

When Conscious Consumerism Backfires: A Critical Study on Social Exclusion, Partnerships, and White Saviorism

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Purpose: What factors influence conscious consumerism, especially related to race and gender identities? This scholarship explores three white women-led social responsibility organizations' (SROs) aspirations to encourage conscious consumerism as well as factors that influence conscious consumerism. **Design/methodology/approach:** Using the Black feminist thought and sustainability development theory, the data were analyzed using a thematic analysis to explore the activation of the white savior industrial complex (WSIC) in SROs. Interviews provided in-depth knowledge of the SRO culture including, but not limited to, insight on social exclusion and partnerships. **Findings:** Noonday Collection, Sseko Designs, and Trades of Hope, all SROs, aspire to be dedicated to people, planet, and profit and encourage conscious consumerism as a means for their customer base and sales consultants to "do their part", and yet, an unintended consequence of the SROs' work is social exclusion and white saviorism. **Originality:** This scholarship investigates what can be done to dismantle the overreliance of conscious consumerism in an effort to finally strip white saviorism, and its role in the white savior industrial complex (WSIC), of its power.

Keywords: the white savior industrial complex (WSIC), Black feminist thought, sustainability development theory, conscious consumerism, race, gender

Introduction

Conscious consumerism in the U.S. context is characterized as an opportunity for people to vote with their dollars, exercise their morality, seemingly creating a better world for themselves and others (Malin & Kallman, 2022, p. 79; Roff, 2007; Vishnubhatla & Agashe, 2022; Willis & Schor, 2012). It's a narrative that fuels individualism and at times collectivism. It's the idea that one person, doing one action, can make a difference, and even moreso, see greater global impact, together.

This research seeks to answer the question: What factors influence conscious consumerism, especially related to race and gender identities? This article does so by examining the white savior industrial complex (WSIC) in the context of social responsibility organizations (SROs) through the Black feminist thought brought forth by Patricia Hill Collins (Collins, 1990; 2009) and sustainability development theory (Dernbach & Cheever, 2015, p. 247; Shi, Han, Yang, & Gao, 2019). The white savior industrial complex (WSIC) includes white saviorism and is deeply connected to white supremacy/superiority (Okun & Jones, n.d.). The connection is that white saviorism and the mentality separating people into "the helpers" and "the helped" encourages the idea

that the “white savior” does not require any additional information such as the lived experiences or perspectives of those most closely affected by the problem, for example, extreme poverty or lack of dignified work.

This article explores conscious consumerism and the presence of white saviorism as manifested by the ways individuals choose to honor people, planet, and profit. This is important because examining conscious consumerism creates knowledge production on factors that influence who practices or engages in conscious consumerism and who does not. It also illuminates its relationship to social exclusion. Another reason this is a scholarly contribution is because it adds to sustainability theory (Dernbach & Cheever, 2015, p. 247; Shi et al., 2019) which intersects with white saviorism (Cole, 2012; Aronson, 2017).

Case Background: Conscious Consumerism Contextualization

Sseko Designs: “Buy Sandals, Send a Girl to College”

Sseko Designs was founded by a young, white¹, Christian, progressive couple with no ties or relationship to Uganda (Bohannon, 2019). Bohannon purchased a one-way ticket to Uganda armed with a travel bag, a notebook, and a lot of questions to combat extreme poverty (Bohannon, 2019). The founders’ whiteness unlocked a door and provided access to Ugandan spaces and communities that were not readily accessible to others, even in some cases, other Ugandans especially financially (Bohannon, 2019; Kallman, 2017; Sullivan, 2020). While many would view Bohannon’s humility and her work with local and indigenous voices and perspectives admirable, the fact remains that her interlocking and privileged social identities allowed her the opportunity to start a company in Uganda (Kallman, 2017). Bohannon and other white women SRO founders’ whiteness both allowed access to *them* to start companies/brands in the Global South while simultaneously preventing the same opportunities for global artisan partners *from* the Global South (Werner, 2015). Meanwhile, it’s highly probable that Ugandans would have wanted to, had the ability to start an SRO of their own especially because they are more connected to all issues pertaining to Uganda, the good and the challenging (Kalibo & Medley, 2007).

The tag line, “Buy sandals, send a girl to college” sounds like a wonderful way to do good for the young women in Uganda. Each purchase through a sales consultant, the company website, or the founder(s) contributed to the collective ambition of providing dignified work as well as educational scholarships. Sseko Designs’ customers have adopted a narrative whereby they not only feel good, they also believe they are “doing their part” by purchasing sandals or a handbag to send an academically gifted girl to university in either Uganda or Ethiopia. Each purchase combines with other purchases for collective ambition, a shared vision and mission, resulting in significant impact including working towards ending extreme poverty. In Bohannon’s search to “end extreme poverty”, she learned that there was a disparity in university attendance amongst men and women (Bohannon, 2019). It is for this reason, she was compelled to ensure that money was not a barrier for academically gifted girls and young women to attend university. According to the Sseko Designs website, prior to their August 2022 merger with Noonday Collection, for every \$100,000 of sales, the SRO was able to provide two university scholarships as well as one full-time job, or dignified work experience for a non-university attending woman (Sseko Designs Impact website, n.d.).

¹ Note on capitalization, I capitalize “Black” and lowercase “white” when referring to these two identity groups to follow the recent Brookings’ decision to update their style guide as a result of months of research. Their rationale is in alignment with my desire to practice equity, “It is an act in recognition of racial respect for those who have been generations in the ‘lower case’” (Lanham & Liu, 2019).

While it is a positive impact for the university-bound women, those who worked for Sseko Designs year-round, as well as Uganda, Ethiopia, and other countries that were partnered with Sseko Designs, this narrative is shortsighted at best, and causes unintended consequences at worst (Stroh, 2015). Ending extreme poverty and creating dignified work environments are noble aspirations, and yet, these endeavors can lead to reducing the problem in the short term while exacerbating it in the long term, an example of “backfire”, which is *often both unintentional and harmful* (Bacon, 2013; Bravely, 2021; Mella, 2012, p. 206; Shabazz, 2018; Stroh, 2015, p. 52; Perry, 2021). Some examples of long-term backfire are social exclusion, the prioritization of people who are not of the Global Majority, and disempowerment. In addition, when this happens many SROs fail to disclose the consequences of that backfire, creating a false understanding of true impact (Stroh, 2015, p. 55).

For stakeholders in the Global South and Global North alike, buying a pair of sandals or a handbag has a positive impact in the short term. However, when considering the long-term impact on the gender disparities of who goes to university in Uganda or Ethiopia or the structural and systemic issues that have caused these disparities in the first place, conscious consumerism not only does not consider these issues holistically, conscious consumerism also does not require much from stakeholders in the Global North (Collins, 2023).

Trades of Hope: “You Are the Link in This Story that Can Give Purpose to a Bracelet, Opportunity to a Mother, and Hope to the World.”

Trades of Hope, founded in 2010 by two white mother-daughter duos, began after a self-admitted misguided quest to start an orphanage. What Gretchen Huijskens realized in Haiti was that several mothers were relinquishing their children to orphanages due to *poverty* rather than a lack of desire to care for their own children or because the children had no other family. What this means is that the children had loving and caring parents and family, and yet, family separation was still occurring because of lack of means. Huijskens also realized, in talking to Haitian women, that they did not want pity, instead, they coveted opportunities to work and contribute to their own families (Huijskens, 2023; Trades of Hope Our Story website, n.d.).

Trades of Hope encourages “purchases for a purpose” as well as storytelling because their sales consultants are able to convey meaning to customers and people who want to host Trades of Hope virtual or in-person events (Trades of Hope Our Story website, n.d.). Many of those who support Trades of Hope value a cause that keeps mothers with their children, ends human trafficking, hires disabled global artisan partners, sends girls to school, and fights against child marriage. As such, stakeholders purchase an item or items in alignment with one or more of these noble causes.

Here, purchasing a bracelet contributes to the grander purposes listed above in the short term. However, it does not address the long-term impacts of poverty and how it can cause family separation. Nor does it address the structural and systemic issues that plague Black mothers who are part of the Global Majority. Again, conscious consumerism not only does not consider these issues holistically, conscious consumerism also does not require much from stakeholders in the Global North (Collins, 2023).

Noonday Collection: “If You Spend Yourselves in Behalf of the Hungry and Satisfy the Needs of the Oppressed, then Your Light Will Rise in the Darkness, and Your Night Will Become Like the Noonday.”

Noonday Collection was founded in 2010 by Jessica Honegger and Travis Wilson, white friends who “dreamed of starting a business that would alleviate poverty through entrepreneurship” and also felt connected to Africa (Noonday Collection Our Story website, n.d.).

When examining Noonday Collection’s epicenter, at least four stakeholders are inspired by conscious consumerism:

1. **Financial partners** who provide working capital, using their resources to impact the world.
2. **Ambassadors**, Noonday Collection’s sales consultants, who earn an income while making an impact by selling jewelry and accessories made by global artisan partners.
3. **Hostesses** open their homes to create a marketplace and have meaningful opportunity to influence their communities.
4. **Customers** shop for jewelry and accessories made by global artisan partners and feel beautiful “*knowing their purchase makes a difference*” (Noonday Collection Our Stakeholders website, n.d.).

These four roles are connected to one another and are in alignment with conscious consumerism and they are also connected to one other stakeholder—global artisan partners² (Honegger, 2018). Moreover, financial partners “impact the world” in ways that are not always possible for those in the Global South, and those who are Black and Brown (Kallman, 2017; Sullivan, 2020). Honegger speaks fondly about the time she and Wilson founded Noonday Collection, especially during the ongoing incentive trips that she leads where sales consultants and global artisan partners have an opportunity to meet one another, share stories, learn more about the products that conscious consumers back in the U.S. will purchase to “do their part” (Honegger, 2018).

Ambassadors and financial partners “do their part” and make an impact on those around them in the short term. And yet, there is more to the story, especially with respect to structural and systemic issues. It’s imperative to understand how white sales consultants reconcile perceived or actual white saviorism when all the global artisan partners are Black and Brown people. Again, conscious consumerism not only does not consider these issues holistically, conscious consumerism also does not require much from stakeholders in the Global North (Collins, 2023).

This article argues that while the intent of most involved in these SROs is positive, the impact, especially long-term may backfire (Bacon, 2013; Bravely, 2021; Shabazz, 2018; Stroh, 2015; Perry, 2021). Another underlying argument is that white saviorism is embedded within these organizations and its adherents desire to “vote with their dollars” through the practice of conscious consumerism. While this article provides constructive criticism of the SROs, it also acknowledges the positive short-term impact that all three of these SROs have had on stakeholders.

Conceptual Background

The White Savior Industrial Complex (WSIC)

Informed by Cole (2012) and Aronson (2017), I define the white savior industrial complex (WSIC) as a system that develops when well-meaning white people go to places outside of their comfort zones and realities or to countries in the Global Majority to “help” the people in those places. They have an overconfidence present that leads them to believe that *they* are the solution, or that they have primary access to it (Anderson, Knee, & Mowatt, 2021; Cole, 2012; Flaherty, 2016).

² Author’s note: Most often, global artisan partners do not have an opportunity for their voices to be heard or their perspectives considered with respect to how their stories are shared and the *actual impact* Noonday Collection, as well as Sseko Designs and Trades of Hope, have on their lives, their communities, and their countries. Any messaging from global artisan partners to U.S. stakeholders (sales consultants, customers, contracted consultants, HQ or home office team members, etc.) is heavily monitored and is often one-sided.

Many founders of social responsibility organizations (SROs) believe they were “called to” or are “charged with” “saving” countries in which they partner, a dynamic that aids the emergence of “the helpers” and “the helped” identities. In doing so they activate the white savior industrial complex (WSIC) and white supremacy/superiority culture (Flaherty, 2016; Hughey, 2014; Schnable, 2021; Okun & Jones, n.d.). The idea of being “called to” or “charged with” is deeply connected to religion, specifically the Christian faith tradition. Many who have these overwhelming thoughts consider their involvement with SROs as part of their “mission” (Flaherty, 2016; Forbes Councils, 2017; Schnable, 2021). As such, it’s challenging for these people to think that anything that they are doing to “help” others is wrong as they are participating in purposeful action (Hughey, 2014). And because their commitment has good intentions, they are unable to see that they have galvanized the white savior industrial complex (WSIC) (Cole, 2012; Forbes Councils, 2017).

Delving into the organizational ecology of aid, both financial and emotional, I have found that there are many other tools that are contributors to the WSIC: adoption (Joyce, 2013a; 2013b; 2016), the Peace Corps (Kallman, 2019; 2020; Schechter, 2011), and movies (Hughey, 2014). In each of these examples, the “white savior” has and often takes the opportunity to demonstrate what they have done often positioned as a great sacrifice—adopting transracially, becoming a Peace Corps volunteer, helping a “less privileged” Black or Brown child—that they’re able to (1) feel better about themselves and (2) humblebrag professionally and personally, on their CV or their social media feed, respectively (Cole, 2012).

To say that these “white saviors” are ill-equipped to “fix” problems is an understatement. These examples are demonstrative of the multitude of ways that white people have been (and at times continue to be) misinformed and lack the ability to come alongside those they feel “called to help” because they lack contextual knowledge of the myriad of issues at play. They still “help” despite having a lack of understanding and awareness of the cultural implications of these issues. “The helpers” are often advantaged or privileged because they are not only perceived as outsiders and granted access³ as well as they are given the benefit of the doubt from the community regarding the issue(s) for which they are working on, and more (McCool, 2021; Wong, 2008). Meanwhile as they are centered, their viewpoints and considerations are privileged and prioritized, they are often simultaneously causing harm to the communities in which they are present or situated and are often able to leave without facing any consequences for their actions (Aizenman & Gharib, 2019; Aizenman, 2020).

Aronson (2017) states,

...WSIC involves a “big emotional experience that validates privilege.” Ultimately, people are rewarded from “saving” those less fortunate and are able to completely disregard the policies they have supported that have created/maintained systems of oppression (i.e., the US’s exploitation in Haiti has contributed to poverty and corruption, yet people in the US can feel good about their charity after the Earthquake). The rhetoric around how people in the US often talk about Africa—as a continent of chaos, war-thirsty people, and impoverished HIV-infected communities, situates these countries as places in need of heroism. (Aronson, 2017, p. 36)

As Aronson aptly states, the WSIC sets the stage for two camps: “the helpers” and “the helped” which tips

³ An example of this occurs with adoption, especially transracial adoption which is a significant contributor to the WSIC, historically and even contemporaneously, white people in the U.S. have been able to adopt internationally without proving that they are *fit, let alone, more fit* to care for a child with a different culture, possibly a different language, and often a different race/ethnicity. Often adopting children from South Korea, Ethiopia, Colombia, Romania, and other countries over four decades from 1953 to 1991 (Khazan, 2021), many adopters were and continue to be white Christians who have experienced infertility or have felt “called” to expand their families through adoption.

the scales so that there is greater imbalance, less autonomy, and no solution that is sustainable let alone one that dismantles the WSIC. In the case of SROs, for example, sales consultants from the U.S., often white, go somewhere in the Global Majority, such as Uganda or Guatemala, to meet global artisan partners. The ones who have left the U.S. are “the helpers” and the Ugandans or Guatemalans are “the helped”, even if “the helpers”, when at home, need help themselves. This is reminiscent of Cole’s thoughts: “A nobody from America or Europe can go to Africa and become a godlike savior or, at the very least, have his or her emotional needs satisfied” (Cole, 2012, para. 13). Going “over there” can help “the helpers” feel like they are necessary and that they do not need help themselves, which in an often unhealthy way, allows their emotional needs to be satisfied.

Literature Review

Sustainability Development Theory

Dernbach and Cheever (2015) defined sustainability development theory (or sustainability) as “a decision-making framework for maintaining and achieving human well-being, both in the present and into the future” (Dernbach & Cheever, 2015, p. 247). The framework requires both consideration and achievement of environmental protection, social justice, and economic development in decision-making. An intention of this framework is harmonious living between members of humanity and nature thus addressing the global challenges of increasing environmental degradation and widespread extreme poverty (Agola & Hunter, 2016).

Shi et al. (2019) bolstered sustainability development theory by adding the idea of *equity* as a policy consideration. I define equity as the process of providing accessible, tailored, specific, and necessary distribution of resources and support based on the *need* of the individual, group, or institution. Equity can then put socially excluded people in a position to take space and be on equal footing as the individuals, groups, or institutions who have enjoyed privilege, resources, and support all along. Equity is not the same as equality which would be providing the *same* resources and support to an individual, group, or institution (Minow, 2021). Shi et al. (2019) argued that policy must consider four dimensions of equity to be valid: (1) intra-generational equity, (2) inter-generational equity, (3) procedural fairness, and (4) species equity (p. 11). When considering intra-generational equity, many Black women are not included in discussions about sustainability development theory. Shi et al. (2019) defined this aspect as, “...equity among different social groups in the use of resources and the distribution of products” (p. 11). These authors have also brought forth 11 principles of governance through pillars that can illuminate some of the policy considerations when dealing with social impact and social enterprise organizations. They are “effectiveness (ability, good decision-making, and cooperation), accountability (integrity, transparency, and independent oversight), and inclusiveness (no one left behind, no discrimination, participatory, supportive, and intergenerational equity)” (Shi et al., 2019, p. 12). As noted, many social responsibility organizations (SROs) have failed to include local and indigenous knowledge and wisdom, which often leads to unintended consequences such as resources not being used or accessed equitably, and further marginalization (i.e., social exclusion) for diverse and marginalized voices and perspectives.

Sustainability development theory indicates that conscious consumerism is a way for humans to contribute to sustainable living and that it is a way for SROs to reach their stated aims. However, sustainability development theory alone does not address the layering of social identities like race and gender.

Conscious Consumerism

Conscious consumerism puts consumers in a position where they have an opportunity to prioritize and shop with more aligned brands; brands that are committed to the environment as well as to people and/or to shop specifically for a cause (Malin & Kallman, 2022; Perrotta, 2021; Roff, 2007; Stewart, 2012; Vishnubhatla & Agashe, 2022; Willis & Schor, 2012). While many organizations have built a brand around social innovation and conscious consumerism, some have also run into issues of unintended consequences like TOMS (Lindström, 2018, p. 38; Small & Klein, 2015) while others have expanded on the “buy one, give one” model like Warby Parker (Small & Klein, 2015). These brands and other social responsibility organizations (SROs) like them bet on consumers’ desire to be perceived as “do-gooders” and that they are in the financial position to purchase the high-end product whether it is TOMS shoes, Warby Parker glasses, or a Shinola watch (Cole, 2012; Collins, 2023; Small & Klein, 2015).

This illuminates that conscious consumerism is a phenomenon that can be perceived as synonymous with white consumers broadly, and often white women consumers specifically, which does not take into account shifting demographics (Baldwin, 2004) and bargaining power that impacts Black communities, especially Black women (Rio, 2011). Conscious consumerism, as a social problem, also takes an existing capitalistic framework for granted, so that purchasing the product as a conscious consumer is enough, thus there is no perceived need for institutional change or a deeper look at the impact of race (Collins, 2023; Norris, 2023; Robinson, 1983; Small & Klein, 2015). One more important note about this phenomenon is that a few large companies have sought to “do their part” (i.e., Etsy) while others have been slower to institute organizational change (i.e., Amazon) (Dreyfuss, 2019; Gibson, 2019). Conscious consumerism is racialized and gendered especially if brands cater to white women, while excluding Black and Brown women, as many SROs do (Hairston, 2020; Murray, 2020).

Black Feminist Thought

Black feminist thought, written about extensively by Black intellectual, professor, and scholar Patricia Hill Collins beginning in 1990, was and continues to serve as a mirror, a point of reflection, or a different narrative that challenges the prevailing thought and false narrative that the U.S. is a colorblind nation in which race, gender, or class has no further impact on a person’s life or social or economic standing (Collins, 1990; 2009; 2021).

Black feminist thought also allows a critical look at how women of color, especially Black women, are socially excluded from spaces from intellectual activism to conscious consumerism (Collins, 2009; 2021). In bell hooks’ (2018) book, *Ain’t I a Woman* she says,

Unlike us, Black women in the 19th century America were conscious of the fact that true freedom entailed not just liberation from a sexist social order that systematically denied all women full human rights. These Black women participated in both the struggle for racial equality and the women’s rights movement. When the question was raised as to whether or not Black female participation in the women’s rights movement was a detriment to the struggle for racial equality, they argued that any improvement in the social status of Black women would benefit all Black people. (hooks, 2018, p. 2)

hooks aptly addresses how Black feminist thought not only considers, the theory prompts others to also consider, both race and gender and their impacts on Black women in particular. This is another gap in sustainability development theory scholarship.

Gaps in Existing Knowledge

Reading about conscious consumerism through the lenses of just sustainability development theory leaves out insights on race and gender despite including important aspects of theory such as social justice, dedication to the environment, and various facets of equity (Dernbach & Cheever, 2015; Shi et al., 2019). Applying Black feminist theory to conscious consumerism allows a critical look at both race and gender in ways that sustainability development theory does not meaningfully engage in race and gender (Collins, 1990; 2009; 2021).

Methods

To explore the impacts of race and gender on conscious consumerism, I interviewed women in three social responsibility organizations (SROs). This method allowed me to gather information about the SROs and their stakeholders, the inner workings of the SROs, and the experiences of the Black and Brown women that worked at these organizations.

Social Responsibility Organization (SRO) Selection

I selected three SROs for this study: Sseko Designs, Noonday Collection, and Trades of Hope. I selected them for three reasons. First, they were all founded by white women, in two cases—Sseko Designs and Noonday Collection—two white men co-founded the SROs despite the white women co-founders being the face of the organizations, respectively. Second, the SROs sell fair trade products made in the Global South ranging from jewelry and accessories, apparel, shoes, and sandals, to household items to customers in the U.S. through sales consultants. Third, all three white women founders encourage conscious consumerism as a means for U.S.-based stakeholders (sales consultants and customers) to “do their part”.

The three SROs were founded from 2009 to 2010, in the U.S. with global artisan partners located across the Global South primarily in Uganda, India, China, Ethiopia, Vietnam, Guatemala, Kenya, Haiti, Peru, and countless other countries inhabited by People of the Global Majority (PGM). All are structured as direct sales companies or multilevel marketing (MLM)⁴ companies (Huybrechts, 2012; Lilyquist, 2020). See Table 1 for SRO organization profiles.

There are two distinctions when it comes to SROs such as the ones studied for this project. First, the Fair Trade Federation (FTF), a trade association of fair trade enterprises, seeks to support their members to continue to align with values of “health for the planet, and the labor, dignity, and equality of all people” (*Fair Trade Federation* website, retrieved on 11/29/23). Noonday Collection, Threads Worldwide, and Trades of Hope are members of the Fair Trade Federation. Sseko Designs was previously a member of the FTF prior to their August 2022 merger with Noonday Collection.

The second distinction for SROs is B Corp certification. According to their website, “B Corps are mission-driven companies that balance purpose and profit” (*B Corporation* website, retrieved on 11/29/23). B Corps seek to shrink the gap between the highest paid team member and the lowest paid one; they seek to experience competitive growth, and have a desire to be stewards of the planet from idea generation to the time a customer opens a box pulling out a beautiful, fair trade product (*B Corporation* website, retrieved on 11/29/23).

⁴ MLMs are also known as networking marketing, or social selling. These legitimate, while controversial, business structures should not be confused with pyramid schemes which are illegal. Some well-known direct sales companies are Mary Kay, Avon, and Amway.

Of the three SROs explored in this article, only Noonday Collection carries the B Corp designation. Members of both the FTF and B Corp can be found on their respective websites through the ‘find a member’ search function.

I selected these organizations because of my positionality, privilege, and relationship with these smaller organizations. I was granted access to these SROs because I know sales consultants from all the organizations, some founders, as well as contracted consultants that worked with many of these SROs. I also believe it is one of the reasons some, if not most, sales consultants and contracted consultants felt comfortable speaking with me. It is also important to note that my relationship with interview study participants has an impact and does shape the interaction I have with the data insofar as I have increased empathy, compassion, and understanding for the Black and Brown sales consultants.

Table 1

Social Responsibility Organizations (SROs) Profiles

Characteristics	Noonday Collection	Sseko Designs	Trades of Hope
Founder(s) race/ethnicity	White	White	White
Founder(s) gender	Woman and man ⁵ (friends)	Woman and man ⁶ (married)	Four women (two sets of mother/daughter duos)
Year founded	2010	2009	2010
US HQ location	Austin, TX	Portland, OR ⁷	Palm Coast, FL
Global artisan partner locations	Uganda, Ethiopia, Kenya, Peru, India, Vietnam, Haiti, Rwanda, Guatemala, and more ⁸	Uganda, Ethiopia, Kenya, Peru, India, and China	Haiti, Uganda, Cambodia, Guatemala, India, Jordan, Peru, Nepal, and more ⁹
SRO's business structure	Direct sales (MLM)	Direct sales (MLM)	Direct sales (MLM)

Sampling and Interviews

I conducted interviews with 40 U.S.-based SRO stakeholders (i.e., sales consultants, founders, and contracted consultants) in English for two months from June 20, 2022 to August 19, 2022. See Table 2 and Table 3 for sample size of respondents by race/ethnicity and by stakeholder role. Participants were eligible to participate in the study if they (a) self-identified as a stakeholder in Sseko Designs, Noonday Collection, or Trades of Hope, (b) self-reported availability for an interview, and (c) self-reported living in the U.S. Participants were recruited via various methods: (a) direct requests of SRO stakeholders, (b) social media outlets (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter), and (c) word of mouth. In this interview study, two types of non-random sampling were used: convenience sampling and quota sampling. Quota sampling was used to select the participants from different demographics, with a focus on stakeholders from marginalized and/or disenfranchised populations. I realize that this is a non-representative sample and my findings cannot be generalized. Nevertheless, the insights gained from this sample are relevant for understanding the impact of race and gender on conscious consumerism.

⁵ The white women founders are more physically present and forward facing with consultants and customers.

⁶ The white women founders are more physically present and forward facing with consultants and customers.

⁷ This was prior to their August 2022 merger with Noonday Collections.

⁸ Global partner locations also include: Afghanistan, China, Ecuador, Mexico, Nepal, and Thailand.

⁹ Trades of Hope have multiple global partner locations. Check their website for additional information.

Table 2

Sample Size of Respondents by Race/Ethnicity

Asian / APIDA ¹⁰ / AAPI ¹¹	Black	Latina	Mixed race	White	Total
2	9	1	2	26	40

Table 3

Sample Size of Respondents by Stakeholder Role

Sales consultants	Former sales consultants	Contracted consultants	Founders/co-founders	Total
32	3	3	2	40

I asked respondents about the benefits of being part of an SRO, what drew them to their SRO or why they founded it, and what they believed were problems or issues within their SRO. These questions allowed me to explore the interplay of race and gender in the SROs as well as how those social identities manifest in conscious consumerism. Interviews ranged from 20 minutes to 60 minutes, but on average lasted 30 minutes. Interviews were completed via Zoom, audio recorded, and transcribed verbatim using Otter.ai, a transcription service which uses artificial intelligence (AI) technology. I listened to the audio recordings to ensure Otter.ai, transcribed with precision. The transcriptions were imported into Dedoose version 9.0.107 (2022) for data management and analysis. After participants' interviews were done, they were asked to select a pseudonym, which was used during the data collection and analysis processes.

Data Analysis Using Thematic Analysis

Transcriptions were coded after the interviews using a grounded coding scheme. That is, codes were born from patterns found in the data as seen in the literature. Initial codes were created and adjusted to add more codes. Multiple rounds of coding were done to refine the data through this process. Differences between responses were noted and closely examined (Belotto, 2018; Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017).

Findings

What factors influence conscious consumerism, especially related to race and gender identities? Overall, I found that the factors that influenced conscious consumerism and its impact on race and gender were threefold: (1) the presence of white saviorism and white fragility in the social responsibility organizations (SROs) explored as part of the white savior industrial complex (WSIC) which did not strip WSIC of its power; (2) most SRO stakeholders, all proponents of conscious consumerism, believed that "doing their part" and performing activism *through conscious consumerism* is enough to claim positive impact; and (3) that Black women, a confluence of racialized and gendered social exclusion, should have their voices heard and perspectives considered. One key finding, tapping into the explicit and implicit knowledge that Black sales consultants bring to SROs, when they are respected and listened to, is in alignment with Black feminist thought. To connect the dots, the presence of white saviorism coupled with silencing of Black sales consultants in the three SROs did explicitly show how conscious consumerism has room for growth in respecting and fully integrating Black women and their purchasing power and social impact.

¹⁰ Asian Pacific Island Desi American (APIDA).

¹¹ Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI).

The Presence of White Saviorism and White Fragility

A key finding in this research is that many social responsibility organizations (SROs) are synonymous with white saviorism despite social responsibility and positive impact they may also demonstrate. Donelle, a Black woman former sales consultant had this to say about helping and white saviorism.

If the people you're helping, don't see the same kind of profitability, that you yourself are seeing that one of you is doing something wrong. And chances are, it's not the place that you went as the (white) savior. Everybody doesn't need a (white) savior. So do a temperature check and figure out what brought you there in the first place. And then start a conversation and listen, because you might actually learn something. (Donelle, a Black woman, key informant interview, conducted on August 1, 2022)

Donelle soundly advises readers, especially white readers, to listen to Black women and move away from white saviorism. Said a different way, it is imperative for white women in SROs to not only listen to Black women, they need to shed their desire to "help" that is part of white saviorism. They can be successful in this aim by doing their own learning and unlearning as Ellen later suggests. Olivia, a white woman sales consultant offers, "There is a power imbalance because the production team (global artisan partners in the Global South) feels that they wouldn't succeed without their role in the organization". Olivia speaks to the power imbalance between those in the Global South and those in the Global North, implicitly illustrating and challenging whiteness and the differences that exist between SRO stakeholders, including who wields power and who does not in the same way.

Another benefit of whiteness that was noted by Marisela Kate, a mixed race former sales consultant is that white women at the top of the organization (both founders and sales consultants) held the most power because the SROs "always consider their feelings and their opinions". Marisela Kate's assessment speaks to something that respondents brought up often in the interviews, that not only is white saviorism present in SROs, so is white fragility. White fragility is the idea that catering to whiteness, white feelings, and white tears is the most important thing to do, even when that very whiteness has done real harm to Black and Brown SRO stakeholders.

Related, Donelle makes a connection between white saviorism and how white women sales consultants perform activism in their professed desire to support Black women in Uganda to pursue higher education, while espousing white savior values and behaving in ways that support the WSIC.

I thought that it was less about supporting Black women in Uganda for education purposes and more about patting themselves on the back but look at what we can do for you as non People of Color for People of Color. (Donelle, a Black woman, key informant interview, conducted on August 1, 2022)

Donelle does acknowledge the positives of the SRO in which she was a part, they supported Ugandan women's pursuits for economic freedom and higher education, while also, patting themselves on the back which supports their white saviorism (Cole, 2012).

When asked about issues or critiques about her SRO, Joliette, a Black sales consultant, offered the following,

I wish my organization could improve is the education and awareness and instruction of the non-Black and Brown women who thrive in this arena (meaning they have high sales volume) and are making money, generating income off Black and Brown women and don't understand their part (whiteness and white saviorism). For an organization, that built their success off Black and Brown women, I wish they poured into the Black and Brown women in the U.S. and globally. (Joliette, a Black woman, key informant interview, conducted on June 20, 2022)

Joliette's honest assessment of how whiteness shows itself through white saviorism, another building block in the WSIC, is an important, albeit, difficult assessment to read or hear.

Despite the presence of white saviorism within the SROs, not all white SRO stakeholders wanted to remain complicit. Ellen, a white woman sales consultant, shared this,

I want to as much as I can continue to influence this organization, this particular organization in this particular company, to really help other white people look inside themselves. And realize that because we work with a global community, we absolutely have an even bigger responsibility to understand ourselves, understand our whiteness, understand how we contribute to cultural whiteness, and the way our country (the U.S.) is run and really the world is run. We have that obligation, no matter what. (Ellen, a white woman, key informant interview, conducted on August 1, 2022)

Ellen believes, correctly, that the onus falls squarely on white people and the SROs themselves for educating white people, that it cannot be on the Black and Brown SRO stakeholders. She also shares that despite the impact of working with a global community, “doing their part” as white women through conscious consumerism is not enough, in that they need to go further in their work and fully interrogate their own whiteness, complicity with white saviorism and the WSIC.

“Doing Their Part” and Performing Activism Through Conscious Consumerism Is Enough

Many of the sales consultants, founders, and contracted consultants were proud of the vision and the mission of the company. They felt grateful to be part of the SRO and really felt drawn to the work of selling, promoting, and marketing, so that their SRO is successful for both the people in various countries that are home to People of the Global Majority (PGM) and to those who are in the U.S. Like many, Liv, a white woman contracted consultant felt that the SRO in which she worked was in alignment with her values, “The more I researched the brand and looked into their mission and their community and their culture, I was really intrigued and excited to work with them”. The majority of participants felt very similar to Liv. Moreover, coupled with the mission and vision of the SROs, participants also connected with the stories of the global artisan partners, Black and Brown people in the Global South who make the fair trade products, were proud to know who made the fair trade products, and felt empowered to “vote with their dollars”.

Emily, one of the SRO founders, a white woman had this to say in realizing the impact of consumer culture, including spending habits/behaviors, “I began to understand why we as consumers, how our purchasing habits actually do have an impact on people and the planet”. Sophina, a Black woman sales consultant, had a powerful critique of white SRO stakeholders “doing their part” in service of white saviorism embedded in conscious consumerism,

And I think that that power dynamic is not being shared, the power dynamic that's being shared is these African, and these Indian people are so poor. So let me purchase this bag. So, I can feel better about myself. And I helped, versus I like this bag, because it's stylish, and it goes with my outfit. And it's doing good. And I'm participating in conscious consumerism and making the world a better place. (Sophina, a Black woman, key informant interview, conducted on June 24, 2022)

Sophina's critique is important for two reasons. First, it interrogates the purchasing power of white consumers and it pushes back on the idea that purchasing a bag, for example, is enough especially when many would purchase a bag to simply feel better about themselves. Second, it bolsters the third key finding in this article, we—as in all of us—need to listen to Black women.

We Need to Listen to Black Women and Pay Them

It was encouraging to learn that some interviewees had been thinking about and had important insights on Black women in their respective SROs. Some suggestions on recruitment and increasing diversity and inclusion in SROs—all three are 92-96% white—include but are not limited to, intentional recruitment of Black women to become sales consultants or work at SRO headquarters, prioritizing hearing from Black women on all SRO decisions, and ensuring that white women and other women of color are doing their own growth work to learn to be co-conspirators to amplify the voices of Black women. Violeta, a Black woman sales consultant shared,

On the sales side, there is cultural insensitivity and just gaps in knowledge. However, it is difficult to improve this because this organization is so white and homogenous. When people are presented with the opportunity (to join as a sales consultant), they don't want to join because it's just so white. Even if you do join, after a while it is tiresome. I cannot speak for everyone, it's certainly tiresome for me. (Violeta, a Black woman, key informant interview, conducted on June 20, 2022)

Mae, a white woman sales consultant stated,

Because I think what ends up happening is that the Black (humans) women that are involved in the company ended up being mouthpieces. And I think it's I think it comes down to laziness, and lack of very firm intention. (Mae, a white woman, key informant interview, conducted on June 23, 2022)

Black women in SROs agreed with Mae's assessment "to listen to Black women" and often felt tokenized and that they were still being required to be perceived as calm so as not to wake up the pejorative boogeyman, a racist trope about Black women overwhelmingly being perceived as angry, despite having good reason to actually *be* angry. Rene, a Black woman, adds,

It makes it hard wanting to stay active in a company where you know that they're just utilizing your experiences and your knowledge as a Black woman to teach white women how to become allies versus them (the SRO) teaching white women how to become allies doing their (white women) own research. (Rene, a Black woman, key informant interview, conducted on June 23, 2022)

Rene's honest firsthand account is valid and may be hard to read for white SRO stakeholders, and yet, Black feminist thought urges the centering of Rene and other Black women's lived experiences as SRO stakeholders. Here we have Rene, a Black woman sales consultant, willing to speak and share her lived experience, which should be listened to and considered, Mae would agree.

In a similar vein to listening to Black women, the data also suggest that SROs should not cater to white stakeholders. Sophina, whom we heard from before, was at an annual gathering for her SRO and shared about a keynote delivered by a white woman to a mostly all-white audience of the SRO founder and sales consultants and how the message delivered was problematic insofar as it catered to white women with no regard to the Black women attendees,

Because the last thing I wanted to hear was for a white woman to tell a Black person on her team, to, you know, pull up by her bootstraps, and just do the work and change your mindset, when ultimately there's nothing that she can do. She can do everything that the white person is doing, but she would still get a different result based on her socioeconomic status or community. (Sophina, a Black woman, key informant interview, conducted on June 24, 2022)

Sophina rightly calls into question the "bootstrap" narrative and illuminates where SROs can do better. Perhaps, it would have been more appropriate to have a Black or Brown woman deliver the keynote as she would have

diverse lived experiences that would enrich the audience, thus providing new ways to think about persistent problems or issues facing the SROs. With respect to catering to white women SRO stakeholders, Sophina, and others, also elucidates that catering to white fragility or how white women feel is part of the SROs' complicity with white saviorism. A way to mitigate whiteness and performing activism is to listen to Black women and pay them their worth, whether they are delivering a keynote or simply speaking up in a sales call meeting or at an SROs' annual gathering.

Discussion

SROs express white saviorism, performative activism through conscious consumerism, and often do not value the experiences of Black sales consultants. The findings reflect on the gaps identified in the literature review because they speak to the racialized and gendered nature of conscious consumerism that exists in SROs.

Despite intent, the impact is that many white SRO stakeholders are performing activism. In the case of white saviorism, the "white savior" may believe that their "good intentions" are enough and they often prioritize their intent over the impact of their actions. And although this article may seem critical of the SROs included, they have each had positive impact on countless lives including the lives of some of their critics. However, this is not meant to assuage productive discomfort¹² that may occur when reading this article.

Through many of the interviews conducted, it was found that individual actors *performed activism at face value that did not take nuance or historical contextualization (such as the global and geopolitical relationships between stakeholders in the SROs) into account*. To be inspired by a company or brand's mission and vision, prompting one to act, is often a wonderful thing, and yet, when there is not consultation and further exploration of the consequences of said action, problems can arise.

Finally, all the SROs investigated here are led by white people *determined to "help" in a manner that suited them—specifically through conscious consumerism—rather than in a manner that was suitable for the collective* and without exploring the impacts of race and gender on conscious consumerism. This aligns with Cole's critique of white saviorism, "those who are being helped ought to be consulted over the matters that concern them" (Cole, 2012). This is why at a minimum, Black SRO stakeholders need to be consulted, paid for their time and emotional labor, and their suggestions and advice needs to be implemented.

Implications

Black sales consultants have shared honestly and transparently about the manifestation of white saviorism within conscious consumerism, its impact, and ways to resolve this issue. SROs need to decouple themselves from white saviorism and the WSIC. Moreover, when white founders take into account race and gender within their SROs and listen to Black women, the positive impact that they currently have will only grow exponentially.

Using Black feminist thought as a framework legitimizes the lived experiences of Black women whose voices and perspectives are often not prioritized. Future research should include the voices and perspectives of global artisan partners, more intentional insight from Black SRO stakeholders, dismantling of performative activism, white fragility, white saviorism, and the white savior industrial complex. This can be done through a critical investigation of SROs while not shying away from productive discomfort.

¹² Author's note: Productive discomfort is a term that was **not** coined by me. I use this term in my consulting firm with clients encouraging them to lean into discomfort as it can serve them as a learning tool, not dissimilar to the discomfort of working out and how despite sore muscles, working out can help the person working out develop healthy habits, improve their mental health and physical health.

Limitations

One of the limitations of this article is that global artisan partners were not interviewed, as such, perspectives from the Black and Brown women from the Global South are an important goal for future research. To fully appreciate white saviorism and its connection to the WSIC, it is important for these SRO stakeholders to contribute their voices and perspectives. A second area that needs to be explored is a critical analysis of the tension between intent versus impact in SROs.

Conclusion

The founders of Sseko Designs, Noonday Collection, and Trades of Hope are white women who believe in the power of conscious consumerism and its ability to positively impact the world, both in the Global North and the Global South. This article has explored the impact of race and gender on conscious consumerism which is encouraged by social responsibility organizations (SROs). While white saviorism eclipsed the possibilities for non-performative activism, several white sales consultants correctly identified solutions that can finally strip white saviorism, and its role in the white savior industrial complex (WSIC), of its power: invest in Black women by listening to them, believing them, and making appropriate, and lasting organizational changes based on their lived experiences and paid guidance.

Ultimately, I hope that this research will inform organizational decisions and effect change within SROs and beyond, reprioritizing the voices and perspectives of Black women within the SROs, who have been underserved, underestimated, and socially excluded. Black women who have been socially excluded in their own organizations are the key to dismantling white saviorism, which is often used as a solution for a problem that oftentimes has not been discussed by those who offer unique insight and are connected to the issues (Cole, 2012).

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