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# 'Allow her to flourish and grow': commodifying gendered handicraft labour in conscious capitalist brand imagery on Instagram

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## ABSTRACT

Much of development policy centred around women over the last 50 years has increasingly emphasised women's engagement in the formal labour force. In more recent years, the emergence of Western 'conscious capitalist' and 'fair trade' brands have sought to bridge this gap by employing women from the Global South in their supply chains. Although this has provided increased opportunities for women, especially those from poor communities, through the process of defetishising their labour vis-à-vis the exposure of this labour through branded advertising and imagery, the images of these women effectively become commoditised themselves. Using a content analysis of 300 Instagram images from three conscious capitalist handicraft brands, this paper will explore how this imagery is shaped around stereotypical thematic constructions of 'developing women' from the Global South, and how conscious capitalist brands characterise the representations of producers in their advertising.

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## Introduction

'We believe in the tremendous power that a woman, specifically a mother, possesses and provides. Allow her to flourish and grow – and she'll pass it on' (Akola 2021). This quote, from the website of a conscious capitalist handicraft jewellery brand, exemplifies much of how development discourse about women has been shaped over the last 50 years. The notion of the 'developing woman' as an industrious labourer stems from the increasing focus on women and their engagement in the formal labour market as key to enabling their equality. Indeed, women's formal introduction into development policy began with the Women in Development (WID) approach that emerged in the 1970s. Prior to this, much of development policy had been shaped on sex-specific terms, with men as heads of households and women as housewives and mothers (Kabeer 1994). This model assumed a trickle-down effect on women that posited that men's productive work would ultimately benefit women and children economically. With the emergence of WID, however, women were viewed as capable economic contributors in the formal economy. WID initiatives birthed the 'efficiency

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approach', which stemmed from the notion that women's domestic roles would not contribute to the formal economy and, therefore, would not lead to market-led growth (Kabeer 1994). This led to a push to identify opportunities for women to employ their market-oriented capabilities, rendering domestic activity invisible and increasing women's workload (Escobar 2012).

Indeed, the trajectory of development discourse over the last 50 years has largely been shaped by neoliberal logics of economic efficiency with a focus on 'income generation' and improving access to paid forms of employment (Simmons 1997, 146; see also Crewe (1998) and Kabeer (1994)). Today, this approach is referred to as 'smart economics', a concept that presupposes women's inclusion in the labour market as a means to their equality (Dogra 2011; Lugo-Ocando and Nguyen 2017). The marrying of women's development with economic growth has led scholars to argue that this enables the defense of the patriarchal privilege inherent in capitalism (Simmons 1997; Escobar 2012). The evolution of this discourse has become plainly visible in the advertising produced by development organisations; increasingly, by corporations with development causes; and as will be explored in this paper, by 'conscious' capitalist (sometimes qualified under Fair Trade) brands, all of which are inherently embedded in the patriarchal capitalist structures that scholars have critiqued.

This paper will explore how conscious capitalist brands advance the notion of 'smart economics' through their Instagram posts and effectively shape constructions of the 'developing world'<sup>1</sup> woman as a 'site of development' through the feminisation of her labour. In effect, this construction has commodified her labour through the consumer's consumption of the images that depict her labour. Through the act of de-fetishising her labour in the exposure of this labour on social media platforms, the conscious capitalist brand commodifies her bodily labour as a site of neoliberal development, making a purchase from the brand not just about the commodity itself (ie the handicraft product), but about how the purchase of this product symbolises the advancement of the labourers' development and economic agency.

Conscious capitalism refers to companies and brands that prioritise supply chain ethics and workers' rights to the effect that this transparency is often exemplified in their media and marketing communications. Conscious capitalist brands are typically Western brands that employ people (largely women) based in developing economies throughout Africa, Latin America and South Asia. In addition to offering employment opportunities, these companies may offer other forms of training, including financial management training. The brands that will be explored in this paper sell handicraft goods including handmade baskets and jewellery. In an effort to 'de-fetishise' the commodity, these brands provide exposure to their supply chain through online channels, featuring producers engaged in handicraft labour in much of this online content.

Through the analysis of Instagram imagery across three conscious capitalist brands, this paper will address a gap in the literature that, as Kim and Wilkins (2021) suggest, has largely left the representation of development unexamined in institutional digital spaces. To fill this gap, the paper will deploy a content analysis to examine the Instagram imagery shared by brands that produce handicraft products including handmade baskets and jewellery and employ producers in countries including Ghana, Rwanda, Uganda, Kenya and Burundi. The selected brands centralise the producers in their brand messaging, frequently featuring images of producers in their brand communications, including on social media.

The findings suggest that not only is conscious capitalist labour highly gendered, but conscious capitalist brands re-work historical and existing tropes of 'developing world' women to advance neoliberal logics of women's development. Indeed, scholars including Ong, Fortunati and Mohanty have commented on the gendered nature of labour. For Fortunati (2007), this manifests as immaterial, domestic labour, central to caretaking for children and the home. Ong (1988) highlights how gendered labour has been exacerbated by corporate discourse, elaborating on the 'natural accommodation of "oriental female"... passivity to low-skilled assembly work', commenting on the embeddedness of the female figure in upholding cultural identity and the tensions this causes. In her discussion of the sexual politics of global capitalism, Mohanty (1995, 11–14) highlights how 'women's work' is defined within the context of gendered, racial and ethnic hierarchies, reproducing ideologies that define women as non-workers. This paper will contribute to discussions of gendered labour by commenting on the gendered nature of handicraft labour and how it becomes commodified through advertising. The paper will conclude how the use of these tropes, particularly the use of body fragmentation in conscious capitalist imagery, further commodifies the producer's body in acts of labour.

### The female figure as an instrument of labour

At the crux of this paper's discussion is how labour becomes commoditised through its representation in conscious capitalist brand advertising on social media. Scholars have written extensively about the disciplining of the female body as both labourers in the formal and informal capitalist work force and reproductive labourers in the domestic sphere, a form of labour largely hidden from the public sphere. The maternal body has become both an instrument of reproduction in the accumulation of labour power (Federici 2014) and the site of 'primal shelter' for a newborn (Kelleher 1997, 23). Mohanty (1995, xxiii) notes, in addition to the above, that the female figure has also come to be embodied as a repository of sin in religious contexts, transgressor in nationalist discourses, guardian of culture, and maintainer of the nuclear family as wife and mother.

Historically, the immaterial labour of women has been rendered invisible. Jarrett notes two different types of direct material inputs provided by the unpaid labour of domestic work: domestic work as freely given labour as well as 'gifts of affect' that 'reflect, reproduce, and/or transgress the social order, but which are framed merely as economic inputs to their detriment' (Jarrett 2014, 18). In more recent years, with the growth of technology, domestic labour has become further mechanised. As Fortunati (2007) notes, technological advances, particularly in the entertainment industry, have allowed the domestic work of looking after children, for instance, to be relegated to the television or computer. However, much like the introduction of household appliances, this has not served to limit women's work in the household. Rather, it has resulted in the further intensification of the workday where the delegation of some household work to technology has merely been replaced by other household or formal work for women.

As domestic work has been rendered invisible, ceasing to be considered 'real work', women in the West are encouraged to enter the formal labour market, driven by sentiments of neoliberal feminism. Neoliberal feminism aims to convince women that they 'should never cease working on themselves in order to enhance their value' (Rottenberg 2019, 1074), touting a 'happy work–family balance' where friends, family and hobbies can be seen as

opportunities for investment (Rottenberg 2019). As a feminism that speaks mainly to White, Western, middle-upper class, cis-gendered women, neoliberal feminism 'helps to (re)produce and legitimize the exploitation of these "other" female subjects while simultaneously disarticulating the very vocabulary with which to address the glaring inequalities that these women experience in their daily lives' (Rottenberg 2019, 1079).

## Neoliberal feminism in the Global South

The forceful integration of formerly colonised nations into the neoliberal, capitalist global economy has also imprinted Western notions of women's freedom and empowerment onto these countries. As will be further explored in the analysis portion of this paper, this is acutely evident when it comes to the depiction of Global South women in development and conscious capitalist advertising. Akinbobola (2019, 52) questions whether neoliberal feminism takes into consideration the 'spaces and places in which they [women] operate', specifically in the African context, noting the unique challenges faced by African women including high unemployment rates, limited financial opportunities, and cultural expectations. Chant and Sweetman (2012, 527) critique development initiatives focused around 'smart economics', noting that 'smart economics returns our gaze to women and their agency, in an approach which fails to focus on the existence of structural discrimination against women'. Similarly, Erickson and Faria (2011, 642) critique the messaging of neoliberal entrepreneurship in Sudan, noting that 'this strategy dovetails with, rather than challenges, the patriarchal state and historically entrenched structures of power'. Chatterjee's (2020) analysis of bottom-of-the-pyramid development projects critiques how neoliberalism renders women gendered subjects that can be used to achieve economic growth. By homogenising the experiences of Global South women and placing the onus on their own entrepreneurial endeavours to achieve not only economic growth more broadly but also individualised notions of freedom and empowerment, neoliberal feminism fails to account for the nuanced and specific experiences of women in local contexts. As Ong (1988) notes, enacting a homogenisation of non-Western women encodes notions of the West's own cultural, and in this case economic, superiority. In one example, Ong (1995) describes how Western family planning ideology promoted by the World Bank in Malaysia emphasised a model based on the Western nuclear family. The goal of this programme utilised Western familial principles in order to reduce family size in Malaysia while increasing agricultural development. However, the lack of accounting for local and cultural nuance resulted in an active resistance and even hostility from village men towards family planning programmes, which led to increased household tensions between men and women as well as increased birth rates (Ong 1995).

Indeed, the transplantation of Western feminisms and ideology to the Global South has been routinely critiqued by Third World and post-colonial feminist scholars. In her review of literature written by Western feminists, Mohanty (1984) critiques the application of Western feminist discourse to the developing world in a way that homogenises women's oppression. Russo (1991) notes the importance of centralising race in feminist discourse, so that women of colour cease to be fundamentally 'different or opposed'; however, as Wong (1991, 289) importantly notes, feminist resistance must be seen in the context of the 'political, social, and economic conditions in which the total emancipation of women, as a sex, is hampered'. Alexander and Mohanty (1995, xviii) critique the notion of an 'international feminism' further, highlighting how 'calls for global sisterhood' are often focused on a model of centre/

periphery where women of colour and women of the Global South are placed on the periphery. Bulbeck (1998), writing for White, Western women, critiques this centring of the West when it comes to developing feminist discourse, noting how women from around the world may be writing feminism from a different centre.

Despite these critiques, as will be demonstrated in this paper, Western-based conscious capitalist brands centre neoliberal feminist ideals when communicating and representing the Global South and the female producers present in their advertising.

### Framing the 'developing world' woman

Extensive literature has demonstrated how colonial discourse has shaped the representation practices of development organisations in their imagery and advertising, producing 'racialized, infantilized, and gendered subjects' (Kim and Wilkins 2021, 194, see also Dogra 2011; Wilson 2012; Chouliaraki 2013). Indeed, women in particular have often been treated as a 'site of development' in this imagery. For example, in a visual analysis of non-governmental organisation (NGO) brochures, Dogra (2011) found that women and children made up 72% of the images analysed. As Dogra aptly notes 'Women are ubiquitous across all representational sites of disaster, development and advocacy' (Dogra 2011, 335). Historically, the framing of the 'developing world' woman has been shaped through the articulation of the female figure as a 'passive victim'. Notably, development programmes aimed at addressing famine and poverty have articulated the suffering of these problems through visualisations of women. As Kelleher (1997) highlights, the 'feminisation of famine' is characterised by the visual of the 'dry breasted mother unable to feed her child' where the 'maternal body, scene of the "primal shelter that ensured the survival of the newborn", becomes the place of death' (Kelleher 1997, 2; 23). Such framework has marked women as 'passive victims' waiting to be 'rescued', perpetuating what Chouliaraki terms an 'asymmetry of power', referring to hierarchical power relations that manifest between the spectators who are viewing suffering from the comfort of their home and the vulnerability of the distant sufferers being depicted in media (Chouliaraki 2006, 4). This produces what Chouliaraki (2013) calls an 'empathetic imagination', referring to the affective relationship manifested between spectators and vulnerable others through advertising which becomes commodified, eliciting an obligatory response by the viewer. This response becomes mired in tensions between benevolence and power, enacting a performance of solidarity in which the West becomes the moral actor (Chouliaraki 2013). Indeed, scholars have critiqued women's inclusion in development policy as perpetuating their homogeneous categorisation as passive victims (Wilson 2012; Lugo-Ocando and Nguyen 2017) while advancing neoliberal interests (Wilson 2012; Lugo-Ocando and Nguyen 2017; Chant 2008; Dogra 2011).

Since the emergence of 'smart economics', however, the framing of the 'developing world' woman has demonstrated a significant shift. Rather than being shaped by her suffering, the economically independent 'developing world' woman is empowered, engaged in labour and smiling. Indeed, the image of a 'happy developing woman' has become increasingly pervasive, not only in development visuals disseminated by NGOs and bilateral institutions, but also by corporations like Nike and conscious capitalist brands like Toms Shoes (see Daily 2017; Wilson 2012; see also Daily 2019; Leissle 2012; Cole 2011). Imbued with the logics of neoliberal feminism, this woman is typically characterised as the 'happy producer' (Daily 2017), depicted happily engaging in gendered labour like sewing, handicrafts or sometimes

agriculture, while still typified by the orientalist discourse of the 'developing world' woman as natural, wearing traditional dress, religious, etc. (Wilson 2012). Scholars have critiqued the fetishisation of 'developing world' women by the Western gaze, noting how the fetishisation of their figure exoticises their bodies and Orientalises their labour (see Chatterjee 2001; Engmann 2012; Magee 2012, Wilson 2012). This characterisation also emphasises women's roles as cultural bearers of national identity. As many feminist scholars point out, the female figure has often been used to ensure the cultural survival of communities, especially in the wake of modernisation (see Ong 1995; Puri 2002; Warner 1996). By depicting images of warm, inviting and happily labouring women bearing cultural dress and producing cultural artefacts, Western conscious capitalist brands emphasise the notion of women as bearers of their own culture while fetishising this depiction for Western consumption.

Previous analyses of conscious capitalist and fair-trade brands have examined how producers and workers are communicated to Western viewers as well as how effective fair trade is in enabling women's empowerment in the regions in which they operate. Scrase (2011) points to some of the key challenges of fair-trade production, noting how fair trade puts the onus on consumers to make the right consumer choice, effectively ignoring the institutions and systems that perpetuate an unfair supply chain. McArdle and Thomas (2012, 289) question the effectiveness of fair-trade practices in relation to women's empowerment, noting 'the evidence seems to point towards involvement with Fair Trade having limited impact on traditional gender relations in developing nations'.

Fair Trade brands have also been critiqued for their stereotypical representations of the Global South (Daily 2017; Daily 2019; Cole 2011; Scrase 2011; Wilson 2012). In her analysis of Divine Chocolate advertisements produced in the early 2000s, which depict female producers holding pieces of chocolate accompanied by slogans like 'craving a better world or just another piece?' or 'decadently decent', Wilson notes how the viewer is invited to 'consume ... the very body of the coffee producer' (Wilson 2012, 66), a nod to sexualised colonial representations of Global South women. Daily (2019) notes how the depiction of the producers in conscious capitalist brands perpetuates 'dangerous aesthetic and ideological stereotypes for the feminine subject, summoning colonial discourses of cultural and economic power, albeit ones cloaked in a veil of empowerment' (Daily 2019, 152). Similarly, Lee (2012, 307) suggests that the relationship between the workers and their commodities as depicted in Fair Trade advertising demonstrates an ahistoricity, with the worker's images adding more meaning to the commodities versus the other way around. As Lee argues, the developing woman producer's image in Fair Trade advertising represents to the Western viewer 'an avenue for a traditional woman ... to break through the oppression, powerlessness, seclusion, and many other undesirable conditions that women from developing countries are perceived to live under' (Lee 2012, 307).

## Advertising gendered labour

Existing literature on advertising demonstrates extensively the role of Marx's theory of commodity fetishism when it comes to embodying commodities with attributes beyond their use value. Marx defines commodity fetishism as the 'mystical character of commodities' that extends beyond the commodities' use value (Marx and Engels 1867, 47). Commodity fetishism explains the transformation of the commodity imaginary from 'useful widget' to 'useful widget with embedded meaning, representation, and value'. To ascertain this 'mystical

character' the commodity must be stripped of its production value, effectively masking the productive labour, and instead takes on a value that extends beyond its use value.

Jhally (1990) argues that this relationship is cultivated via advertising which seeks to allocate a value to that commodity that extends beyond its use value. For Jhally, the role of advertising obscures the visibility of its production and any exploitation associated with this production. For Cluley and Dunne (2012, 253), however, commodity narcissism presumes that the consumer is aware of the exploitative means by which a product is produced, but the desire to have the commodity is so intense that it is to be had at the knowing expense of others.

In the case of conscious capitalist brands, however, the production of the commodity is exposed in advertising. As Mies's (1982) analysis of the Indian lacemaking industry demonstrates, handicraft labour has traditionally been pushed underground, especially since this labour is conducted in the home, even though many families rely on income from this trade to sustain their livelihoods. By depicting handicraft producers engaged in the productive labour of creating handicraft goods for sale, effectively 'lifting the veil' on household-based production, conscious capitalist brands are engaged in what Varul (2008) calls 'romantic commodification'. Varul notes the de-fetishisation of this labour effectively commoditises the labour, 'transforming the unveiled concrete labor itself into a commodity' (Varul 2008, 660). As noted by Bryant and Goodman, the fetish surrounding commodities becomes re-worked, creating an 'alternative spectacle' for Global North consumers (Bryant and Goodman 2004 cited in Varul 2008, 660). The romantic commodification of the producer's labour and goods 'invite romantic daydreams' by 'acting at a distance' through the depiction of faraway lands (Bryant and Goodman 2004, 661), inviting the consumer to 'consume the body of the producer' (Wilson 2012, 66). By using affective marketing, centralised around philanthropy and altruism, the handicraft goods become what Ahmed (2010) calls a 'happy object', which becomes circulated as a social good (Gajjala 2018).

The commodification of gendered labour is not unique to handicraft labour, however. Goffman's (1987) analysis of Western advertising demonstrates the gendered depiction of women – often shown engaged in domestic labour, among other varied gendered attributes. Chatterjee (2001) also explores the commoditisation of the female figure as it relates to her labour in the tea plucking industry. In this context, the process of commoditising her labour involves the feminisation of this labour; she is not simply plucking tea leaves, but rather doing so with delicacy while blurring bodily toil. Gajjala (2013, 60) notes the commoditisation of microfinance borrowers on kiva.org whose digital representations on the website and the interface of Kiva as an online store depict the borrowers as 'commodities to be consumed'. Mukherjee and Williams (2016) demonstrate how 'digital othering' is not unique to Western representations of the Global South. In their analysis of Bengali non-profit organization (NPO) websites, the locality of production is romanticised while artisans are homogenised.

By 'de-fetishising' their labour, fair trade and conscious capitalist brands aim to articulate bonds of solidarity between the Global North and South, giving 'ethical consumers' in the Global North an opportunity to challenge traditional principles of exchange (Fridell 2007). This aim, however, has been critiqued as merely symbolic, and to disrupt the fetishism of commodities, as Fridell notes, 'would ultimately require a project aimed not just at confronting unethical market behavior, but the social relations that underlie them' (Fridell 2007, 101). Hudson and Hudson (2003, 426) critique this production model further, noting that it 'obscures the structural linkages between the core and the periphery', presenting the

producer and consumer as equals with their conditions 'glossed over'. Indeed, this exposure of the producer to the consumer in connection with the product creates what Chatterjee notes as an 'illusory division' in which the 'bodily toil is blurred' (Chatterjee 2001). The 'empowered' female subject is shaped by her gleeful willingness to labour for the gazing Western consumer.

### Gendered, racialised and performative subjectivity on social media

In her discussion of the spectator/sufferer relationship, Chouliaraki (2006, 37) notes how technology 'closes the moral distance between spectators and sufferers'. Indeed, as noted by Kim and Wilkins (2021), development organisations have increasingly used social media to communicate development to the public, and in so doing, engage in representational practices through the production of 'racialized, infantilized, and gendered subjects' (Kim and Wilkins 2021, 194). Like conscious capitalist brands, development organisations are increasingly depicting women engaged in economic labour that aims to emphasise their agency. However, this depiction still demonstrates the traditional method of representing Western definitions of progress and development 'that sustain the legacies of colonialism' (Kim and Wilkins 2021, 195).

For Boltanski (1999), the relationship between the spectator and the sufferer (or, more broadly, the representational 'Other'), constitutes the notion of the 'politics of pity', a concept predicated on the idea that an unequal dynamic between the 'fortunate' and the 'unfortunate' exists and thus precipitates the action that takes place in response to the viewing of this suffering. While such acts may vary, this action is reliant on the benevolence of the fortunate. This distinction exists, as Chouliaraki (2006) argues, because of a media framework that draws the distinction between 'us' and 'them'.

The distinction between 'us' and 'them' on social media is made through the performance of visualised norms. Gras-Velázquez and Maestre-Brotons (2021, 1) show that neoliberalism on Instagram reduces gayness to a 'global marketable brand' while Marwick (2013) similarly discusses the performance of gender in online spaces, depicted through normative understandings of gender performance such as the wearing of high heels. In the same way, conscious capitalist brands reduce the 'representational Other' to a commodified brand through colonialist and racialised depictions in online spaces. However, the existence of their image in these online spaces also represents an opportunity for the interpretation of solidarity and similarity, much like the example Abidin (2017) identifies in their analysis of Singaporean leader selfies used to cultivate a sense of relatability to citizens. Similarly, conscious capitalist brands engage in what Dogra (2014, 3) notes is a dual 'difference' and 'oneness' that allows the viewer to understand the developing world poor as different and distant from the developed world, 'yet like us by virtue of their humanity'. These tactics enable conscious capitalist brands to commodify the images of producers while still maintaining their familiarity and 'authenticity' to the Western viewer.

### Research approach

The research approach largely draws from Kim and Wilkins' (2021) analysis of development agency communication on Instagram. As they note, social media has assumed a large role in the process of mediating the practices, roles and legitimacy of development

organisations and their initiatives (Kim and Wilkins 2021, 193). To this effect, development agencies, as a producer of such images, 'reconfigure the ways in which development agencies communicate about development' (Kim and Wilkins 2021, 193). Further, as the 'public face of development', development agencies aim to find ways to communicate development in such a way that makes their own work appear as 'doing good' (Kim and Wilkins 2021, 193). Extending this to the space of conscious capitalism, in a similar vein, conscious capitalist brands mediate our understanding of their production practices as 'ethical'. Through the process of defetishising the labour behind the handcraft commodity, the conscious capitalist brand not only shapes what ethical production practices should look like, but also assumes the responsibility in mediating how the producer should look. Indeed, it is through this process that conscious capitalist brands, like development organisations, as the 'public face of ethical production', frame their own work as 'doing good'.

The brands selected for this analysis produce and sell goods in the handcraft sector, including hand-woven baskets and handmade jewellery. Their producers are located in Ghana, Rwanda, Uganda, Kenya and Burundi. At the time of the analysis, Brand 1 had 2112 total posts between April 2013 and October 2021; Brand 2 had 2822 posts between October 2012 and October 2021; and Brand 3 had 974 posts between April 2014 and October 2021. The analysis examined both the images and the accompanying captions.

To begin, the analysis utilised the characterisations of Global South women identified in the literature review to shape the thematic areas of analysis. These included examining what action was taking place in the image, how the producer was dressed, the presence of children in the image, the setting or location where the image was captured, and how their body was represented in the image. Similarly, the caption accompanying the image was examined to add further context to the image. In many cases, the caption helped to provide further background information on the artisan depicted in the image or the process of making the handcraft good. Hashtags included in the caption were also examined to determine how the brands encapsulated their key messaging for each post.

### *Data selection and analysis process*

Once the thematic areas of analysis were identified, the selection process began. First, the brand's images were sorted through to identify those featuring female producers. Female producers were identified either through captioned text that indicated their role in the organisation as a producer (eg 'Meet one of our artisans') or through imagery that showed them directly engaging in labour with the commodity. Where the author was unsure, these images were excluded.

For Brand 1, 351 posts were saved depicting producers; for Brand 2, 270 posts depicting producers were saved; and for Brand 3, 118 posts were saved. The posts were saved in marked folders in the author's Instagram account. Once the images were saved, a random sampling strategy was employed<sup>2</sup> to select 100 images from each of the three brands. These images and accompanying text were then screen captured and uploaded to Nvivo, where the author conducted the image analysis. Images were screen captured in their thumbnail form, meaning that videos were screen captured as they appear as a thumbnail on the main feed, and carousel images (ie Instagram posts that feature multiple images within one post) only captured the primary feed image (ie the first

image in the carousel sequence). Repeated images from the Instagram feed were removed from the data set (Table 1).

## Findings and analysis

In her analysis of the content strategies deployed by NGO marketing, Orgad highlights dirt as a 'notable signifier of difference' exemplified in NGO marketing and imagery depicting the Global South, a signifier that marks otherness (Orgad 2015, 120). Drawing from the literature, this analysis makes note of 'notable signifiers of difference' that emerge in the images of producers. The sections below discuss how these notable signifiers shape the characterisations employed by conscious capitalist brands in their depiction of the 'developing world' artisan producer. Table 2 notes the frequency of each theme's occurrence in the data set where  $n = 300$ . Each theme's frequency of occurrence was counted only one time per image.

### The happy producer

The characterisation of the 'happy producer' in conscious capitalist brands has been noted previously (Daily 2017, 2019). The 'happy producer' trope manifests in the frequent depictions of producers smiling (65%) while engaged in labour activities (36%). Daily (2017) highlights the frequency of smiling in conscious capitalist advertising. In Daily's analysis, the producer is often depicted gleefully smiling while engaged in labour. As Daily highlights, the image appears emancipatory, using language of empowerment to produce a hierarchical framework reminiscent of an imperialist gaze (Daily 2017). Although not focused specifically on women, Cole's analysis also highlights how Global South producers are framed in Fair Trade advertising as 'happy, healthy, and enjoy[ing] their lives at origin' (Cole 2011, 166). Along a similar line, Mürlebach (2016, 19) notes how the fair-trade producer is depicted as 'content with whatever nature provides her with'. Central to these analyses is the notion of the 'developing world' woman 'as a reliable, industrious entrepreneurial subject whose labor can and should be further extended and intensified' (Wilson 2012, 50). However, as noted by Wilson (2012) and Dogra (2011), this narrative does not dismantle the narrative of the suffering,

**Table 1.** Data selection.

Brand	Total number of Instagram posts	Number of images that met criteria	Number of images selected for analysis
Brand #1	2112	351	100
Brand #2	2822	270	100
Brand #3	974	118	100

**Table 2.** Results of content analysis.

Theme	Frequency (%)
Engaged in labour	59.3
Smiling	65
Smiling while engaged in labour	36
Depicted as a mother/child present	24.6
Rural setting	24.3
Traditional clothing	72.3
Hashtags: #empowered, #girlboss, etc.	16
Body fragmentation	15.6

victimised woman. Her gendered labour is deployed out of necessity and the advancement of neoliberal logics of empowerment only signal a reframing of the 'developing world' woman as a victim that can be saved through her engagement in the marketplace.

Although the 'developing world' woman as a mother is present, her empowerment via the market renders her domestic labour invisible. It is important to note how this framing perpetuates a Eurocentric notion of female empowerment, aiming to achieve a 'happy work–family balance' (Rottenberg 2019). The frequency of images depicting labour and, more specifically, happy labour, is important to note as it demonstrates a perpetuation of the 'smart economics' model of development discussed earlier. Indeed, it is through this construction of the industrious 'developing world' worker that the 'developing world' world woman is brought into the capitalist sphere. No longer in need of saving, she can 'save herself' through her work in the formal labour market – a notion that is supported insofar as both the Western company offering employment and the Western consumer purchasing the handicraft goods act as conduits to this capitalist exchange.

### *Artisans as mothers*

As highlighted above, the depiction of artisans as mothers occurred in 24.6% of the images examined. Mothers were identified through the use of a child present alongside the woman or women in the images, as well as where the artisan's role as a mother was articulated in the caption. The image of the mother has frequently appeared in framings of the 'developing world' woman. The colonised woman was marked by her sexual promiscuity and inability to utilise birth control methods (Kuumba 1993). Further, as noted previously, under the framework of the 'feminisation of poverty', the mother, dry breasted and unable to feed her child, shaped her framing as a 'passive victim'. With the shift to 'smart economics' the female figure has come to embody an 'investment', depicted as a self-sufficient, independent figure (Dogra 2011). Under the logic of the smart economics approach, women are viewed as more economically efficient than their male counterparts, assumed to have more responsible spending patterns on necessary goods like food and their children's clothing (Wilson 2012). For conscious capitalist brands that include this imagery in their marketing communications, the role of 'mother' is seen as an expression of universal experience and connection amongst both Global North and Global South women.

In almost all images depicting mothers with children, women and children are shown together without a father figure present. This visual conveys that the mother alone is responsible for the caretaking of her children. In one case, this message becomes particularly acute when a mother and her eight children are shown outside of a small hut – leaving the viewer to interpret this as their home. Many of the children are barefoot and holding up a cup of water, contextualising their poverty and limited access to basic necessities. They are pointing their cups of water towards the camera, smiling, as though they are pleased and gratified by this access to a commodity deemed essential. By pointing these cups towards the camera, they are communicating that this gratification is for the viewer whose purchases of the commodities for sale allow them this access. The notion of the 'absent father' is further contextualised in the copy accompanying this image in which the following is noted: 'In 2006, our founder ... discovered that by training and employing women deemed "unemployable" in their communities, and guaranteeing them a monthly income, Akola could

care for thousands of children' (Akola Jewelry Instagram 2022). In this case, the brand takes the place of the father, caring for the 'thousands' of vulnerable children whose mothers would not be able to work otherwise. It insinuates that without Akola, these children would not receive care, and therefore, an absence of the father figure.

Within the data set there was only one image depicting a mother and children that also included a male adult, presumed to be the husband and father. In this image, the father sits at the far right of the frame, separated by a large gap between himself and his family. His gaze is affixed elsewhere while his family smiles directly at the camera. While he sits physically separated from his family, his 10 children are huddled closely around their mother on the left side of the photo. The father feels out of place in this image, uncomfortable, and does not exude the same level of 'fatherly love' as the mother, with his children distancing themselves from him. Although the father isn't physically absent from this photo, he feels, in a sense, figuratively absent.

### **#Empowered**

In the examination of the captions that accompanied each of the images included in the data set, a trend among frequently used hashtags emerged. The use of the hash symbol signals the importance of a word and are typically short, memorable, and unambiguous in their description (Losh 2020). Within the data set, these hashtags included #empowerment, #empowered, #empoweringwomen, #girlboss, #bossladies, #girlpower or similar variations and were represented in 16% of images analysed. As noted by Austin (2021), girlboss feminism, typically stylised using the hashtags noted above, is a postfeminist discourse that marketises feminism in a way that is palatable and accessible for mass consumption. Girlboss feminism is typically characterised by its gendered terms, including 'girl boss', 'boss babe' and 'girl power', and emphasises the link between hard work, self-determination, and success for women (Austin 2021). In sum, girlboss feminism is a simplified version of neoliberal feminist discourse. The use of these hashtags exemplifies the key message that the brands intend for the viewer to take away – that each of these conscious capitalist brands aims to empower artisans by offering employment to them. In her chapter on slogan hashtags, Elizabeth Losh notes how hashtags can be used to suggest how users should feel, presenting definitions and theories about causality (Losh 2020, 62). By deploying a hashtag logic centred around neoliberal feminist buzzwords, NGOs effectively shape a message of causality that links the hard work of artisans with their empowerment while capitalising on trending and simplified Western feminist discourse.

The sentiment behind the hashtags explored in the data set is consistent with that of neoliberal feminism, emphasising women's agency to empower themselves through their labour without accounting for the nuanced and localised experiences of these women and how patriarchy may shape this experience. Indeed, as Ong (2007) notes, in emerging, non-Western contexts, a neoliberal strategy of self-governing cannot be uniformly applied. Instead, Ong proposes a reflexive neoliberal logic that acts as a 'migratory technology of governing' that can be contextualised against situated elements instead of standardising neoliberalism as a uniform process (Ong 2007). Neoliberal feminist concepts need to be considered within the same conception, rather than homogenising empowerment as a goal to be achieved through the market. The use of these hashtags, coupled with the depiction of women engaged in physical labour, projects the notion that women's value is somehow

enhanced through their bodily toil. As Daily (2017) highlights, the use of language of empowerment and emancipatory images of artisans produces a hierarchical framework reminiscent of an imperialist gaze.

### **The representational "Other"**

The themes explored thus far have noted how the representation of the artisans employed by conscious capitalist brands embody many of the characteristics advanced by neoliberal feminism and the 'smart economics' approach to development. This section will explore other thematic elements that emerged in the analysis, including the depiction of artisans in rural settings, which occurred in 24.3% of the images analysed, as well as the depiction of artisans wearing traditional clothing, represented in 72.3% of the images.

In the analysis, rural settings were characterised by backgrounds that exhibited forestry, greenery and vast landscapes with few or no buildings shown. As Cole (2011) highlights, the use of 'faraway lands' in her analysis of fair-trade coffee advertising exoticises the product, revealing that the 'narrative of ethical coffee is rooted in origin' (Cole 2011, 150). Indeed, the use of these settings in conscious capitalist brand advertising locates the artisan in a place that is deemed unfamiliar to the viewer, and in so doing, perpetuates colonialist tropes of Africa as a 'mysterious' landscape. The characterisation of 'developing world' women as 'natural' is also located in colonialist rhetoric that associates women with 'wildness' and 'primitiveness', demonstrating their 'place' within nature and their contentment with their 'lives at origin' (Cole 2011, 166).

Traditional dress, represented in 72.3% of the images, was characterised as clothing considered distinctly non-Western and usually typified by dresses with bright prints. It is important to note that because women from multiple African countries were included in the analysis, the type of dress considered 'traditional' in this analysis may not be consistent across all countries. In most cases, 'traditional style' dresses featured bright, patterned prints in repeated shapes and colours, pointed shoulders, and square or round necks that hit right along the clavicle or directly below. The dresses were often accompanied by a matching headscarf featuring the same print as the dress. When it comes to dress, Magee (2012) notes the tension between self-representation and mediated representation of Ndebele women depicted in *Sports Illustrated*. Magee notes how although self-representation of the Ndebele women may help to educate Western viewers and allow Ndebele women to construct their own visual identity, this visual identity, in the context of *Sports Illustrated*, is used instead to signal Africa, their Otherness and exoticism. In a similar fashion, the depiction of artisans in traditional dress in conscious capitalist advertising signals their difference instantaneously to the Western viewer and marks their Otherness. The use of traditional dress and rural settings for Western viewers act to racialise their subjectivity in these depictions, while the other three characterisations (as #empowered mothers engaged in labour) align with those characterisations associated with smart economics and neoliberal feminism.

### **What's really for sale? Commodification through body fragmentation**

The above sections have noted how conscious capitalist brands depict 'developing world' artisan producers in their advertising on Instagram. The analysis demonstrates that conscious capitalist brands reproduce racialised and gendered tropes of developing world women in

their advertising and perpetuate neoliberal feminist notions of empowerment through labour. This section will highlight how this depiction in conscious capitalist marketing effectively commodifies the producer's image.

As highlighted in Table 2, the use of body fragmentation or dismemberment was represented in 15.6% of the images included in the analysis. Body fragmentation was characterised by images that depicted artisans, often engaged in labour, with parts of their body cut off from the viewer. These images typically showed only the artisans' hands creating the hand-craft goods. Captions accompanying these images discuss the process of making the product, reducing the labourer to a type of mechanised machinery, her agency and humanness removed from the image. However, as noted by Chatterjee (2001), the use of dismemberment also invites a seduction of the viewer. In Chatterjee's analysis, through its feminisation, tea plucking is elevated to a craft, transforming the product (tea leaves) into a 'commodity of worth': 'the aura of the natural female hand's attention creates its values of seduction' (Chatterjee 2001, 214). Cole (2011) similarly emphasises how the meaning of dismemberment is translated in packaging and other marketing material deployed by Fair Trade coffee brands. As they note, those images that show the hands in isolation, offering the commodity to the viewer, 'imply a willingness to labor for the nourishment and pleasure of consumers' (Cole 2011, 158).

The literature reviewed previously discussed the notion of de-fetishising commodities through the exposure to the production process. For Varul (2008), this exemplifies the notion of *romantic commodification* in which the labour and goods themselves 'invite romantic daydreams' by 'acting at a distance' through the depiction of faraway lands (Varul 2008, 661), inviting the consumer to 'consume ... the very body of the ... producer' (Wilson 2012, 66). In this way, the bodily labour of the female producer becomes commoditised with the viewer's romanticised consumption of her labour, visually through Instagram but also through the purchase of the physical product, which represents the means to her economic advancement. This commodification of her bodily labour is exacerbated when the visual representation of her labour is manifested through dismembered treatment of her body. The body is deconstructed from the smiling woman, purely focused on the industriousness of her labouring hands. Indeed, Benwell and Stokoe (2013) note how bodies become commoditised through the use of fragmentation of the body in imagery, with the individual parts of the body presented in relation to the product being sold. To this effect, fragmentation is used as a method to articulate 'feminine individuality as a property of a body and its parts' (Rocha 2013, 9). Indeed, this notion of 'individuality' draws from the very neoliberal logics that associate bodily labour and economic efficiency with notions of individualised empowerment.

As a fragmented body part, the hands become a commodity fetish, transformed from a part of the body associated with utilitarian use, one of the most functional parts of the body associated with 'doing things', reconstructed into a fetishised, mystical character with 'embedded meaning, representation, and value' (Marx and Engels 1867, 47). Indeed, as Chatterjee highlights, 'dismemberment creates the fetish' (Chatterjee 2001, 168). The dismembered hand not only turns the hand itself into a commodity fetish, imbued with neoliberal meanings of empowerment, but also effectively imbues the commodity as a means to the producer's empowerment. Thus, although the commodity becomes 'de-fetishised' through the exposition of labour, the labour itself becomes romanticised through this exposition and the commodity re-fetishised through these romanticised acts of labour. Indeed, what the consumer is purchasing is the avenue by which the producer achieves her empowerment,

rather than merely the commodity itself. It is the functionality of her body and its use in acts of labour that designates the body of the 'developing world' woman as a site of development under the one-way gaze of the Western viewer.

## Conclusion

This paper has contributed to existing analyses on conscious capitalist and fair-trade advertising, filling a gap highlighted by Kim and Wilkins where development representations on the social media platform Instagram have been largely overlooked. Utilising a content analysis of 300 images and accompanying captions across three conscious capitalist brands, this paper has analysed how the use of producer artisan imagery in conscious capitalist brand marketing and communications on Instagram advanced neoliberal feminist sentiments of empowerment for artisan producers while perpetuating racialised and colonialist tropes surround 'developing world' women. The imagery explored in this analysis exemplified trends consistent with neoliberal logics of feminism including the depiction of artisans as 'happy producers'; the use of hashtags like #empowerment and #girlboss, and the characterisation of artisans as sole providers and mothers. Additionally, the use of body fragmentation in this imagery imbues the producer's body with new meaning as the source of their empowerment, effectively commoditising their labour, rendering 'developing world' women a site of neoliberal development, through its use in marketing communications on Instagram.

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## Notes on contributor

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## Notes

1. Terminology within the field of development studies has undergone numerous reworkings and continues to be challenged due to the unequal social, economic, political and power relations it seems to suggest (see Khan et al. 2022). Throughout this paper, I used the term 'developing world' to connote the characterisation of women featured in non-governmental organisation advertising as an extension of the 'Third World Woman' typification described by Mohanty:  
'The average third world woman leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and her being "third world" (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family oriented, victimised, etc.)' (Mohanty 1984, 337).

Because NGOs have largely moved away from the term 'Third World', I apply Mohanty's definition to the term 'developing world' in its application to the typification of women as this is a term that remains in use by NGOs as well as by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals which notes that the goals are 'an urgent call for action by all countries – developed and developing – in a global partnership' (United Nations 2022).

2. The random sampling strategy was conducted using a website called [random.org/sequences](http://random.org/sequences). The total number of Instagram images depicting producers from each brand was entered as an input and a range of randomised integers were returned as an output. This sequence of numbers was then used to select the images of the artisan producers based on how they were previously saved (by order of date posted) in the author's Instagram 'saved posts' folder. At the time of the analysis, Brand 1 had 2112 posts between April 2013 and October 2021; Brand 2 had 2822 posts between October 2012 and October 2021; and Brand 3 had 974 posts between April 2014 and October 2021.

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