BRANDING AUTHENTICITY, GLOBAL–LOCALIZATION AND TECHNOLOGY

Thematic analysis of two West Bengal urban–rural handicrafts NPO websites

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In a developing economy it is important for organizations from the Global South to stake claim on their unique positions in the international marketplace. India's handicrafts industry is an integral part of the national economy and claims a place of pride as a marker of regional culture and heritage. For localized handicraft nonprofit organizations (NPOs) that want to reach global consumers, branding their products is critical to their long-term sustainability and success. Today, the most common way for organizations to reach aesthetically eclectic, global—not to mention, urban—consumers is through the Internet. How an NPO creates and negotiates its digital identity and product branding are important considerations within the domains of technical, professional, and intercultural communication, particularly when establishing a digital presence to reach desired consumers. Creating an aura of authenticity around the products, their representations, and their artisans is an important element of digital branding of handicrafts. Heightened global–local encounters (Wherry, 2006) and intercultural technical communication research adopting a cross-cultural focus on social justice, economic inequities and globalization (Agboka, 2014) provide the context of this research. We performed a thematic analysis of two Bengal (Indian) handicraft NPOs' websites focusing on handicraft authenticity, global-local tensions, and digital presentation. Three themes organize our findings: authenticity of place and production, desire for global reach, and socioeconomic consciousness. Our analysis highlights the

key role of digital technology in marketing authenticity, contemporizing traditional arts, while balancing organizational commitment to social justice. As our analysis indicates, visually and textually establishing handicraft authenticity is easily accomplished in an online environment, but taking advantage of online marketing to achieve global reach still seems a struggle for these NPOs.

The Indian handicrafts industry is an integral part of the cultural tapestry of traditional Indian heritage (Ministry of Textiles, 2013). Handicrafts are defined as "'items made exclusively by hand often with the help of tools to give it both a decorative and utilitarian value'" (as cited in Ministry of Textiles, 2014, para. 6). This industry has for some time been facing a threat of extinction and, as such, has become a focal point for nonprofit organizations (NPOs) and economic development entrepreneurs. Several nonprofit and nongovernmental organizations that are active in developing social and economic sectors, do so to represent, intermediate and/or lend voice to economically and technologically dispossessed communities (Gajjala, Yartey & Birzescu, 2012; von Broembsen, 2011). Handicrafts produced by rural artisans in postglobalized West Bengal (Bengal), a culturally and intellectually rich state on the eastern seaboard of India, are no exception to the trend. The involvement of small-scale NPOs in this area is becoming more complex, particularly with the rise of a digitally native, urban clientele who have "ascribed craft and the handmade, with ethical, environmental and socio-cultural value" (Wood, 2011, p. 2), altruistic values that constituents believe should also be digitally reiterated by nonprofits, as would make sense in a technologically-saturated, post-Web 2.0 society.

Online spaces, like NPO websites, can act as professionally networked "nodes at which various locals connect and disconnect in the production of the global" (Gajjala, 2012, p. 2). The desire of rural craft NPOs in developing sociopolitical contexts to not fall behind in the race to inhabit the online global marketplace, exposes their part-innate, part-learned tendencies to become, "both

– global audiences and located/situated producers – in varying degrees" (Gajjala, 2012, p. 2). Neoliberal economic globalization has produced a form of individualized labor, often involving "individual workers uprooted culturally, materially and socially—and oftentimes even physically—from within local economies made nonfunctional through the direct and indirect effects of globalization" (Gajjala, 2012, p. 4). Moreover, the positioning of traditional handicrafts as stuff that rural Bengal is made of, adds to the anachronistic romanticization of an industry that is in actuality very much on par with the demands of a neoliberal global economy. Yet, as McCracken (1988) has observed, "One of the most important ways in which cultural categories are substantiated is through the material objects of a culture . . . [that are] created according to the blueprint of culture" (p. 74).

It is within this context of heightened global–local encounters (Wherry, 2006) that we performed a thematic analysis of two Bengal (Indian), handicraft NPOs' websites in relation to handicraft authenticity, global–local tensions and intercultural technical communication. We begin by reviewing key literature that forms our conceptual framework. Then, we provide background on the handicrafts sector in India and on the NPOs analyzed, followed by a brief overview of our method. After establishing this background, we move into the thematic analysis of the two websites and our findings. We found that while these two nonprofits promote respectable social justice initiatives to uplift artisans and preserve authenticity of their handicrafts, the two organizations analyzed here minimize the artisans' agency and voices. The online presentations' disconnect from the artisans, who are crucial to the artworks' authenticity, ultimately takes away from the authentic presentation the organizations have worked to create. Intercultural technical communication scholars and other stakeholders for Global South handicrafts NPOs ought to construct online presentations that give voice and agency to those artists that they seek to uplift.

Conceptual Framework

Authenticity, cultural branding and handicrafts

Given that this research focuses on two organizations that support traditional arts and preserving Bengali culture, it is important to define what we mean by culture. We take our understanding of culture from Stuart Hall (1986) who conceptualized it as "the actual, grounded terrain of practices, representations, languages and customs of any specific historical society . . . [including] the contradictory forms of 'common sense' which have taken root in and helped to shape popular life" (p. 26). Culture has to do with how people "make sense of the world" but those meanings that are created are not simply "'out there;' rather, they are generated through signs" (Barker, 2012, p. 7). Artwork is a cultural symbol that helps to produce meaning, and thus a sense of culture. The way an artwork is produced and the stories that it may tell also contribute to the development and understanding of culture. Handicrafts like textiles and sculptures can be understood to be authentic representations of the cultures from which they emerge. They are a kind of material culture, the commodification, consumption and trade of which are "eminently social, relational, and active" (Appadurai, 1986, p. 31).

This commodification of culture is a concern for some critical scholars (cf. Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972) because they fear a loss of individuality and authenticity. So much so that critics of cultural saleability have often lamented that "the commodification of tradition automatically spelled the end of cultural authenticity and meaningful social relations" (Howes, 1996, p. 2) that were ritually fostered by the indigenous nature of production and consumption of cultural artifacts. If, then, our cultural products lack authenticity and originality, how can they carry meanings that help us construct our sense of cultural identity?

As Wherry (2006) points out, to say that a handicraft either *is* or *is not* authentic is an oversimplification and a misrepresentation of the concept. Notions of authenticity are subject to personal interpretations, experiences, and social contexts (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). People need a means to survive, and for

some that method is handicrafts production, wherever those products may fall along the in/authenticity continuum. In fact, the authentic/inauthentic dialectic has come under criticism, and some scholars have argued for a more nuanced understanding of authenticity. Consumer researchers have agreed that the 'authentic-inauthentic' dialectic has been "one of modern marketing's central themes," a branding tension that over the last hundred years "has been intensified by technological advances, which have facilitated the effective simulation of authenticity" (Benjamin, 1969; Brown, 2001; Grayson & Martinec, 2004, p. 296; Halliday, 2001; Orvell, 1989). Authenticity, then, is an important part of establishing brand appeal, particularly at a time when it is technologically easy to create simulated works (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). At a time of intense global–local encounters, originality is rare, but "to go global is not to forsake authenticity" (Wherry, 2006, p. 28).

In an effort to develop more refined understandings of authenticity, Wherry (2006) outlines four types of authenticity in the context of handicraft and tourist arts: reactive authenticity, reluctant authenticity, complicit appropriation, and transcendental appropriation. We focus on *reluctant authenticity*, which refers to when an artisan "reluctantly" engages in commercial trade of their artworks despite fear and uncertainty about the possibility of losing power and authority over their work. Yet, this reluctance makes their artwork scarce and thus more valuable. Moreover, these reluctant artists often use "pre-modern equipment and techniques" to make the artwork by hand in traditional ways, and often proudly display these tools and production practices as indicators of their work's authenticity (Wherry, 2006, p. 22). We draw on Wherry's (2006) theorization of reluctant authenticity, which signifies how the *reluctantly globalized artisans* in developing economies partner with those who have the means of spatial, social and monetary capital in order to have negotiated control over the form, cultural meanings and profit shares of the 'authentic' crafts they create.

In a global marketplace, authenticity (of whatever kind) is a necessary branding strategy for success. The American Marketing Association has defined a brand as, "A name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers" (Brand, 2009).

Selling art is a unique kind of transaction among artists, buyers, and others—i.e., organizations, galleries—that blends commerce, social relations, emotion, history, and culture (Quensenberry & Sykes, 2008). For local handicraft arts, establishing authenticity in terms of history, artisans, production processes, and/or place of production are what distinguish one artist's or group's work from another. In an online environment where a physical connection to the artwork is missing, authenticity of place, production, and people may become a significant part of an online presentation and product marketing plan.

Globalization and digital presentation in intercultural technical communication

Globalization has been culturally defined as a process of "complex connectivity" (Tomlinson, 1999, p. 2) that "affects people's sense of identity, the experience of place and of the self in relation to place, [and] shared understandings, values, desires, myths, hopes and fears that have developed around locally situated life" (Tomlinson, 1999, p. 20). With the emergence of globalization, time, space and place have separated, leading to people and communities being increasingly affected by physically distant forces (Williams, 2012). Some scholars have expressed concerns that a "delocalization" of places under the forces of globalization may lead to a destruction of local cultures (Escobar, 1999, p. 36). Yet, place and local culture, as we will show, can be valuable in a global marketplace and may contribute to the saving and uplifting of local cultures. In fact, the area of intercultural technical communication is indebted to the social, cultural, political, economic and ideological implications of globalization and "shares responsibility for globalization's effects, whether good or ill" (Savage & Mattson, 2011, p. 5). Scholars of professional and technical communication are increasingly turning their attention to intercultural, international and transnational spaces of interaction where issues of power, language, global–local identity, lack of economic opportunities, social justice initiatives, cultural nuances and uneven digital access—in many cases, a lack of it—are replete. As such, it is imperative that the field adopts a more pedagogically inclusive, complex and

intersectional scope, practice and ideology (Agboka, 2013; Bokor, 2011). One way to address this gap in intercultural technical communication within the context of globalization and cultural displacement has been to turn to more participatory, social justice-focused and activist forms of research, both online and face-to-face, that seek to humanize participants and adopt rhetorical and decolonial approaches to study race, critical-cultural and technological narratives within cross-border professional contexts (Agboka, 2014; Crabtree, 1998; Grabill, 2000; Haas, 2012).

In online interactions where audiences are potentially global and quite diverse, establishing authenticity is important for organizational credibility. Locally-based and locally-focused NPOs, such as the ones analyzed here, face a challenge in their online presentations to transnational audiences in their need to highlight their placed-ness in, and deep connection to, rural Bengal. Yet, their digital representation needs to balance their local–global identity and social justice and economic initiatives (Agboka, 2013; Bokor, 2011) with their need to reach ethically aware global consumers (Wood, 2011). In fact, both NPOs' local roots are their selling points in the globalized marketplace.

Presentation and representation in online environments are much studied topics. Using Goffman's (1959) work on self presentation, a number of new media scholars have explored the topic of online representation—from personal homepages (e.g., Dominick, 1999; Papacharissi, 2002), to personal video blogs (e.g., Griffith & Papacharissi, 2010), to online dating profiles (e.g., Ellison, Hancock, & Toma, 2011) among others. Goffman (1959) used theatrical metaphor to understand social interaction, arguing that performances are always rooted in people's understanding of the audience with whom they are interacting. As research in the field has demonstrated (e.g., Ellison, Hancock, & Toma, 2011; Griffith & Papacharissi, 2010; Papacharissi, 2002), when it comes to online interactions, the metaphor still holds. In particular, when faced with "context collapse" that is common on social network sites, wherein audiences from many contexts converge, users must make strategic decisions about their imagined audiences in order to maintain an authentic online presentation (Marwick & Boyd, 2011, p. 122).

Understanding the audience influences what constitutes an authentic presentation. How an organization understands its audience, then, will also shape its online presentation. When it comes to the exchange of artworks, online interactions bring the benefit of raising awareness and generating interest from potential buyers, but may lack the appeal that experiencing an artwork in person may offer certain buyers (Quensenberry & Sykes, 2008). However, online presentations may bring the benefit of giving artists the opportunity to influence buyers' interpretations of authenticity. For example, Felker, Hammond, Schaaf, and Stevenson (2013) show that online presentations of Native American art offered artists the opportunity to express their "relationship to their materials, spiritual values, work ethic, self-respect and connections to the Pueblo community and the greater world" (p. 106), thereby influencing buyers' understandings of what is considered authentic artwork.

Background on NPOs and Indian handicrafts industry

The handicrafts industry is crucial to India's national culture and economy, with the government having offices dedicated to supporting these industries. The Office of the Development Commissioner (Handicrafts) and the Ministry of Textiles are two such offices. The handicrafts industry itself is unorganized and decentralized, largely deriving from household activities (Ministry of Textiles, 2011). This disorganization is perceived as problematic in terms of expanding the industry. The latest Annual Report from the Ministry of Textiles (2013) reiterates that this sector "has . . . suffered due to its being unorganized, with the additional constraints of lack of education, low capital, poor exposure to new technologies, absence of market intelligence, and a poor institutional framework" (p. 117). How best to address these issues is unclear.

There are conflicting messages about the future of handicrafts in India coming from the government and other organizations. On the one hand, there are efforts to protect authentic handicraft production practices. For example, the Handlooms Act of 1985 that promises, among other things, the "protection of interests of persons engaged in the handloom industry and the need for the

continued maintenance of the industry," in part by reserving specific traditional textiles, such as sarees, to be produced solely by handloom (Government of India, The Handlooms Act, 1985, p. 2). Unfortunately, some preservation attempts, like the use of vegetable dyes for textiles, meant that "knowledge that had been firmly in the domain of the artisans now was converted into textual information, shifting ownership of this knowledge into the hands of those who study rather than 'do'" (Mamidipudi & Gajjala, 2008, p. 237). Artisans have become disconnected from—though not unaware of—the market, and part of many NPOs' goals is to help build these connections and ensure amenability to the artisans (Mamidipudi & Gajjala, 2008).

On the other hand, there is a push to expand the handicrafts sector, possibly at the expense of preserving authentic production practices. For example, the Ministry of Textiles (2011) has advocated to expand the industry and to increase India's share of the world's handicrafts exports. Some of the factors identified in 2011 as constraining the industry's growth are its decentralized nature, lack of access to resources for artisans who are often from low-income sectors of society, and a reluctance among artisans to adopt new technologies for production (Ministry of Textiles, 2011). In the context of such pressure, it may be unsurprising to learn that changes are being considered to the Handlooms Act of 1985. Changes up for consideration include allowing power looms to produce sarees—a proposal, which critics of these changes argue potentially endangers the livelihoods of traditional weavers (Jaitly & Mohanrao, 2015; TNN, 2015).

It is in the context of these conflicting demands to expand the handicrafts industry but also preserve authentic production methods that many handicrafts-social justice-focused NPOs operate. The two NPOs analyzed here are based in the state of Bengal in eastern India. Self Help Enterprises (SHE) India specializes in one type of handicraft (*kantha*) and Mrittika Foundation Trust[1] focuses on several kinds of traditional handicrafts. We selected these two organizations because they represent NPOs at different stages of organizational development: SHE is a known, established and successful organization while Mrittika is newer, lesser known, and has been struggling to survive. Both NPOs, however, have a strong commitment to authentic handicrafts and social justice.

SHE India is spearheaded by Shamlu Dudeja, who has been working since the 1980s to study, preserve, and promote *kantha* (Reuse & Recycle, 2010). *Kantha* is a form of embroidery with deep roots in the Bengal region's traditions. The word *kantha* means "rags" in Sanskrit (Radhakrishna, 2014), which makes sense given the handicraft's history. Traditionally, women would recycle old sarees, dhotis and other fabrics to weave together and create quilts (Reuse & Recycle; Radhakrishna, 2014; LS Desk, 2014). The cloths woven together indicated "family unity" and it was a "collective occupation" facilitating "social participation as the women told each other stories as they went along" (Radhakrishna, 2014). *Kantha* has experienced a revival, particularly with Dudeja's vision, and has been transformed into fashionable clothing and home furnishings that appeal to socially conscious global consumers (Reuse & Recycle, 2010). In addition to the embroidery's beauty, these consumers also appreciate how *kantha* can empower "daughters of rural Bengal from weaker sections of society to lead a dignified existence" (Reuse & Recycle, 2010).

Dudeja formed Self Help Enterprise Trust in 1998, following which SHE was officially registered with the West Bengal government in 2004 (Reuse & Recycle, 2010). The organization has team leaders that support rural women with the *kantha* work, for example, by delivering textiles and patterns to the artists' homes so that they do not need to travel for the materials (Reuse & Recycle, 2010; Flanigan, 2010). In exchange for their artwork, the women are paid and also receive support through education and healthcare (Flanigan, 2010). As of 2013, Dudeja is quoted as saying that SHE had "'more than 1300 women on our rolls'" (Reddy, 2013).

While SHE specializes in one form of Bengali handicraft, Mrittika Foundation Trust supports artists who produce several different kinds of Bengal-based artwork, including *kantha*. Dulal Mukherjee, a Bengal-based architect and entrepreneur, established the Trust[2] in 2006, to revive and preserve rural Bengal handicrafts (Adhikary, 2008). The Foundation is based out of a farmhouse in rural Bengal, in a village called Badu in the region of Madhyamgram. The word "Mrittika" is a feminine name that means "Mother earth" in Bengali, which is fitting, given the Foundation's focus on preserving rural arts unique to Bengal.

The Badu campus houses many of its artisans and provides a source of contract-based, part-time employment to local, rural craftspeople. The works Mrittika artists produce include: Bengal terracotta pottery; ceramics; *dhurries* (woven jute rugs); woven wall hangings; *dokra* (an ancient folk form of metal sculpture); handloom-spun cotton, cotton-silk and silk textiles (*tant* saris and yardages); *kantha*; and most recently a venture into organic farming. Mukherjee's eldest daughter, Malini Mandal, led the organization from abstract concept to the trend-setting handicrafts organization that it has become. Tragically, Mandal lost a long battle with cancer in 2012 and Mrittika has been struggling to regain its footing ever since.

The daily wages for Mrittika Foundation artisans was around Rupees 250.00 as of 2008 (approx. $5.00 as per the average dollar-to-rupees exchange rate in 2008) (Adhikary, 2008), which was substantially more than what full-time artisans were paid at the time in most state-sponsored, profit and nonprofit handicraft organizations in Bengal or other Indian states (Jena, 2008; Ministry of Textiles, 2013). *Objects d'art*, 'lifestyle products,' and fashion wear are created by artisans at the Badu workshop, many of which are exhibited under the brand name 'Leela,' which alludes to the concept of feminine creation or play, owing its origin to Hindu cultural history and religious mythology. The products are geared toward a select urban, aesthetically-aware intelligentsia. These "connoisseurs," according to Mandal, are the ideal consumer base for the Foundation, who she believed "don't mind the [higher] price because they acknowledge the skill and hard work going behind these objects of art," and also seem conscientious that "the money is ploughed back to the artisans" (Adhikary 2008).

METHODS

Inspired by Grayson's and Martinec's (2004) and Wherry's (2006) theorization of authenticity, and to better understand the role technology plays in marketing authenticity to negotiate local–global challenges that urban–rural handicraft NPOs of the Global South tackle, we asked these research questions:

1) What are the visual and textual cues that appear on each website that communicate authenticity of location/place? b. What kind(s) of authenticity are communicated?

2) What role does technology play to brand as "contemporary" both Mrittika Foundation and She India NPOs' authentic handicrafts for the global market?

3) What opportunities for communicating authenticity are these NPOs utilizing and/or potentially missing?

In order to answer these questions, we conducted a thematic analysis. Thematic analysis focuses on creating meanings and "tends to lead to a more macro explanation where individual codes can cross-reference multiple themes" (Mukherjee, 2013, p. 112). A latent thematic analysis, which is the specific method of inquiry that this study follows, dissects the latent meanings embedded in the data and arranges common patterns of implicit and explicit themes that help researchers explain the layered phenomena under exploration (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As a frequently used social science method, thematic analysis helps us to obtain a deeper understanding of the social, cultural, communal, behavioral, political and economic contexts of the topic under study (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Frith & Gleeson, 2004; Mukherjee, 2013; Riessman, 2002; Roulston, 2001). Latent thematic analysis builds on a *constructionist model of knowledge* (Burr, 1995) where emergent themes are identified using critical interpretation that is grounded in supporting theory/ies. Thematic analysis has also been an effective qualitative research method used within professional communication to analyze the "changing climate in the workforce in organizations" (Boyatzis, 1998, p. vi). In particular, organizational communication content—emails, websites, memos, social network sites used for business and educational networking, etc.—have been analyzed by scholars and found to be much more than fact-based information (Cain & Policastri, 2011; Conaway & Wardrope, 2010). Rather, using grounded theory approaches, themes that were considered repositories of "embedded cultural attributes" and critical reflections of public opinion, attitudes, common concerns, brand loyalty—or lack of it—and rhetorical appeals have

emerged from a selective body of business and technical communication research using constructionist forms of thematic analyses (Conaway & Wardrope, 2010, p. 141). Thus the latent, constructionist approach, where "broader assumptions, structures and/or meanings are theorised as underpinning what is actually articulated in the data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 85) seems well suited to this study's goal, which is to explore visual and textual cues of branded authenticity that may be present in the two sampled handicraft NPO websites of the Global South to understand technical communication spaces as cultural sites of struggle.

This study follows a rough methodical rendition of Braun & Clarke's (2006) six steps of performing a thematic analysis, including:

i. *data familiarization,* where the researchers conducted close visual observations and textual readings of SHE India and Mrittika Foundation websites based on their prior knowledge of the study's research questions and guiding theories;

ii. *initial code generation*, where data from the two NPO websites were categorized into primary codes that referred to both the semantic and latent content of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006);

iii. *searching for themes*, where we analyzed the codes and began to identify the individual themes, some of which became principal themes and others became secondary themes;

iv. *reviewing themes*, where the primary themes were reviewed again to ensure 'accurate representation' that was guided by the current study's research goals (Braun & Clarke, 2006);

v. *defining and naming themes*, where the principal themes were further refined and appropriately named, defined and substantiated using representative instances from the data; and

vi. *reporting the analysis,* where the thematic findings were critically reported using a "coherent, logical, nonrepetitive, and interesting account of the story the data tell – within and across themes" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 96-97).

Thematic Findings and Analysis

After several close readings and observations, visual and textual data from the two Bengal handicraft NPO websites were identified and analyzed for exploring "the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations—and ideologies—that are theorized as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84). However, before exploring the emergent themes it seems imperative to have a basic understanding of the structural layout and visual elements comprising the official websites of Mrittika Foundation Trust and SHE India. It should be noted that since the time of data collection, the SHE India website has been redesigned and the Mrittika Foundation website is down for maintenance.[3]

Brief descriptions of NPO websites

The Mrittika Foundation homepage has been created by a Kolkata-based digital marketing agency. The entire website has a modern, clean and geometrical appeal (Figure 1 on p. 105). The homepage sports the logo of the Foundation represented by the Bengali equivalent of the alphabet 'M,' rendered urban-eclectic in style (Figure 2 on p. 105).

Tabs linked to the *About Us, Creations, News/Events, Recognition, Support Us, Blog* and *Contact* can be found on the splash page. Other than images of certain craft products created by Mrittika artisans, latests news/event feeds and professionally taken fashion photographs of models in Mrittika saris/fabrics, the element that is most discernible, indeed interesting, on the home webpage is the catchline, "Leela – celebrating the femininity and grace of a woman," followed by a summary of the brand and its products (Mrittika Foundation, 2014). Images of artisans at work in the rural farm venue that houses Mrittika Foundation are used sparingly in the website, with most images displaying their range of products.

The SHE India homepage begins with an introduction that displays animated "stitching" that forms the shape of the state of West Bengal in India, followed by four images (within the Bengal-shaped stitching) and sets of text accompanying each image (Figures 3-6 on pp. 106-107).

Figure 1

The homepage of the Mrittika Foundation website that features the major brand name 'Leela' for many of its handcrafted products.
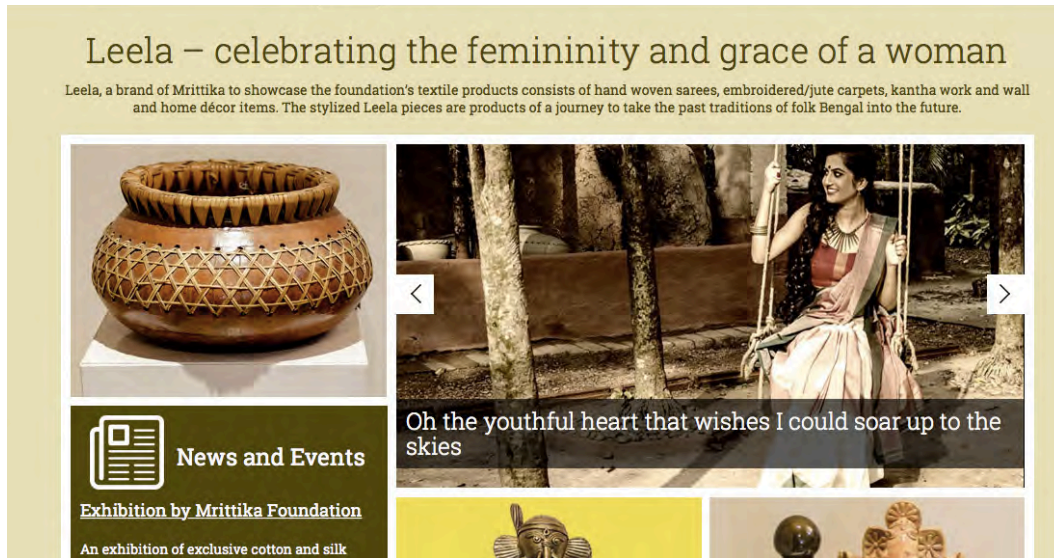

Figure 2

Bengali letter spelling 'Mri', a stylistically rendered logo along with the NPO's name below it that reads 'Mrittika Foundation.'
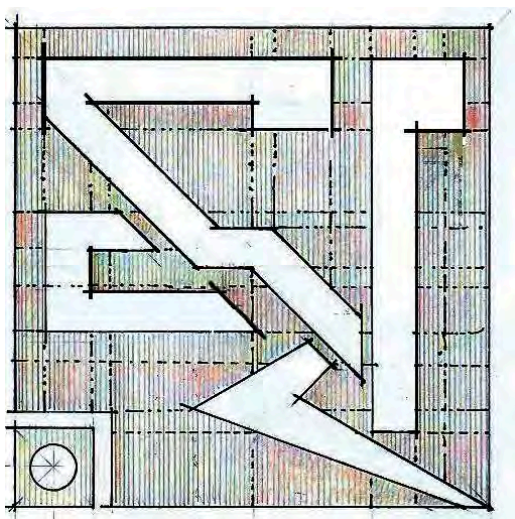
Figure 3.

The word "Kantha" appears in English and three other Indian vernacular languages, including Bengali and Hindi (Devanagari), with a close-up image of a kantha designed fabric.

Figure 4.

The image is of Howrah Bridge, an iconic urban landmark in the city of Kolkata with accompanying text that says, "beautiful bengal / home to kantha" (sic).
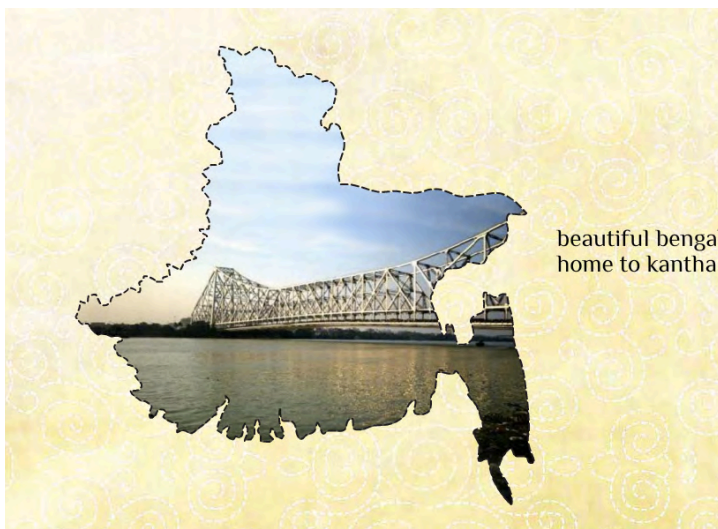
Figure 5.

A close up of kantha stitching (a design that looks similar to the one in Figure 3, p. 106) with text that says, "kantha / the cultural heritage / of rural Bengal"

kantha
the cultural heritage
of rural Bengal

Figure 6.

The fourth introductory image is a medium shot of two women—Shamlu Dudeja, the entrepreneur and philanthropist behind SHE India, is the one explaining the kantha design to the other woman sitting further below, who is intently examining the stitching. In the background there is a pile of colorful fabrics and other rural women working on stitches. The text reads: "self help enterprises / (she) -- / for empowerment of rural / women promotion of kantha"

self help enterprise
(she) —
for empowerment of rural
women promotion of kantha

Figure 7.

The logo of SHE India (Self Help Enterprise) as seen on their website.

Figure 8

Balancing rural production and urban consumption in their online presentations: Rural Bengali women employed by SHE (i) working on kantha designs in her village home and (ii) being felicitated by SHE's primary patron and client, His Excellency Shri M. K. Narayana, ex-Governor of West Bengal, in the city of Kolkata.


On the main website, the splash page sports a simulated hand-drawn logo of a butterfly spreading its wings, overlapping a conservative 'She' written in a serif font (Figure 8). In addition to standard navigation tabs (*Home, About Us,*

Collections, Feedback, News and Events, Affiliations, and *Contact Us*), the splash page also features quickly dissolving and partially juxtaposed images that depict SHE's philanthropic activities, craft exhibitions, *kantha* products, rural producers, urban clients and models wearing outfits embroidered by SHE artisans, as well as a brief summary of SHE's social justice philosophy and organizational history. Perhaps, what is most striking on the homepage and all of the other linked pages of the SHE India website is the varied choice of messages that accompany each set of dissolving image sets. For instance, stylistic slogans such as "home of *kantha*/labour of creativity and ingenuity," "home of *kantha*/a labour of love and devotion," "Self Help Enterprise (SHE)/creating self worth and empowerment" (Figure 9) and "*kantha*/providing economic independence to rural women," etc. seem to work well to authenticate their brand image as a "Self Help Enterprise" that helps to empower and formally train economically and socially impoverished rural women, who are already skilled in the art of quilting embroidery.

Figure 9.

The blog section of the Mrittika Foundation website that features two posts from February, 2014 showcasing some of their handcrafted products and dokra artisans.
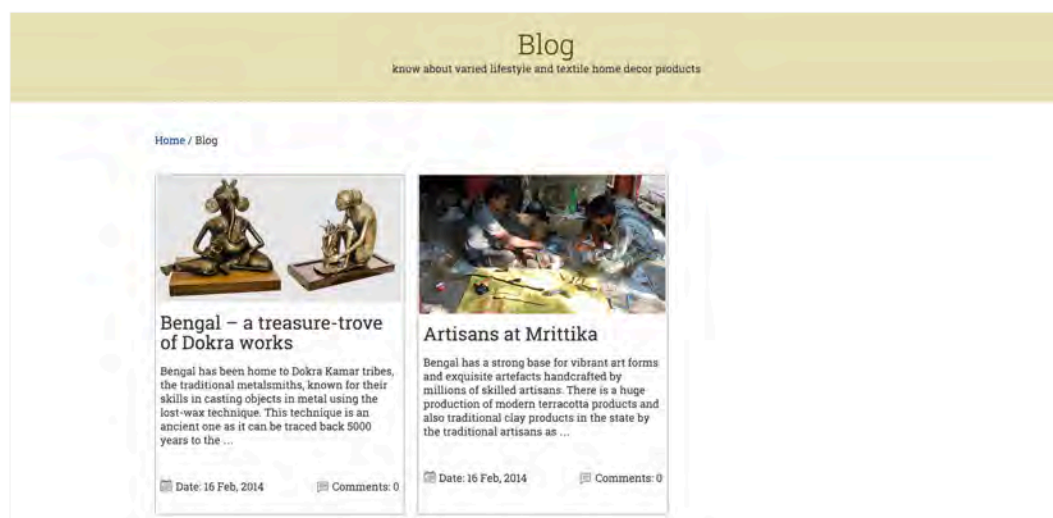
Thematic analysis

Three themes emerged during our analysis: (1) authenticity of place and production, (2) desire for global reach and role of technology, and (3) socioeconomic consciousness. The themes categorized here are not mutually exclusive and frequently overlapped while coding the data.

1. Authenticity of place and production. The first theme explores the two NPO websites' visual and textual efforts to highlight their handicrafts' authenticity in terms of both place and also production methods. Both online presentations establish a connection to place and localness through their handicraft producers' and products' deep connection to rural Bengal as well as through the adherence to traditional production methods. The following thematic content addresses both parts of research question 1, which ask about the visual and textual cues on each website that communicate authenticity, and the kinds of authenticity indicated. Although we do not know, based on our data, to what extent the artisans are "reluctant" (Wherry, 2006, p. 18), we can infer from the websites that there is pride in their locality and traditional production methods, at least on the part of the organizations supporting the artists.

As noted above, Mrittika's "M" logo design visually and linguistically connects the organization to Bengal. The *Blog* (Figure 9) embedded in the website has two entries from February 2014, one of which features a photograph of two nameless artisans crafting *dokra* figurines in the workshop. The supporting blog narrative "Artisans at Mrittika" talks about the place of Bengal and Bengali artisans in the Indian handicraft industry and their "finished handicrafts, intrinsic to the soul of rural Bengal" that the Trust hopes will soon garner global recognition (Mrittika Foundation, 2014).

One of Mrittika's selling points is its connection to Badu, to the people there and to certain indigenous technologies (pottery wheels, looms, clay kilns etc.). They describe the handicraft workshop as being "Located in a lush farmhouse in Badu, Madhyamgram, where the soul of rural Bengal touches a chord through the rich pieces of craft on display" (Mrittika Foundation *About Us*,

2014). A sense of place in the world is necessary to highlight in an online presentation of their work and the organization. At the same time, there needs to be a sense of fluidity about a time and place where these products can be used and appreciated. Mrittika Foundation's Blog post about *dokra*, one of the handicrafts indigenous to Bengal, delineates the NPO's attempt to remain true to the historical and locational significance of the craft, while remaining realistic about the demands of contemporary consumers' global, urban taste:

Dokra is slowly becoming a dying art as a result of the setting-in of modern tastes and likings and also the rising cost of raw materials involved.

> At Mrittika, the artisans are aided to work with newer and more contemporary design forms so as to cater to modern tastes . . . The result is the creation of stylized pieces that can blend in with the modern layout and furnishing of living rooms in present-day settings (Mrittika Foundation, 2014).

Place and local-ness are relevant factors in many organizations' online presentations and interactions, despite their (potentially) global reach. SHE India's connection to Bengal is visually and textually clear from the very first encounter with the website, as evident from the animated images. *Kantha* and Bengal are intertwined on SHE's website—codependent and acting as each other's brand identity. Place, specifically ruralness, is also digitally entrenched on SHE India's website, in the *About Us* section, where they discuss working with village women:

> Trained seamstresses go to the villages and look for women with sewing skills, and a little time to spare everyday. The inherent needlework skill of these women are honed, till they are able to vary the simple common garden running stitch with stunning results (SHE India, 2011).

Authenticity of production methods is also crucial for both organizations' brand identity, based on their web presentations. Mrittika highlights their production methods and place throughout the website, particularly on the *About Us* page with an image of a weaver at work at a handloom and on the blog post titled,

"Artisans at Mrittika," which includes an image of two artisans making creations in the workshop. This post also briefly describes the artisans' lives at the Mrittika campus in Badu, where, "potters craft innovative pots at the wheel, while *dokra* artists give shape to human figures. Weavers on looms are busy translating designs into yardages, as *kaantha* artists produce intricate embroidery" (Mrittika Foundation, 2014). The post also showcases how the handicrafts produced there become the output of a creative ethic that uses authentic methods, as well as natural (thus, authentic) extensions of their rural locality.

However, even as the audience is digitally transported to a romanticized locality of production, Mrittika's online presentation of the artisans lacks a sense of individuality and unique narratives that likely each artist contributes to the organization. This abstraction, though likely unintentional, "points towards the critical view of becoming 'the other' in a normative setting" (Knudsen, 2006, p. 62). Further, this digital othering is indicative of the intersection of sociopolitical, cultural, gendered and economic complexities (Mukherjee, 2013) that lie at the heart of the artisans' offline, abstracted locations and the NPO's online global representation. Making globalization an undeniably complex process of connectivity, this uncomfortable intersection of the global and the local is the result of the "uneven balance of (cultural) forces" (Tomlinson, 1999, p. 62) that creates dichotomous power relations in the workings of urban–rural handicraft sectors in the developing Global South.

Authenticity in the case of SHE India is also located in the place and methods of production. The website, most clearly on the *Methodology* page, displays a specific focus on oral traditions, historical mythologies and the aesthetic quilting skills of women in Bengal from generations past inspiring SHE India's current methods. *Kantha* is an historically feminine and locationally authentic form of handiwork that has been transformed into an empowering feminist practice of artistically mediated economic-self sustenance for rural women. For example, SHE India's *home* page explains how "Kantha was used to sew several layers of old cotton tatters (using old handloom saris or dhotis) together to make quilts, centuries ago. Women created their own patterns inspired by the environment and the epics, and sewed these on to the wads[4], using their inherent

artistry. What began here hundreds of years ago is today the fashion diktat world-over, thanks to the efforts of SHE" (SHE India, 2011).

The philosophy behind SHE India's methods advocates the continuity of the craft as a home-based activity and the maintenance of its legacy as a community ritual that brought rural women together over leisure and conversations. This practice becomes the mantra underlying its brand identity, and their production method is said to be "the key to the high standard of work and authenticity" of their artworks (SHE India, 2011). In keeping with the authenticity of "how it was meant to be," the SHE India website also espouses the spirit of *kantha* as a leisure-craft and one that would give the women substantial spatial and temporal flexibility in terms of where and when they choose to complete their designated embroidery projects:

> The women under SHE, work at their own will to make their lives more meaning full [*sic*] while earning some extra money. It also helps sustain their family. They collect the material and get their briefing as regards design and colour scheme, and then return home to work at leisure. There are no deadlines and they work at a comfortable pace between various household chores (SHE India, 2011).

Local, rural authenticity is what the NPOs in question use to brand their artworks for global, urban consumers, but as the field of material culture studies has pointed out, "when goods cross borders, then the culture they 'substantiate' is no longer the culture in which they circulate" (Howes, 1996, p. 2). The product becomes invariably distanced from its producer and context of production, but closer, in effect, to the global consumer. Current research in intercultural technical communication involving NPOs that represent the disenfranchised and their need for recognition, social justice, and professional equity, has reiterated how important it is to be critically interpretive and understand the many effects of globalization, including improved technological and communication opportunities that have brought people across-geographies into closer and more fluid spaces of interaction (Agboka, 2014; Mutua & Swadener, 2004). It is as a result of this *local labor–global product* distance that neoliberal market economics have created

in the Global South that these two organizations aspire to modernize tradition through contemporized design intervention, which is undoubtedly digitized through their web presence, while simultaneously attempting to brand authenticity rooted in local-ness for near extinct crafts.

2. Desire for global reach and role of technology

This theme explores the two websites' visual and textual presentation of their efforts to reach a global market by modernizing their indigenous products to appeal to urban aesthetic sensibilities and by their desire to create awareness of near-extinct local handicrafts. Here we address the second research question, which asks what role digital technology plays to modernize the brand identity of both NPOs' authentic handicrafts for the global market. Both websites include: product descriptions that tell audiences how to incorporate the artworks into a modern lifestyle; information about the organizations' respective efforts at keeping these arts alive; narratives about improving socioeconomic conditions for the artists; and evidence of desired global reach. However, both websites lack online stores where global consumers can purchase products.

The Mrittika Foundation homepage, for example, promises a "journey to take the past traditions of folk Bengal into the future" (Mrittika Foundation, 2014), attempting to refashion and globalize Bengal folk crafts that have held their own for centuries in local and social history. The range of Leela-branded wall art products speaks of this connection between tradition and modernity, "which either bring out the vibrancy of the Indian motifs, stories and colours or epitomize the abstract boldness of the design patterns. Having these art pieces in your living room can soften the hard lines of furniture and electronic equipment" (Mrittika Foundation, 2014). This blending of urban–rural sensibilities has been a growing trend over the last two decades, with official websites of many Indian fashion houses showcasing the theme of reviving lost Indian handicrafts and repurposing them for a conscientious urban, global clientele (Wilkinson-Weber, 2004).

The Mrittika website corroborates their global branding mantra that is rooted in tradition and rural livelihood. It paints a picture of the "serene ambience

at Mrittika [that] forms an iconic backdrop to the creative gush of its proficient artisans for whom the platform has become a medium of expression and recognition for their art form" (Mrittika Foundation, 2014). Mrittika's reluctant artisans give up the sense of ownership for the crafted end-products that then sell under the Foundation's brand name, yet ironically lend greater authenticity to their art by virtue of this reluctance (Wherry, 2006). This reluctant authenticity becomes a crucial part of their urbanized brand identity aided by technology that helps simulate Mrittika's indigenous artifacts on their digital platform (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). Authenticity is subjectively performed by handicraft NPOs where the connection between their traditional artifacts, their location, and processes of production are socially conditioned within the context of "intense global–local encounters" (Wherry, 2006, p. 28). Indeed, to aspire for global market reach doesn't mean one has to "forsake authenticity" (Wherry, 2006, p. 28).

While Mrittika does acknowledge that their traditional Bengali handicrafts "will occupy pride of place in the world of fashion and lifestyle" (Mrittika Foundation, 2014), their website lacks an online store or other online presence (e.g., Etsy) where such consumers who are not in India can buy these products. Having an online store would help address the push from the Ministry of Textiles (2011) to increase India's share of exports in the global handicraft market. What Mrittika Foundation and the industry as a whole need are consumers to buy these products, and so they need to convince ethically aware (Wood, 2011) global consumers how a certain sari, *dokra* figurine, or terracotta bowl can transcend rural Badu and fit into a modern urban lifestyle. As such, the ability of the Foundation and their products to be incorporated into the fluidity of the global marketplace is currently limited.

The handicraft revival efforts of Mrittika Foundation, however, must also be considered in the context of the local, rural economy it enriches. The website asserts that the "vision of Mrittika to catapult these artisans and their art in the global diaspora has given a new lease of life and hope to these skilled workers who were ceasing to garner the attention they deserved due to neglect and want of a market" (Mrittika Foundation, 2014). This disclaimer makes apparent the holistic

Figure 10.

Mrittika Foundation reinforcing place-ness by locating the handcrafted shatranjis and asans (embroidered and/or jute carpets meant for casual sitting or worshipping) as an "inherent part of every household in Bengal" (Mrittika Foundation, 2014).
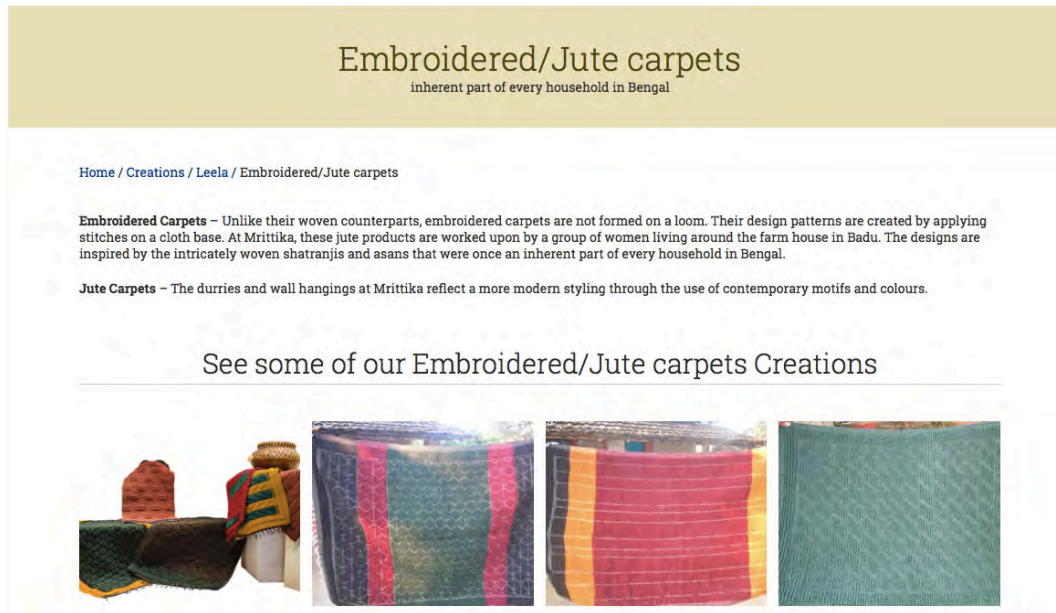
approach with which Mrittika is trying to support the dying rural arts, its underappreciated and underpaid artisans, and its place in the urban and global aesthetic marketplace. However, we find an underrepresentation of its artisans and an affective labor-product abstraction on the Mrittika website. This seems to be an unwitting byproduct of the Trust's commitment to maintain a weighted balance between local production sensibilities hinged on a somewhat culturally immobile understanding of "authentic" branding. This oversight may also be a byproduct of its aspiration for global consumption possibilities inspired by an "eclectic" understanding of traditional aesthetics (Mrittika Foundation, 2014), an aesthetic dialectic that seems for now to be an impracticality given its struggling condition.

Figure 11.

A statue of preindependent Indian political leader Mahatma Gandhi, on display in an exhibition hall in the US, alongside kantha products from SHE India (SHE India, 2011).

For its part, the SHE India website boasts of several product exhibitions the world over, including in the US and the UK, which have helped the NPO establish "a well-deserved place for *Kantha* in the world of folk-art, internationally" (SHE India, 2011). Yet, an obvious display of Mahatma Gandhi's statue in a handicraft exhibition center in the US, placed as part of SHE's *kantha* products, becomes the website's visually-marketed effort for "authenticating" traditional Bengali-ness (and, Indian-ness) for a globally situated marketplace. In fact, the "activities" section of the SHE India web presence announces how "*Kantha*, has recently been catapulted to the hall of fame in the international ethnic textile industry by being the only hand-stitched quilt at the International Quilt Week in Yokohama, Japan" (SHE India, 2011), and the "affiliations" page

lists sponsors from around the world, including the UK, France, Australia and the US.

Moreover, even though *kantha*, the artists, and their production practices are all firmly placed in rural Bengal, SHE India helps artists innovate their artworks for modern tastes and helps global consumers understand how to integrate these artworks into their lifestyles, ultimately building connections between the artists and consumers with the hope that this "exquisite stitch, suitable for outfits and home furnishings" will be appropriated the world over. In the "collections" page, there are links to products for sale, listed in U.S. dollars (at least on our computers based in the US), but after clicking "buy now" the user is taken to the "feedback" page rather than an actual online store. Similar to Mrittika, the lack of a functional online store limits SHE India's opportunities for global reach as well as the nation's handicrafts export presence in global markets.

Nevertheless, SHE India's placed-ness in Bengal contributes to the artworks' authenticity. Additionally, the organization establishes authenticity and credibility as an NPO through their organizational, grassroots level activities described on the website, such as "spearheading training programmes in *Kantha*, natural dyes and other related activities to rural women in various districts of

Figure 12.

The role of technology in marketing authenticity in a local–global context is apparent through SHE India website's narrativization of this Global South NPO's craft methodology that maintains the leisure-bound nature of kantha as "an income generating tea break" for its rural female artisans (SHE India, 2011).

Bengal," as well as arranging educational, health-related and home-purchasing loans for its rural artisans, and mobilizing "training in literacy and primary arithmetic to women and children, whenever possible," in association with other literacy-advocating NPOs (SHE India, 2011). While textually and visually stressing the need for global recognition, a need that SHE India has fulfilled to quite an extent, its web presence reiterates the importance of globalization as a personal experience that is rooted as much in place, rural community, and local identity (Williams, 2012), as it is in its efforts of "creating *kantha* for the global community" (SHE India, 2011).

3. Socioeconomic consciousness. Here we explore the two websites' visual and textual presentations of the NPOs' efforts to uphold their goals of social justice, relative to their location in the developing Global South, local handicraft revival initiatives, and the rural Bengal artisans they support and represent. The following thematic content addresses research question three, which asks about opportunities taken and missed for communicating authenticity. In addition to place and production, social justice is part of both organizations' brand identities as communicated online, and is, presumably, part of their appeal for conscientious global consumers.

The *About Us* section of the Mrittika website, subtitled "provided shelter to village artisans," talks about the cofounder's conscious commitment to create a "little corner [that] has provided shelter to village artisans who practise traditional arts . . . The highlight of this endeavour is to revive these traditional arts through stylized and more contemporary designs and concepts" (Mrittika Foundation, 2014). There is an effort to highlight that their "handicrafts are now being patronised by connoisseurs and celebrities who acknowledge the skill and hard work going behind these objects of art. And the money is ploughed back to the artisans in deference to their skill and labour" (Mrittika Foundation, 2014). Yet, what does not get transcribed online is their artisans' agency and self-

empowerment initiatives, an explication of their awareness of the fast-changing demands of the global–local craft market and how fluidly they can master their creative labor within the developing economy of the Global South. Such narratives should find voice on their website so that the uneven socioeconomic power differentials that are often found within the 'producer-product-marketer' triad does not reproduce itself online. Indeed, an organization that seeks to uplift underprivileged groups ought to avoid reproducing "power–politics of exclusion" that may socioeconomically infiltrate professional urban–rural partnerships in their online presentations (Mukherjee, 2013, p. 89).

To communicate 'authenticity' as their primary product brand and to perform economic and social philanthropy that they are committed to, the SHE India website highlights its local handicraft revival initiatives, stating that *kantha* "was a dying village craft in the wake of printing" until Dudeja and her daughter "began marketing Kantha in a big way" (SHE India, 2011). The fact that SHE India has built its nonprofit identity and craftwork ethic on the "social conditions of production" (Wherry, 2006) that take into account the working conditions and domestic responsibilities of rural women is evident in the socioeconomically empowering disclaimer, "When it started out there were just a handful of people and today it helps hundreds of women sustain their livelihood" (SHE India, 2011).

Figure 13.

Multiple images showing the organizational representatives of SHE India reaching out to rural Bengali women with basic necessities, such as food, clean water and medical checkups.

While SHE India gives the artists more identity online than Mrittika by including numerous images of them at work and taking advantage of the educational and health services offered, the site lacks information about individual women. The site visitor learns about the founder, Dudeja, but very little about the individual artisans. Thus, SHE India's online presentation appears to fall prey to a similarly unconscious "power-politics of exclusion" (Mukherjee, 2013, p. 89) as Mrittika.

Conclusion

Theoretically speaking, SHE India and Mrittika Foundation fit the mold of reluctant authenticity, where Global South artisans partner with NPOs that have an urban stronghold to handle the production, sociocultural interpretations and financial returns of the traditional handicrafts they help create and brand as authentic through their web presence. The major difference we found lies in the degree to which each NPO communicates its products' authenticity and the resultant branding opportunities they capitalize on or overlook.

Both organizations effectively communicate their deep roots in rural Bengal and its people, their preservation of traditional production methods, and their commitments to social justice. They also both express a desire for global reach and their efforts at contemporizing these traditional crafts helps them connect with modern, global consumers. Using visual and textual branding tools on their websites, both organizations communicate the authenticity of their products, people, and production methods. Notions of authenticity are subject to personal interpretations, experiences, and social contexts and the online environment offers these organizations flexibility in presenting their artworks for a variety of audiences, indeed perhaps even encouraging a reconsideration, for some consumers, of what constitutes an authentic artwork.

Unfortunately, both organizations miss the commerce opportunities that abound online, for neither one has an online store. In their roles as mediators between rural artisans and global consumers, both organizations have room for improvement. Finally, both Mrittika and SHE India present their social justice

goals and achievements on their websites—which also feed into their authenticity branding efforts—but they lack narratives and information about the individual artisans. Thus they inadvertently minimize the underprivileged artisans' identities and agency—at least from the perspective of a global audience member looking at their websites—while at the same time highlighting them as artists and recipients of the socioeconomic advantages each organization offers them.

Going forward, more action-based research is needed to understand the artists' thoughts, opinions, and perspectives on their collaboration with NPOs such as Mrittika and SHE India. We also believe that the field of intercultural technical communication would be able to effectively explore intersections of power, production, inequities, and social justice in global, cultural sites when future research is more mindful of local contexts. In this context, that would translate to representing the artists' points of view in future research to help us better understand notions of authenticity when it comes to traditional handicrafts, particularly when selling them online. Moreover, to understand their degree of reluctant engagement in the entire craft creation-branding-consumption process, it will be beneficial to know more about how the artists communicate with the organizations, with each other, if/how they communicate with consumers, and to what extent authenticity of place and production is important to them. ■

Notes

[1] It is important to mention that the authors of this article are currently on the advisory board of Mrittika Foundation Trust.

[2] In India, a trust is an NPO with distinct philanthropic goals. Thus, we use the terms "trust" and "NPO" interchangeably in this article.

[3] Since the data for this study has been collected more than a year ago, the websites for SHE India and Mrittika Foundation have been/are being redesigned. This is common given the dynamics of online data and the perpetually evolving nature of globally-engaged entrepreneurial nonprofits.

[4] A wad here refers to layers of soft cloth sewn together with simple garden running stitches and often used as a canvas for colorful embroidery on hand-drawn designs.

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