend much of their time. Home goods and decor saw a significant increase in sales and for Zeal Living it was no different (Biron 2020).
It’s kind of funny, everybody wants glassware and glass sets. It was a really strong trend already and then you can see sort of as lockdown hits everybody was buying wineglasses and glassware sets because like well, I’m home I might as well. But home decor is also a category that’s fared pretty well because people are home and they’re going around and thinking oh I hate that wall, I’m going to redo it or whatever.

Within the category of home goods, Caitlin also saw a shift from “big ticket” items to smaller, less expensive items. She explained, “I think people are investing in more of the daily practical things and beautifying the daily practical things.” This falls in line with Zeal Living’s consumers who wanted to continue to support Zeal Living and other independent, small businesses but purchasing larger, more expensive items was not practical at that time.

Caitlin shared how she had a strong connection with her customers which led to their committed support her during the pandemic. She set up a texting service during COVID-19 where she would message her customers with a personalized, automated message and if they responded and wanted to learn more, then Caitlin would personally respond to their question. She mentioned that cause of this personalization, she has had a high returning rate. She explained,

The biggest thing I learned this year [during COVID-19] is that people buy for people. They wanna know who I am and they want to feel connected to me and
they like me. They’re more likely to be like oh it’s Caitlin we know her and we trust her like yeah what does she have for me now.

Caitlin’s personal communication and connection with her customers allowed for her business to do well, even during a pandemic. Referencing back to the importance of shared human connections discussed in chapter five, Caitlin displayed the importance of connecting with her customers and the overall positive impact that had on her entire business.

While talking to Caitlin it seemed her primary focus when it came to COVID-19’s impact was on the factors which she could control: her customers and the central role which she played as the owner of Zeal Living. She had no control over which countries or regions enforced lockdowns and whether certain artisan groups could continue work or not. There was nothing she could do about the groups who could not go to work or ship out products due to locked down borders. Caitlin instead focused her attention on the groups who could still safely create their work and ship it out. In the meantime, and with the money made from orders that could still be placed, she continued to place orders with groups who could not work or ship out, knowing that the orders would not be placed for an indefinite amount of time. When I first spoke to Caitlin, I wondered why her initial thoughts were on her customers and herself and on the artisans last. Additionally, her overly optimistic tone made me think she had unrealistic expectations of the pandemic and the realities it posed towards the one aspect of the supply chain who not only are the most at risk but also the most distant and invisible.
When I began transcribing the interview almost a year later, I began to look at her response from a different viewpoint. For one, Caitlin is the face of her store and regardless of whether she’s speaking for a magazine article or a graduate student’s thesis, it makes sense for her to discuss her business in an optimistic light. Even if that optimism bordered on romanticization. As a side note, her optimism came from a place when the world was still in the initial stages of the pandemic, and many were still optimistic that the pandemic would end sooner rather than later.

I do believe there was a power dynamic that was created during the pandemic that was left unaddressed. For Caitlin, COVID-19 allowed her the “unique opportunity to get creative and dig in.” She launched themed gift bags and jumped into e-mail marketing strategies to personally connect with her customers. Her actions had an overall positive impact upon Zeal Living and her artisan partnerships. However, I do feel like she failed to realize the stark contrasts of her statements between “it's been a cool opportunity” and “sending them a deposit on that order means they’re literally feeding their families.” It is a privilege to describe the pandemic as a cool opportunity while the artisans she was working with were struggling to feed themselves and their families. However, Caitlin, as well as myself, were privileged in how we were able to endure COVID-19. I begin this chapter by saying I found opportunity during COVID-19. Even Joy mentioned that COVID-19 had been an opportunity for her to explore different projects at Fair Anita. My point here is that our privilege allowed use to explore opportunities during a pandemic while many suffered greatly, whether due to the virus itself or financial instability.
Ti-a Woven is based in Vail, Colorado but is present throughout the greater Denver metropolitan area. Ti-a Woven has an online shop but the majority of sales are made from in-person markets. When considering how the COVID-19 pandemic had impacted her and her business, Simbala reflected on the status of in-person markets, the well-being of herself, her staff, and the artisans.

In terms of supply chain disruptions, COVID-19 did not impact Ti-a Woven Goods substantially. Typically, Simbala makes two to three large orders per year. The last shipment was delivered in October 2019 and Simbala stated that her next order would usually be made in February or March of the following year. Since the pandemic had just hit, everyone was furloughed including the artisan cooperatives in Ghana. As months went by and all markets were being cancelled, there was no need to make another order since the warehouse was still full of inventory. Once an order was placed, the biggest issue that Ti-a Woven faced was the border restrictions that prevented any shipments of baskets to the U.S. Simbala explained that they typically airfreight their baskets, but since borders to the U.S. were closed, there could be no commercial flights going to and from Ghana and the U.S. When I spoke with Simbala in late July, she had just recently decided to “get the ball rolling again” and placed an order and sent money to Ghana so production on baskets could begin again.

As most Ti-a Woven sales were made at in-person markets, COVID-19 had a significant impact upon the overall success of the store. Beginning every May, Ti-a Woven is usually represented at seven different farmers markets across Colorado,
including two in Denver. When COVID-19 hit in March, stay-at-home orders were placed until April 11, 2020. At the time many were unsure whether farmers markets would be cancelled or how they would be impacted. As part of the stay-at-home ordinances, only essential businesses could remain open. This included grocery stores, hospitals, and any business that needed to function in-person to operate. Any other businesses, including the employees, were deemed non-essential. While this was not intended to equate to the overall value of any business, the title did lower the morale for many whose profession was considered non-essential. For Simbala and Ti-a Woven, it was no different. When farmer’s markets were initially given clearance to resume for the summer, only essential vendors, meaning food vendors, could sell. For Simbala, being deemed non-essential was difficult especially when you consider the amount of people that Ti-a Woven employs, both in the U.S. and in Ghana. Thankfully, Ti-a Woven was allowed to attend most farmers markets throughout the summer.

In the summer of 2020, Denver County mandated that all social gatherings had to remain outdoors. Initially, there was no indoor dining and once indoor dining did resume, capacity was reduced 25%. Other than escaping to the mountains, outdoors spaces such as parks, walking trails, and outdoor markets became a regular activity. Going to the Highlands and South Pearl Street farmer’s markets were the only two locations where I conducted in-person ethnographic research. I went to the South Pearl Street farmer’s market twice and spent around four or five days at the Highland Farmer’s market. While at the Highlands farmer’s market I met Bridgette, who operated the Ti-a
Woven stall at this location. She allowed me to sit at her stall and observe the customers who came through and answered questions that I had for her.

I saw for myself how COVID-19 impacted these farmers markets. At Washington Park, a market that is twice the size of Highland's farmers market, the market had monitored entryways where visitors were given the rundown of COVID-19 protocols which included always wearing a mask. Visitors had to follow a one-way guided path through the market as opposed to walking freely through the market. When I attended Highlands's farmers market later in the summer, there was no monitored entryway and visitors could walk about freely. Visitors still were required to always wear a mask.

Figure 24: ‘Welcome to the Farmers Market’ Photos taken by author.

Farmer’s markets, both in Denver and across the U.S, are often geographically placed in higher-income, white neighborhoods. In Denver, farmers markets are in the neighborhoods of Washington Park and Highlands, both of which are white and upper-
middle and high-income areas. As I stated earlier with Caitlin Halberstadt of Zeal Living, there was a strong urge during this time to support local and small businesses. Ti-a Woven had the advantage of selling fair trade items in locations that were highly frequented during the early months of the pandemic because it was an outdoor space, and the demographic of visitors could afford to support local and small businesses during this time.

In Vail, COVID-19 protocols were slightly different due to differing county regulations and the high volume of COVID-19 cases that the county was facing. Simbala ran the Tia-Woven stall in Vail and shared that,

There’s just like a lot of rules that the health department in Eagle county [where Vail is located] is enforcing and so you can kinda feel the impact of the new rules, how its impacting the visitors there, and it ultimately ends up impacting our sales. I’m not complaining, I’m simply explaining that its definitely had an impact on our sales and the volume of people that come to the market and how sales ultimately impact what I can do for the women in Ghana. Because if I’m not selling then I can’t produce.

Simbala explained how COVID-19 has had a domino effect on her business. While many consumers wanted to continue to support Ti-a Woven Goods during this time, COVID-19 protocols impeded many consumers from doing so. Simbala also pointed out a significant downfall of selling goods primarily in-person rather than online. Protocols were changing
constantly and Simbala and the rest of the Ti-a Woven Goods team had to constantly stay on track of these rules to ensure they could maintain sales each week.

The benefit of buying a fair trade handicraft in person rather than online during a global pandemic was the personal connection which the consumer could make to influence their purchasing decisions. The setting of a farmer’s market on a beautiful, sunny, Saturday morning already has the capacity to put visitors in a happy mood. The space of farmer’s markets during also allowed visitors to briefly be distracted from the overwhelming and isolating feelings that many were going through. The Ti-a Woven Goods stalls at both markets were unique standouts to other food-based vendors. Brightly colored baskets adorned the walls of the stall and the floor surrounding the stall. Not only were the baskets beautiful and one of a kind, but they were also practical and could be used daily, even during a pandemic. The baskets were perfect for storing produce bought at the market or the grocery store. They were also ideal for home décor, which as I mentioned with Zeal Living, increased in popularity due to stay-at-home mandates. Customers were attracted to the aesthetic but, from observation, enjoyed hearing about how their purchases were not only supporting a local Colorado business, but also artisans in Ghana. On top of that, Ti-a Woven is a family business. Both markets that I attended were operated by relatives of Simbala and I feel this factor also played a role in the customers' purchasing decisions. As a family owned, Black owned, woman owned, small, local, fair trade business, Ti-a Woven checked off a lot of boxes for customers who wanted to create a positive, social impact with their purchases.
From a consumer standpoint, Jacky, who fell under the category of consumer but also ran fair trade search engine, shared how she shifted her purchasing behaviors during COVID-19 and how other consumers shifted their behaviors as well. She said in the past year (of 2020) she kept hearing stories of fair trade shops closing and everyone from retailers to artisan groups were struggling. She explained,

I bought a lot of my Christmas gifts in March (2020) when everything was shutting down because I was like I gotta help them in whatever I can do to keep them in business to help them survive this year because I've seen several of them close this year. I cry every time I see one of the shops on my site close. It just breaks my heart and so I was trying to do whatever I can to keep them in business. I spent a lot of time this year finding different ways to promote them, trying to
grow the website, trying to purchase as much as I can. I bought a lot of Christmas presents this year.

Jacky’s panicked behavior reflected many other socially conscious consumers who took it upon themselves to do however much they could to keep local and small businesses alive. For a brief moment, it seemed many were concerned about the possibility of only the existence of big-box stores and chain restaurants. On Jacky’s site, she said the amount of people who visited the site increased drastically, going from 3,000 hits a month to 10,000. From these visits she had seen an overall increase in sales. On a positive note, she observed that a few FTOs saw an increase in sales, just like Zeal Living. This increase could either be due to specific artisans groups who were still able to produce handicrafts and ship them out or were able to adapt their products to meet current demands, such as making masks. On the hand, it could also have something to do with increased consumer concern. She said, “you start looking at those small businesses and you’re like I want them to still be here next year.” It seemed many consumers, particularly socially conscious one, increased their support for their favorite small, local, or fair trade shops because they did not want to see a future without them.

In this chapter, I observed repeatedly how long term relationships played a vital role for all four FTOs and the positive impact that these relationships had on every actor involved in the supply chain, from producer to consumer. When relating to COVID-19, storytelling was used to discuss the importance of consumers shopping local and shopping small if they had the financial means to do so. Zeal Living, Ti-a Woven Goods,
Fair Anita, and independent Ten Thousand Villages stores, such as the location in Goshen, Indiana, are all considered small-businesses. Therefore, there was an overarching theme for these businesses to stress the importance of shopping small so that they could continue to operate and continue business relationships with their artisan partners.
CHAPTER TEN: CONCLUSION

The main purpose of my research was to understand how fair trade organizations (FTOs) marketed culturally embedded handicrafts produced by female artisans living in the global South to consumers in the global North. Fair trade prides itself in conducting sustainable and ethical trade relationships and uses transparent marketing practices to reveal all aspects of the interrelations of their product supply chains to consumers. Using methods of storytelling, FTOs share intimate stories of artisans under the guise that consumers learn more about these social relations and how fair trade has positively impacted their life in some way. However, by revealing intimate details of an artisan’s life, which include stories of trauma, hardship, successes, and joys; these stories become commodified and ultimately are intended to add economic value to the product.

I wanted to explore how FTOs used methods of storytelling, whether it was sharing stories of artisans or stories of how a product was made, to educate consumers and encourage them to purchase handicrafts produced under the fair trade system. I focused on four FTOs: Ti-a Woven Goods, Fair Anita, Zeal living, and Ten Thousand Villages and Ten Thousand Villages Goshen. I primarily used virtual research methods due to COVID-19 which allowed me to gain a greater understanding of digital marketing.
practices, specifically the use of social media and e-commerce sites. I explored how each FTO used various platforms to advertise their products and educate consumers. I focused not just on how organizations faltered when it came to their messaging, but also how they displayed responsibility and respect for the artisan groups they partnered with and the culturally embedded handicrafts they produced. Perhaps more importantly, I was also interested in understanding how these organizations evolved and whether they showed reflexivity in their messaging and overall marketing materials.

Within storytelling, I observed several major themes. I observed how the notion of personal, human connection was in the fair traded social movement, both in marketing and consumer behaviors. Several participants felt that the stories created a personal connection between them and the artisan. Through social media and e-commerce sites, that connection has only grown stronger as stories are continuously updated and added. There are a growing number of FTOs that understand stories as being one-sided and inadvertently places artisans in a position of inferiority when their stories are used to sell their products. Instead, FTOs aim to highlight the product and sell handicrafts that the younger generation will want to buy. Further, it is not enough for FTOs to just sell handicrafts and emphasize the fair trade mission. Younger generations are demanding that their favorite brands support social justice movements. FTOs must actively engage with consumers and stay up-to-date on important current events. In June 2020, did that FTO support the Black Lives Matter movement, and did you communicate this support to consumers?
Next, language is important and it is why I dedicated an entire chapter to one word: empowerment. FTOs, in addition to other social enterprises and charitable organizations, have clung to the word, perhaps to avoid having to define what they truly mean when they use it. In its over usage, empowerment has become a buzzword that many participants felt no longer says anything. Others felt the word had connections to white saviorism and insinuated that the word meant to give power to others, who previously had no power to begin with. That power was something to withhold and selectively give out to those who we feel deserve it and need saving.

The word empowerment in fair trade thus is not just associated with gendered meanings, but racial meanings as well. For Simbala, as a Black American, empowerment came from a place of feeling disempowered. Her goal was to create a business that allowed those who were often marginalized in society, who may have felt disempowered just like her, to find opportunity in Ti-a Woven Goods so that they too could feel empowered. For Zeal Living, Fair Anita, and Ten Thousand Villages, their goals of supporting artisan groups and expanding their economic access and opportunity were the same. However, every other participant that I interviewed for my thesis were white women and therefore their understanding of and usage of the term differentiated from that of Simbala's. Joy’s understanding of empowerment also came from a place of feeling disempowered due to her experiences with rape and sexual assault. She too, emphasized the point of creating a business that was mutually beneficial and one that allowed everyone, including the artisans and herself, to gain a sense of agency. This agency,
which may have felt lost due to a traumatic experience or lack of income or opportunity. Overall, while many were conflicted over the use of empowerment, many felt that to them it meant having choices in life and using the privileges and resources we have so that others can have those choices in life as well.

COVID-19 had a significant impact upon everyone's lives, and I was grateful that the participants I interviewed took time out of their days to speak with me. It was difficult finding participants as meaning were going through difficult and emotionally draining times, myself included. While it was valuable to understand how four different FTOs responded to a global pandemic and how they communicated these changes to consumers, I understood that many of the participant’s perceptions and understandings of their FTO and the fair trade government overall was clouded by COVID-19. For example, I asked Sarah, the Brand Manager and Media Relations for Ten thousand Villages what she felt was the next step for the fair trade movement, or even just for Ten Thousand Villages. Sarah seemed somewhat flustered by the question and at the end of response said, “I don’t know how to answer that question, because frankly the past year has blown us all away. Like if you had asked me this question at the same time last year, I would’ve answered totally differently with what I’m responding with today.” The way that FTOs typically would have marketed their products or shared information about artisan partnerships may have shifted significantly due to COVID-19. Regular communication with artisan partnerships was difficult for many FTOs and had trouble getting in regular shipments. Other FTOs had to prioritize the artisan groups who were
able to work and ship out products. FTOs who had a strong online presence or strong presence at outdoor markets thrived due to consumer support, especially from those who had disposable income. While others who were brick and mortar locations suffered. Many consumers felt responsible for keeping small and socially responsible businesses alive. Additionally, due to the Black Lives Matter Movement, many felt a responsibility to support Black owned and minority owned business. This particularly benefited Simbala and Ti-a Woven Goods

From my findings, the fair trade social movement is evolving in a positive direction. While not perfect, leaders and advocates of fair trade display reflexivity and are willing to adapt to ensure their messaging remains culturally respectful and ensures that all actors across their supply chains are represented in a manner of respect. Ultimately, the motivations of consumers matter, and marketing needs to represent artisans as being equal partners in a mutually beneficial relationship. As FTOs use social media to actively engage with their consumers, FTOs have an opportunity to reach a wider audience of consumers wanting to participate in the fair trade social movement. However, FTOs need to consider the types of stories they are sharing. If they are sharing stories of artisans, why and to whose benefit? Language and imagery are powerful, and each word needs to be intentional. If your Instagram post has roughly three seconds to draw a consumer, consider how your viewer will perceive that story. To reiterate a quote by Sarah from Ten Thousand Villages, “meanings are in people not in words.
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