

A Master's Thesis:

**Crafting Geographies: Digital Placemaking in the Craft Chocolate Industry**

by

Sidney James Boegman

Bachelor of Communication & Media Studies (Honours), Carleton University, 2020

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

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We acknowledge and respect the Lək̓ʷəŋən (Songhees and Esquimalt) Peoples on whose traditional territory the university stands, and the Lək̓ʷəŋən and W̱SÁNEĆ peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

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## Abstract

Chocolate presents a challenge to North American consumers interested in ethical consumption as its main ingredient, cacao, can only be grown in equatorial regions that are generally distant from the food's major consumer markets. While many consumers are unaware of chocolate's supply chain, the commodity chocolate industry has been increasingly criticized for perpetuating environmental degradation alongside social and economic inequities for smallholder cacao farmers whose labour is foundational to the product's creation. Positioning itself in opposition to commodity chocolate, the craft chocolate sector can be understood as a 'moral market' that presents a supply chain which aims to reduce the injustices commonplace in the chocolate industry. As a part of their alternative sourcing practices, companies within the craft chocolate sector procure cacao from a diverse selection of 'origins', or the geographic regions where cacao beans are harvested from the *Theobroma cacao* tree. Many craft chocolate companies are dedicated to educating consumers about the geographic features, harvesting processes, and land stewardship of cacao origins, all of which impact chocolate flavour. Critically, the contemporary ubiquity of online shopping has shifted much of this education to digital spaces. Company websites consequently represent a significant opportunity for North American consumers to learn about craft chocolate and cacao origins. However, there is a dearth of research into the efficacy of this consumer education and how consumers conceptualize cacao origins based on representations provided by commerce-oriented websites. Using an iterative, mixed-method process, this thesis draws on a novel dataset of 257 direct-to-consumer (DTC) craft chocolate websites operating in North America and 6 focus groups with 34 North American craft chocolate consumers to explore how cacao origin geographies are understood by consumers in commerce-driven digital contexts. Findings suggest that despite the purchase orientation of most websites keeping value chain information relatively superficial, the content provided is important to consumer assessment of a craft chocolate company's legitimacy. This thesis contributes to the nascent concept of digital placemaking by providing a case study on how cacao origins are constructed through user interactions with DTC craft chocolate websites. Additionally, this thesis benefits the craft chocolate community by engaging in collaborative, practice-based research design with The Chocolate Project: Canada's largest craft chocolate retailer and educator. Specifically, this research provides insights into broader industry trends and consumer habits that are often inaccessible to the smaller companies who comprise most of this market sector. Additionally, this thesis critiques the effectiveness and impacts of current communication practices on DTC craft chocolate websites and suggests alternative directions that may further support equitable value chains and reduce barriers to entry into craft chocolate.

**Keywords:** globalization, ethical consumption, e-commerce, consumer-producer relationships, placemaking, transparency, cacao origins, global food systems

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## **Co-authorship Statement**

Chapters One, Two, and Three of this thesis will be submitted as standalone articles to peer review journals, and were co-authored by Dr. Sophia Carodenuto and David Mincey. I conducted the method development, data collection, analysis, and writing for these three articles, and was supported by the co-authors who helped to develop the research objectives, interpret results, and review the articles. In addition, Dr. Carodenuto provided additional writing and editing support for the articles, while David Mincey provided guidance on the craft chocolate sector and access to sample populations. Both co-authors assisted with overall project development.

## Positionality Statement

Before entering into my research exploring direct-to-consumer e-commerce websites in the North American craft chocolate sector, it is imperative to note that chocolate's creation and popularity are entangled with histories of colonial violence that continue today through contemporary neocolonial practices. As such, I feel it is essential to preface my thesis with a statement on my own positionality and a reflection on the perspectives I have formed over the past two years of research. In her 2017 article "*Artisan*" as Brand: *Adding Value in a Craft Chocolate Community*, Kristy Leissle asserts that individuals with "the socioeconomics of foodies ... whose discourse is racialized as white" (p. 41) are most likely to enter the craft chocolate community, and my own position in the world meets many of these criteria. I am a white researcher living and working on the traditional territories of the Songhees, Esquimalt, and W̱SÁNEĆ peoples, otherwise known as Victoria, British Columbia, Canada. Many of the benefits of my life—things I take for granted—have been granted to me through past colonial exploitation and current neocolonial processes. Socioeconomically, I was raised into and am still a member of the liberal professional class seeing how I have been employed as a marketer in the organic food & beverage industry both before and during my thesis work. My experience in this field contributed to my interest in global food systems and ethical consumption practices, which ultimately led to my research focusing on chocolate.

While I interrogate a market sector primarily composed of white people living in the Global North who work in partnership—and enter into potentially extractive relationships—with (predominantly) people of colour living in the Global South, I have questioned my ability to be truly critical as someone who fits so neatly into the mold (pun intended) of those whose biases I hope to explore. As someone who *loves* food, and especially chocolate, the diversity and depth of flavour in craft chocolate has marvelled me. As someone who is concerned about my own consumption practices and struggles with how the systemic structures supporting a North American lifestyle have been designed in ways that heighten consumption while harming others, the values purported by the craft sector have called to me. My close partnership with The Chocolate Project over the past two years—learning about everything that goes into high-quality chocolate from cacao origins to crafting processes, market dynamics, and sensory evaluation—has ensured that over the course of this research I have not only studied craft chocolate but become a part of this very community. I developed a new passion alongside my thesis, and it would be foolish to say that I am not personally allied with the craft chocolate sector.

Despite my affiliations, I do my utmost within this research to make relevant, insightful critiques that allow others in the craft chocolate community to face the same analytical mirror I have been using to view my own reflection. My work interrogates the promises of ethical consumption, the sometimes neocolonial understandings of cacao origins, and the inherently neoliberal foundation of the entire craft chocolate sector. I offer critique not as an indictment, but in the hopes of pushing us to become even better. Throughout my time in this community, I have been constantly astonished by the openness and willingness of people within it to share, learn, and grow. This thirst for knowledge I have experienced is a central part of my joy around sharing and mobilizing these research findings because I am confident that my work will find the right people. My ultimate hope is that the standards and practices currently being espoused by this industry will be improved upon and expand beyond the boundaries of craft chocolate, so that cacao smallholders worldwide will see improved livelihoods and living circumstances.

## Introduction

### Complicating Chocolate

Chocolate is a smooth, creamy substance ubiquitous to North American and European diets. It can be found in sweet treats of all kinds: baked goods, ice creams, drinks, candy, and—of course—chocolate bars. The essential ingredient in chocolate is cacao, a tropical fruit that comes from the *Theobroma cacao* tree, which originated in Mesoamerica but has since been cultivated internationally (Coe & Coe, 2013; Leissle, 2018; Off, 2007). Since *Theobroma cacao* can only consistently grow within a 20-degree range on either side of the equator, commercial production of cacao at scale is limited to equatorial regions (Coe & Coe, 2013; Leissle, 2018; Off, 2007). Over 90% of cacao is grown by five to six million smallholder farmers, most of whom work no more than two hectares of land (Bermudez et al., 2022; Leissle, 2018; Rueda et al., 2018; Zimmerer et al., 2015). However, most chocolate is produced and consumed in the Global North significantly outside of cacao's growing regions (Coe & Coe, 2013; Leissle, 2018; Off, 2007). Beginning with Spain's genocidal invasion of the Americas, cacao was brought to Europe to become what chocolate is today, and this fruit ultimately became entangled in a system of global trade (Coe & Coe, 2013, Leissle, 2018; Off, 2007; Walker, 2007).

Alongside consuming the most chocolate, countries from the Global North enjoy the most economic benefits from cacao despite being unable to produce cacao commercially (Leissle, 2018). Today, the global cocoa<sup>1</sup> and chocolate market is valued at 48 billion USD and is projected to grow to over 67 billion USD by 2029 (Fortune Business Insights, 2024). This financialized commodity market is primarily controlled by eight companies: Mars, Mondelez (Cadbury), Ferrero, Nestlé, Hershey, Barry Callebaut, Cargill, and Olam (Business Insights, 2024; Leissle, 2018). This market generated an approximate revenue of 238 billion USD in 2023, profiting at the expense of the tropical rainforests where cacao grows and to the detriment of the smallholder farmers who are the foundation of the entire chocolate industry (Cadby & Araki, 2022; Fountain & Huetz-Adams, 2023; Leissle, 2018; Rueda et al., 2018; Wunsch, 2023). Most contemporary consumers in the Global North, whose purchases generate revenue for chocolate companies, do not engage with chocolate's complex journey from tropical fruit to rich bar (Leissle, 2013, 2017; McCabe, 2015). The commodity chocolate industry has worked to conceptually remove chocolate from its spatiohistorical context, thereby allowing consumers to enjoy chocolate without interrogating its origins (Leissle, 2013, 2017; McCabe, 2015).

### Colonial Legacies of Trade

Chocolate's contemporary value chains have been irreversibly formed by European colonial activity (Leissle, 2018; Maguire-Rajpaul et al., 2022). Prior to European contact with the Americas, cacao was deeply embedded in Mesoamerican cultures as a drink, a cultural symbol, and as a form of currency (Coe & Coe, 2013; Leissle, 2018; Off, 2007). The flow of cacao shifted dramatically as European desires for chocolate grew, first within aristocratic social circles and then all classes decades later following the industrial revolution (Coe & Coe, 2013).

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<sup>1</sup> The use of 'cocoa' versus 'cacao' is a long-running debate within the chocolate industry that has not yet—and may not ever—reach a single standard consensus due to the differing perspectives of various market sectors. Within this thesis, 'cacao' will be used to refer to the plant and its products before secondary processing, while 'cocoa' will be used to refer to processed goods such as cocoa powder or butter. The exception to this rule occurs during discussions of the commodities market where 'cocoa' conventionally refers to the dried beans, and when explicitly naming other sources that use 'cocoa' instead of cacao (Coe & Coe, 2013).

Instead of remaining within Mesoamerica, cacao beans were exported to Europe and began to take form as a global commodity divorced from its geocultural origins (Coe & Coe, 2013; Leissle, 2018; Off, 2007). In response to growing consumer demand for chocolate, various European nations increased systematic, commercial cacao production in their colonies (Coe & Coe, 2013; Off, 2007). This expansion occurred first in Central and South America before spreading to new equatorial geographies including but not limited to Brazil, Ecuador, the Caribbean, and West Africa (Coe & Coe, 2013; Leissle, 2018; Walker, 2000). Over time, cacao—and then chocolate—became a truly global food product (Clarence-Smith, 2000; Coe & Coe, 2013; Leissle, 2018; Off, 2007; Walker, 2007).

From the inception of these new value chains, European-led cacao production occurred through enslavement and coerced labour. These practices occurred first at the expense of the local Indigenous populations before also subjugating imported African peoples (Clarence-Smith, 2000; Leissle, 2018; Off, 2007; Walker, 2007). Slavery was particularly profitable for cacao plantations because the diversity of manual labour across the stages of cacao production meant that “older, infirm slaves as well as women and small children could be profitably employed” (Walker, 2007, p. 93) in tasks such as sorting and drying cacao that did not require much physical strength. Even as cacao-producing countries liberated themselves from their former colonizers, the socioeconomic and spatial disparities present within the colonial cocoa trade have been reified through trade terms favouring European currency, the growth of export agriculture, and conditional foreign aid such as Structural Adjustment Programs (Leissle, 2018; Maguire-Rajpaul et al., 2022; Konadu-Agyemang, 2000). The resultant slashing of agricultural subsidies and introduction of liberalized exchange rates drastically harmed smallholders' abilities to afford agricultural tools and receive just prices for cacao, subsequently reducing their access to basic necessities (Maguire-Rajpaul et al., 2022). Present-day flows of trade continue to perpetuate exploitative conditions for Global South populations through exchange-rate and wage differentials which sustain high levels of income and consumption in the Global North (Hickel et al., 2021). On average, wages paid to workers in the Global South are one-fifth the level of wages in the Global North, and the majority of cacao smallholders do not make a living wage (Fountain & Huetz-Adams, 2023; Hickel et al., 2021). Despite the attempts of Global North nations to distance themselves from their colonial pasts in their contemporary methods of consumption, current trade flows that rely on the cacao exports of Global South producers to the Global North mimic these historical patterns of exploitation.

### ***Bought Here, Grown There***

Many chocolate consumers do not frequently engage with the product's value chains. This ignorance is partially due to the far distances between producing and consuming geographies, but also because of the dissimilarities between cacao and chocolate. It is hard to imagine that rich, brown chocolate comes from the tangy fruit inside brightly coloured cacao pods—if there is even an awareness of the pod! Because North Americans exist far away from cacao as an everyday experience, most chocolate consumers do not have the opportunity to be connected to its origins and value chains. Moreover, chocolate production has historically been obfuscated and removed from its original geographic context (Leissle, 2013; McCabe, 2015). Consumers are much more likely to associate chocolate with the country of its maker, such as Belgian (Godiva), Swiss (Lindt), or American (Hershey) chocolate, than they are with the country of cacao origin (Leissle, 2013; McCabe, 2015). Chocolate makers are certainly responsible for creating the bars themselves. However, without cacao, chocolate would simply

not exist and the work of cacao smallholders has been systemically (and literally) devalued (Fountain & Huetz-Adams, 2023; Leissle, 2018; Rueda et al., 2018). Because each smallholder only produces a tiny fraction of the cacao that moves through the hands of these large corporations, they are afforded the least economic benefit (Leissle, 2018). Yet, all companies relying on cacao for their own products depend on millions of Global South smallholders, traders, and transportation workers to produce and move this key ingredient (Leissle, 2018; Rueda et al., 2018).

However, chocolate has begun to be reconnected to its origins over the past two decades as consumers have become increasingly aware of the harms of commodity chocolate. The 2001 BBC documentary *Slavery: A Global Investigation*, which explored labour exploitation on West African cacao farms, sparked concerns in the Global North over equitable labour practices in cacao farming (Coe & Coe; 2013; Leissle, 2013; McCabe, 2015). This documentary, and its subsequent media coverage, became a pivotal moment in consumer reconceptualization of chocolate as a complex global food product with origins in the Global South (Coe & Coe; 2013; Leissle, 2013; McCabe, 2015). External product certifications such as Fairtrade and Organic have become rapidly expanding segments of the global chocolate market, and cacao bean origin is increasingly prioritized by consumers (Fortune Business Insights, 2024; Leissle, 2018; McCabe, 2015; Poelmans & Rousseau; 2016; Thorlakson, 2018). An awareness of ethical cacao production has therefore entered consumer consciousness as people within the Global North begin to understand chocolate as an inherently global food product, thus redefining the space between producers and consumers.

### ***Impacts at Origin***

The most recently published Cocoa Barometer identifies three critical areas of impact for cacao smallholders at origin: environmental impacts, human rights impacts, and livelihood impacts (Fountain & Huetz-Adams, 2023). Chocolate exemplifies a ‘tropical forest risk commodity:’ a consumer good whose production threatens some of the earth’s last remaining biodiversity hotspots and stable carbon-sinks through deforestation (Berenguer et al., 2014; Pendrill et al., 2019; zu Ermgassen et al., 2022). In the cocoa industry, deforestation most frequently occurs as smallholders are forced to expand into new forested zones following reduced productivity on their existing plantations. This expansion has resulted in a loss of over two million hectares of forest between 2000 and 2019 (Fountain & Huetz-Adams, 2023; Rueda et al., 2018; zu Ermgassen et al., 2022). These deforested areas suffer from damaged soil microbiomes due to reduced surface biomass and increased use of commercial fertilizers, insecticides, and fungicides, causing further environmental degradation and reducing the agricultural productivity of the land over time (Ntiamoah & Afrane, 2008). However, cacao has the potential to be a key part of restorative agroforestry systems in tropical climates despite its current negative environmental impacts (Armengot et al., 2016; Kuyah et al., 2019; Suarez et al., 2021). Agroforestry, recognized as an alternative to monoculture systems, conserves biodiversity and other ecosystem services whilst creating considerable livelihood opportunities for local communities (de Beenhouwer et al., 2013; Kuyah et al., 2019). Cacao therefore has the capacity to reverse environmental degradation by contributing to healthy rainforests and reforestation efforts.

Previous labour and human rights research in the chocolate industry has found that cacao smallholders often experience forms of coerced labour including, but not limited to: physical, verbal, and sexual violence; underpayment, non-payment, or withholding payment; deception;

and food deprivation (LeBaron & Gore, 2020; Leissle, 2018). Women workers are also more likely to experience coerced labour, more precarious employment, and lower wages (Barrientos, 2014; Carr, 2008; LeBaron & Gore, 2020; Leissle, 2018; Vigneri & Holmes, 2009). Another central element of coerced labour is the absence of other livelihood opportunities—for many smallholders, cacao farming is the most profitable and beneficial option (Leissle, 2018).<sup>2</sup> The decision to work in cacao farming, when driven by lack of opportunity elsewhere, can be understood as coercive by circumstance. Ultimately, cacao production and chocolate consumption are inextricable from each other. Smallholders' livelihoods are in part precarious because consumers in the Global North enjoy cheap chocolate. Labor exploitation in cacao is therefore a global issue that benefits not just multinational chocolate corporations, but also traders, retailers, and consumers (Leissle, 2018).

Due to its emotional resonance, child labour is one of the most contentious topics within the chocolate industry. This issue has been widely publicized and positioned as a critical ethical violation on cacao farms by both public and private actors (Coe & Coe, 2013; Leissle, 2013, 2018; McCabe, 2015). There have been a series of initiatives to eradicate child labour in chocolate supply chains including a class-action lawsuit against Nestlé and Cargill, the US Engel-Harkin Protocol, and corporate promises to 'clean up' their supply chains (Coe & Coe, 2013; Leissle, 2013, 2018; McCabe, 2015; Ryan, 2011). However, existing scholarship on coerced labour in cacao farming positions child labour as a complex issue where some children do experience labour exploitation and hazardous work conditions, whilst others are able to contribute safely within the context of their families (Barrientos et al., 2013; Berlan, 2013; Leissle, 2018). At its core, child labour is linked to broader social issues including gender inequality, family break-ups, and the poverty caused by commercial exploitation (Barrientos et al., 2013; Berlan, 2013; Hickel et al., 2021; Leissle, 2018). Child labour in cacao farming is an ongoing, global issue that requires reflexivity about the social circumstances of smallholders despite the topic's emotionality.

Livelihoods, notably the lack of living wages for smallholders, greatly exacerbate the environmental degradation and human rights violations experienced in cacao origin geographies (Adams & Carodenuto, 2023; Fountain & Huetz-Adams, 2022). Smallholders live under very tight economic margins, and—since a single cacao tree is a 30-year investment—are disproportionately beholden to external governing factors such as weather, politics, pricing volatility, and the speculative market (Cadby & Araki, 2022; Fountain & Huetz-Adams, 2018; Leissle, 2018; Rueda et al., 2018; Tothmihaly & Ingram, 2018). In major cacao-producing regions, select commodity cacao buyers have considerable authority and prioritize the desires of the end consumer over farmer livelihoods (Cadby & Araki, 2022; Carodenuto, 2019). Despite increasing demands for cacao, smallholders are also receiving an ever-smaller share of revenue, with some sources estimating a reduction from 16% in 1980 to 3-6% in 2013 (Cadby and Araki, 2021; Fountain & Huetz-Adams, 2022; Leissle, 2018). These issues compound, leaving smallholders struggling to earn a living income and rendering them more vulnerable to exploitation (Fountain & Huetz-Adams, 2022).

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<sup>2</sup> As Leissle (2018) and others point out, lack of opportunity shaping 'choice' is not unique to cacao production and can be found globally; for example, the circumstances of people born in poor communities who join the armed forces in North America.

## ***Choosing Social Good in the Craft Chocolate Sector***

Largely motivated by the ethical and environmental issues of commodity chocolate, concerned individuals began making and selling what is now considered bean-to-bar, ‘craft’ chocolate in the late 1990s (Coe & Coe, 2013; Giller, 2009; Leissle, 2017). Despite using less than five percent of total global cacao production, the craft chocolate industry has nonetheless experienced rapid growth in the last decade with over 300 different companies involved today (Cadby, 2021; Gallo et al., 2017). Craft chocolate makers are an entrepreneurial, collaborative business community that value an uncommonly high level of transparency between businesses and with consumers (Boegman et al., 2023; Cadby et al., 2021; Gallo et al., 2017; Woolley et al., 2022). Other factors that differentiate craft from commodity chocolate include sourcing high-quality ‘specialty’ cacao from regions predominantly outside of West Africa, engaging in collaborative trade relationships with farmers whenever possible, paying premium prices for cacao to support farmer livelihood, and emphasizing sustainable sourcing practices (Cadby & Araki, 2022; Cadby et al., 2021; Rueda et al., 2018; Woolley et al., 2021).

As these goals are embedded in the business practices of craft chocolate companies, this sector can be understood as a moral market. Moral markets are business sectors invested in creating social value in addition to—and often at the expense of—revenue generation (Fourcade & Healy, 2007; Georgallis & Lee, 2019). Entrepreneurs have been identified as powerful agents for change within neoliberal markets due to their willingness to address socioeconomic and sustainability challenges (Gallo et al., 2017). Gallo et al. (2017) assert that craft chocolate businesses engage in collective action to mitigate sustainability challenges and employ a ‘triple bottom line’ (people, planet, profit) approach to success. This claim is substantiated by Woolley et al. (2021) who argue that craft chocolate companies have created a new market niche that centers around the achievement of specific social goals: values-driven cacao sourcing, industry collaboration, and explicit consumer education. While the growth of the craft chocolate sector has potentially introduced new market actors who are less morally-motivated, the outward presentation of the sector remains consistently ethically-oriented.

Craft chocolate makers are eager to educate consumers about the social and environmental benefits of craft over commodity (Leissle, 2017; Thorlakson, 2018; Woolley et al., 2021). Rather than relying on external certifications such as Organic and Fairtrade, the majority of craft chocolate companies employ corporate transparency to communicate their ethics and value chains (Cadby et al., 2021; Gallo et al., Leissle, 2017; Woolley et al., 2021). Transparency is an effective means of establishing consumer trust by creating a commitment to openness rather than operating in secret (Birchall, 2014). Anyone is able to monitor and assess the business practices and ethical claims of the reporting company, should they so desire. One prominent aspect of transparency in the craft chocolate sector is the disclosure of relationships with smallholders at origin. Due to the international nature of cacao supply chains rendering it difficult for consumers to feel close to the food, details of where cacao comes from, who farmed it, and how much they were paid has the potential to enhance consumer trust and build emotional intimacy.

Consumer interest in ethical, high-quality chocolate has therefore risen alongside the sector’s growth, allowing craft chocolate to thrive as a niche market (Fortune Business Insights, 2024; Leissle, 2017; McCabe, 2015; Poelmans & Rousseau, 2016; Woolley et al., 2021). The growth of this market sector has occurred alongside a re-orientation towards ethical consumption practices within contemporary consumer culture (Carrington et al., 2016; Davies & Gutsche,

2016; Hiller & Goworek, 2023; McCabe, 2015; Newholm et al., 2015; Woolley et al., 2021). Current ethical consumption practices are founded upon the neoliberal belief that individual lifestyle choices have tangible, sociopolitical impact at a structural level (Littler, 2011). As such, consumers are held responsible for their personal consumption choices and therefore experience anxieties about the social, ecological, and economic consequences of these decisions (Carrington et al., 2016; Caruana et al., 2020). In contrast to the exploitative production conditions of multinational corporations, craft chocolate companies are understood by consumers to be creating materially desirable, ethically sound products (Leissle, 2017). Certain consumers are willing to pay more for chocolate they perceive as providing social good, prioritizing ‘voting with their dollars’ by spending money at companies they believe align with their personal values (Leissle, 2017; Poelmans & Rousseau, 2016).

However, consumers also prioritize attributes external to ethics when it comes to purchasing chocolate—most notably taste and price, but also product packaging and availability, purchase occasion, and brand trust (Brown et al., 2020; Leissle, 2017; Poelmans and Rousseau, 2016). Consumers associate craft chocolate with discernible flavour differences, asserting that craft tastes not just better than, but fundamentally different from, commodity chocolate due to the higher quality of cacao used in production (Brown et al., 2020; Leissle, 2017). A critical aspect of craft chocolate flavor comes from its origin geography, or the place where the cacao was grown (Giller, 2009; Nesto, 2010). The terroir (environment and production methods) of a region impacts flavour, meaning that specific cacao origins have distinct flavour profiles that can emerge in a bar of chocolate (Giller, 2009; Nesto, 2010). Because origin affects chocolate flavour, consumers are motivated to learn about and become closer to cacao origins as it impacts their eating experience. Craft chocolate makers are therefore incentivized to educate consumers about specific cacao origins on the basis of product differentiation, which impacts how cacao origins are discussed and constructed by these businesses and their consumers.

### ***Digital Placemaking***

Craft chocolate companies are more frequently meeting consumers online to both sell chocolate and educate them about cacao’s complex geographic journey (Boegman et al., 2023; Cadby, 2021). Individuals who most frequently engage in ethical consumption practices or value ‘craft’ food products are more likely to visit locally-owned stores, farmers’ markets, and specialty food events (Cadby, 2021; Zimmerman, 2015). Therefore, most business-consumer interactions occurred offline through in-person relational marketing tactics prior to 2020 (Cadby, 2021; Georgallis & Lee, 2019; Leissle, 2017; Zimmermann, 2015). However, the craft chocolate sector swiftly entered online spaces as the COVID-19 pandemic reduced access to consumer markets (Cadby, 2021). Although online shopping was already a prominent form of consumption in North America, consumers moved online in greater numbers and wider demographics during lockdown periods and many have continued shopping through online channels (Cadby, 2021; Halim, 2022; McKee et al., 2023). e-Commerce has therefore become a ubiquitous part of everyday North American consumption (Hagen et al., 2024; Vulkan, 2020). Direct-to-consumer (DTC) websites, which enable someone to learn about, engage with, and make purchases directly from an individual company online, are a critical area of opportunity for businesses and an essential site of assessment for consumers (Demangeot & Broderick, 2016, Vulkan, 2020).

Today, most craft chocolate companies use branded websites and social media platforms to educate consumers about craft chocolate and communicate information about their supply chains. In doing so, these companies engage in placemaking practices by creating representations

of cacao origin geographies online. ‘Place’ is an essential concept for understanding the entanglement between space and human beings (Cresswell, 2014; Massey, 1994). Places are constructed through practices of *placemaking* that create a collective or individual sense of place, and are thus a “way of understanding the world” (Cresswell, 2014, p. 26). Consequently, place has always been mediated: by conversation, writing, artwork, photography, mapping (both analog and digital), video, and more (Adams, 2016; Cresswell, 2014). Because various forms of media and communication processes affect experiences of geographic reality, digital representations provide new avenues that can be used to understand place (Adams, 2016; Głowczyński, 2024). This form of sharing invites others to experience a place more deeply than they might otherwise in everyday life.

Due to rapid technological advancements that continually change technology’s means of mediating place, the concept of ‘digital’ placemaking is similarly evolving. Several different yet similar definitions currently exist, including “the use of digital media to create a sense of place for oneself and/or others” (Halegoua & Polson, 2021, p. 547), when “place is experienced and construed as meaningful location by means of people’s interactions—both fleeting and lasting—over digital media” (Parini & Yus, 2023, p. 2), and “a process in which the experiences of place are transformed, mediated, and created through multifaceted communication processes between people, places, and digital technology” (Głowczyński, 2024, p. 2). Drawing upon scholars including Halegoua and Polson (2021), Parini and Yus (2023), and Głowczyński (2024), I assert that digital placemaking can be understood as the process of constructing and experiencing place through meaningful interactions afforded by digital media. Communication crucially occurs *about* the place in question, constructing a sense of place without physically visiting a geographic location through visualization, naming, and storytelling (Głowczyński, 2024; Rzewzewski, 2018). Within the craft chocolate sector, businesses frequently employ cacao origins as a form of place-based marketing and while discussing their ethical sourcing commitments (Leissle, 2013, 2017; Woolley et al., 2021). Digital placemaking is hence likely to occur through the consumer education about cacao origins that craft chocolate makers provide to consumers online.

## **Research Objectives and Structure**

Since the expansion of digital marketing and online sales in craft chocolate is relatively new, there is limited research into how craft chocolate makers communicate with consumers in digital spaces, or how consumers navigate and interpret those spaces. Additionally, little research exists on the perceptions of cacao origin geographies within the craft chocolate sector due to its relative newness. To begin to fill these gaps, this study is structured around the following objectives:

1. To better understand how craft chocolate consumers use and navigate DTC craft chocolate websites;
2. To explore emergent themes within communication between craft chocolate companies and consumers in commerce-focused digital contexts; and
3. To understand how digital placemaking practices in the craft chocolate industry impact craft chocolate consumers conceptualizations of cacao origin geographies.

This research is based in collaboration with The Chocolate Project, Canada’s largest craft chocolate retailer and educator. Working with non-academic community partners follows a community-engaged, practice-based approach to research with the goal of creating meaningful

applied knowledge that provides tangible benefit to the non-academic community (Carodenuto et al., 2022; Weber et al., 2014). Within the context of this project, meaningful applied knowledge means providing a sector composed almost entirely of small businesses with insight into consumer desires and broader industry trends to facilitate research-based decisions. The overarching goal of this work is to support cacao smallholders at origin by strengthening the craft chocolate sector as a whole. The project also explores and critiques ethical consumption and corporate transparency practices within the craft chocolate industry and interrogates how the North American craft chocolate community positions cacao origin geographies. Lastly, this research contributes to the definition and understanding of digital placemaking, a concept that remains in flux, by providing a case study that illustrates how place can be constructed from a distance through online technologies.

This thesis employs an iterative, mixed-method process by combining in-depth analysis of DTC craft chocolate websites operating in North America with exploratory focus groups of North American craft chocolate consumers. Mixed-methods research was specifically selected for its potential to consider the topic holistically and improve the depth and validity of results through data triangulation (McKim, 2017). This process began with the creation of a dataset of 257 relevant DTC craft chocolate websites, which were employed across all areas of data collection. Chapter One addresses the first research objective through exploratory focus groups of craft chocolate consumers as the individual experiences, information, opinions and thoughts of this population are essential to understanding how consumers conceptualize cacao-producing geographies, navigate online research, and make purchase decisions (Brown et al., 2020; Jensen & Shumway, 2010; Krueger, 2015; Secor, 2010). Focus groups were selected for their effectiveness at producing dialogue, which facilitates insight into a greater range of emotions and opinions on the study topic (Krueger, 2015; Secor, 2010). Chapter Two addresses the second research objective through an analysis of DTC craft chocolate websites that occurred first via a counting method and term frequency inverse document frequency (TF-IDF) analyses, which are two common exploratory means of evaluating website content (Law et al., 2010; Russell & Klassen, 2019). Biterm topic modelling (BTM), which was selected due to its suitability for analyzing short text data such as website content, was used to explore text-based data in greater detail (Law et al., 2010; Russell & Klassen, 2019). A qualitative framework analysis was also employed to contextualize findings from the text analyses (Allison et al., 2019; Ritchie & Spencer, 2002). Lastly, Chapter Three addresses the third research objective by applying Głowczyński's (2024) human-place-technology conceptual framework to the focus group data related to cacao origin and digital placemaking. The concluding chapter in this thesis integrates the findings from the previous three chapters, outlines limitations and future research directions, and discusses implications for the craft chocolate sector regarding ethics-based marketing of cacao origin geographies.

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## Chapter One

### e-Commerce and Digital Placemaking in the Craft Chocolate Sector

**Abstract:** Craft chocolate has been defined as a movement away from commodity chocolate, presenting an alternative value chain that aims to reduce the social, economic, and environmental injustices that plague the chocolate industry. Comprised of a collection of entrepreneurs and artists, the craft chocolate community welcomes the unique flavours that are defined by cacao origin. Origin is the term used to describe the place where cacao beans are grown, including the harvesting process, land stewardship, and other distinct factors influencing bean quality, and ultimately chocolate flavour. Many craft chocolate companies have made it their mission to educate consumers about cacao origins and the recent increase of online shopping in craft chocolate since COVID-19 has enabled consumer education at a speed and scale not previously possible. In this study, we explore how craft chocolate consumers are interacting with ‘direct to consumer’ (DTC) websites where chocolate is sold without an intermediary between maker and consumer. Our results reveal typical pathways through which craft chocolate consumers are interacting with DTC websites. We identify a distinction between shopping-focused and learning-focused movement on websites. We also identify the importance of websites in consumer assessment of a company’s history and legitimacy. This research allows for a better understanding of the effectiveness of cacao origin communication in a digital context, providing potential insights for improving digital strategies, consumer engagement, and suggestions to improve the overall growth of the craft chocolate market.

**Keywords:** online consumption, globalization, moral markets, transparency, consumer research, ethical consumption, craft chocolate

## 1.1. Introduction

As global food systems expand and become more complex, consumers are increasingly expecting companies with international reach to take responsibility for producing goods that are socially and environmentally ethical (Carrington et al., 2016; Lewis & Potter, 2011). The commodity chocolate industry has been under growing consumer pressure to address human and labour rights violations, environmental degradation of tropical rainforest ecosystems, and systemic financial exploitation of some of the world's poorest communities (Cadby & Araki, 2022; Carodenuto, 2019; Leissle, 2018; Maguire-Rajpaul et al., 2022; Pendrill et al., 2019; Rueda et al., 2018). In response to these social and environmental concerns, a flourishing 'bean-to-bar' craft sector of the market that focuses on ethical chocolate production has emerged over the past two decades (Georgallis & Lee, 2020; Leissle, 2017; Woolley et al., 2021). Craft chocolate makers have been able to nurture a dedicated 'moral market' consumer base that understands chocolate's global value chain and emotionally resonates with the issues the industry is working to improve (Leissle, 2017; McCabe, 2015; Poelmans & Rousseau, 2016; Woolley et al., 2021). While consumer preference cannot be a substitute for public regulatory advancements, social movements are increasingly working within political markets of consumption to provoke institutional change (Patsiaouras, 2022). Although 'voting with your dollar' cannot be a substitute for state regulation, craft chocolate consumers may be slowly enabling the transformation of global value chains to prioritize the decommodification of conventional chocolate.

Due to higher per-unit prices and the in-depth consumer knowledge often required to justify purchase, the craft chocolate sector has a steeper barrier to entry when compared to conventional chocolate (Cadby, 2021; Cadby & Araki, 2022; Leissle, 2017). Therefore, consumer education is generally considered essential to the craft sector's success (Boegman et al., 2023). Most consumers in the Global North have been consuming chocolate since a young age, unaware that chocolate comes from the seeds of a tropical fruit whose vitality depends on the agricultural skill of farmers and land stewardship in the areas it is grown. This lack of awareness both devalues the food and increases the potential for the development of exploitative trade relationships. The concept of 'terroir' is broadly recognized in the wine industry, but its equivalent in the chocolate industry, cacao origin, has yet to be fully appreciated (Nesto, 2010). Thus, the craft chocolate sector has made education about cacao origin one of its core missions.

Craft chocolate companies have traditionally relied on in-person, relational marketing strategies to communicate the value of craft chocolate and the important role of cacao-producing geographies in the product's value chain (Cadby, 2021). However, North American consumers rapidly moved online during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns and many have continued shopping through online channels for a plethora of products, including chocolate (Cadby, 2021; Halim, 2022; McKee et al., 2023). Arguably, online shopping is now ubiquitous and for many retailers, this is their main channel to reach consumers (Hagen et al., 2024). While the transition to online platforms initially significantly reduced access to consumer markets for craft chocolate

makers, this shift also provided an opportunity for these businesses to rethink the ways they connect with consumers and educate about the values behind their products.

Within the craft chocolate sector today, branded websites are a popular means of sharing information with consumers (Boegman et al., 2023). Termed ‘Direct-to-Consumer’ (DTC), these websites belong to individual companies that integrate brand information with online shopping platforms, allowing consumers to purchase directly from the company via the website (McKee et al., 2023). Although DTC is not unique to craft chocolate, the recency of this transition in the craft chocolate sector means that there is limited research into how these companies communicate with consumers in commerce-driven digital contexts. With this paper, we explore the efficacy of DTC communication strategies, with a focus on education surrounding cacao origin. We use the following questions to shape our approach:

**RQ1:** How do craft chocolate consumers use and navigate DTC craft chocolate websites?

**RQ2:** How do craft chocolate consumers connect with cacao-producing geographies based on interactions with DTC craft chocolate websites?

By providing a baseline of consumer perceptions of the craft chocolate sector and associated website usage, we aim to understand which messages resonate most with consumers. We hope this will inform communication strategies to improve the effectiveness of origin education in digital contexts. This work can be used to inform marketing strategy and business investment into digital channels, empowering a sector consisting almost entirely of small businesses with the ability to make data-informed decisions, and helping level the playing field between craft and commodity chocolate sectors in one small way. In the following article, we outline our methods, study population, and analytical process before highlighting major findings. We then discuss implications for craft chocolate companies and suggest directions for future study.

## **1.2. Methods**

To understand how craft chocolate consumers perceive craft chocolate DTC websites, we developed the study design in collaboration with The Chocolate Project, Canada’s largest craft chocolate retailer and educator. By applying a practice-based approach to research design, which involves collaboration between academic and non-academic research partners to co-produce knowledge informed by practical action, we focused our research on providing value to the craft chocolate community (Carodenuto et al., 2022; Weber et al., 2014). This research was approved by the University of Victoria Ethics Board (application number #22-0576). All participants provided informed, written consent and were compensated for their time with a bar of craft chocolate (approximately \$16 CAD value).

As no research describes North American craft chocolate consumer understandings of DTC craft chocolate websites, focus groups are an appropriate exploratory method to answer the research questions and uncover future areas of research. Additionally, focus groups are highly effective at producing exchanges between individuals which facilitates insight into the range of emotions and opinions held by craft chocolate consumers. Group conversations enhance the

ability of a researcher to uncover influences, perspectives, and behaviors of the study population in a way that would not be possible without the group dynamic (Krueger, 2015; Secor, 2010). The first-hand experience, information, opinions and thoughts held by focus groups are essential to understanding how consumers conceptualize cacao-producing geographies, navigate online research, and make purchase decisions (Brown et al., 2020; Jensen & Shumway, 2010; Krueger, 2015; Secor, 2010).

### ***1.2.1. Participants***

We defined our “craft chocolate consumers” study population as individuals who live in North America and have purchased craft chocolate at least twice in the last six months. Additional inclusion criteria consisted of being over 18 years old, comfort conversing in English, and ability to use the internet and navigate a website. While age, language, and online literacy were selected for practical reasons, geographic location was critical for understanding how consumers connect with the otherwise distant geographies of cacao origin. Although small amounts of cacao may be grown in California, the only location in North America that produces commercially viable cacao is the US state of Hawaii. Further, the craft chocolate movement’s multi-decade history in North America provides a varied sample of seasoned craft chocolate consumers (Cadby et al., 2021; Giller, 2017). Alongside the proliferation of North American—predominantly American—craft chocolate companies is a customer base that supports them. However, the low purchase frequency was purposefully chosen with the goal of attracting a wide number of craft chocolate consumers, as it allowed for participation from casual craft chocolate consumers, dedicated consumers, and those who prefer craft over conventional chocolate but purchase chocolate less frequently. Participants were identified through purposive sampling. Scholars who have studied the sector for years purport that craft chocolate consumers are a unique community that share ethical values and consumption practices (Leissle, 2017; Woolley et al., 2021). Therefore, this population is particularly knowledgeable about the phenomenon of interest and the characteristics being studied are evenly dispersed throughout the group, making craft chocolate consumers suitable for a purposive sampling strategy (Jensen & Shumway, 2010; Palinkas et al., 2015)

### ***1.2.2. Focus Groups***

The focus groups were structured in three parts with the goal of encouraging comfort and dialogue among participants (Krueger, 2015). In part one, participants introduced themselves and were asked more general questions about their motivations for buying craft chocolate, their browsing habits when visiting websites about craft chocolate, and their understanding of where chocolate comes from. In part two, participants were asked to engage in an activity where they navigated through and critiqued one to two DTC craft chocolate websites as a group. This activity enabled genuine engagement with and assessment of the websites. Sites were randomly selected from a researcher-created database of 257 DTC websites that operate in North America (regardless of company location) and were therefore viable potential purchasing channels for these consumers. Participants were asked to consider their likes, dislikes, and what the site told

them about craft chocolate. We followed a semi-structured protocol throughout by encouraging participants to take the activity in whichever direction they desired. In part three, participants were asked about consumption habits and the focus groups closed by asking participants to identify if there was any topic that was missed or any content participants wanted to re-emphasize (Krueger, 2015).

Focus group recruitment occurred between August and September 2023 through the Chocolate Project's email list, social channels, and retail location, in addition to networking connections the first author made while attending the 2022 Northwest Chocolate Festival (NWCF).<sup>3</sup> A total of six focus groups lasting approximately 90 minutes each were conducted between September and October 2023. Two groups took place in-person (hosted at The Chocolate Project, a known location to these participants), while four groups took place online via Zoom. Groups included between three and eight participants, with 34 total participants across all sessions. All discussions (online and in person) were recorded, de-identified, and transcribed. To protect confidentiality, participants (P) were given code names that corresponded to their focus group (1-6). To differentiate between individuals in the same group, each participant was randomly assigned to a letter of the alphabet descending from A.

### ***1.2.3. Data Analysis***

Focus group transcripts were inductively analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). This process involved recursive movement between six key stages: 1) data familiarization, 2) systematic data coding, 3) generating initial themes, 4) developing and reviewing themes, 5) defining, refining, and naming themes, and 6) producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). As a highly flexible yet accessible approach to qualitative data analysis, thematic analysis enables reflexive exploration of both the similarities and differences in research participants which can generate richer, less prescriptive insights (Nowell et al., 2017).

The data familiarization process began with transcript correction and continued with a full read of all transcripts prior to coding. NVivo version 14 was used to organize and code transcripts and to generate themes. While the repetition of specific subjects was noted, high frequency was not deemed essential for code inclusion. Singular or dissenting perspectives were also considered during coding and theme development. Diagramming to generate a thematic map was used alongside NVivo to develop, connect, and further refine our themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). A preliminary summary of research findings was shared with participants to additionally validate our data.

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<sup>3</sup> The Northwest Chocolate Festival is North America's largest craft chocolate industry conference and trade show.

## 1.3. Results

### 1.3.1. *Craft Chocolate Purchasing Motivations*

Understanding why consumers decide to purchase craft chocolate can assist craft chocolate companies in determining what to prioritize when designing a DTC website. Participants indicated that they purchased craft chocolate for three key reasons: 1) improved flavour over conventional chocolate, 2) high chocolate quality, and 3) the ethics behind craft chocolate production. While these areas were rarely mutually exclusive, participants tended to prioritize taste over ethics.

#### 1.3.1.1. *Improved flavour over conventional chocolate*

Participants' understanding of craft chocolate was strongly connected to flavour, which they described as diverse and rich. Across all focus groups participants consistently mentioned flavour as a reason they were invested in craft chocolate. "I buy craft chocolate because it tastes good" (P2D) was a commonly articulated and repeated statement. In contrast to the consistency that defines conventional chocolate products, participants prioritized and appreciated uniqueness in flavour. In their early forays into craft chocolate, participants were frequently delighted by the difference in flavour profiles they encountered. As one group member stated, "it's just amazing how one plant can produce such a rich variety of flavours. And it's really interesting to see ... what [different producers] do with the chocolate and how they ended up with such a range of flavours that are so intense and enjoyable" (P2F). Notably, participants who were primarily invested in craft chocolate due to their personal moral values also mentioned flavour, such as one participant who "took about 10 years off from eating [any] chocolate at all until [they] discovered craft chocolate and oh my god, these people care [about making ethical chocolate] and then it just has the bonus that it tastes amazing by comparison to your everyday milk duds" (P2C). For those participants who were less concerned about ethics, flavour was essential: "for me, I'm not sort of going seeking those ethical bars. I'm going for something that tastes really, really good" (P3B). Ultimately, many focus group members spoke about the high flavour potential of craft chocolate with admiration: "it is incredible that we can try out these different flavours and notes. And for me chocolate will never be the same again" (P6D).

#### 1.3.1.2. *High quality chocolate*

To many participants, "the chocolate quality is probably foremost important" (P1E). "My driving force for buying craft chocolate is because I really like high quality food" (P4G), said one participant when introducing themselves to the group. This theme of craft chocolate as high quality, notably *higher* quality than commodity chocolate, was clear in every single focus group. One participant stated that "[craft chocolate] was a whole different thing than the candy that [they] had had as a little kid and a teenager from the vending machine at school." Craft chocolate was considered "good food rather than something [to] just shove in" (P3A); a product meant to be savoured mindfully. Emphasis was placed on the artisan nature of craft chocolate: a preference for quality over quantity. "I'm interested in the craft of craft chocolate first, the small

business aspect” (P5E). Despite acknowledging that many craft chocolate makers use factories with “many huge machines going and giant roasters” (P5F), to participants, craft chocolate is quality chocolate because it is “handmade” (P3A), “produced there in the shop” (P4A), and created “on a small scale” (P2C) with care and devotion. One participant stated that craft chocolate is “a much more artisanal process” (P2A) than commodity chocolate. They continued, “I think that's an aspect that's common to many other foods like craft beer or any other craft food, it's much more rich in flavour than other ones” (P2A). Essentially, participants were invested in craft chocolate as a high-quality food product and connected that to the labour associated with its creation.

### *1.3.1.3. Ethics*

Most participants had strong ethical motivations for purchasing craft chocolate. “I like to think of chocolate as a treat” (P4A), said one participant, “and when I think about treating myself, I want to make it sort of as thoughtful and conscientious as possible. And it doesn't feel like a treat if it's sort of harmful” (P4A). While certain group members were more invested than others, the desire to purchase ethical chocolate was strong across all focus groups. “We vote with our dollar” (P3A), said a group member while describing why they believed it was important to purchase ethical chocolate. Participants identified three key areas as areas where they valued commitment from craft chocolate companies: pay equity, no labour exploitation or child labour in supply chains, and environmental sustainability.

**Pay equity.** Participants articulated strong desires to support craft chocolate supply chains that provided a “living wage at all steps for the producers; the farmers, right through to the chocolate makers” (P1B). Equitable wages, commonly discussed and understood within groups as living wages, were strongly connected to supporting cacao farmers in origin countries. One participant asserted that “supporting the farmers who are actually growing the product is a big thing” (P4D), while another stated that they are “looking for some clear evidence that the producer of the chocolate is paying farmers a fair price” (P2B) since they “think it's totally unethical for us to consume products that are exploiting the ultimate producers, the farmer.” (P2B). Participants situated craft chocolate as a sector that supported farmers through pay equity: “I know some farmers are paid very low by big industries. And that being not the case for craft chocolate makes me so much happier” (P2A).

**Anti-labour exploitation and child labour.** Many group members desired to not financially support forced labour and child labour in cacao supply chains. One participant stated: “when I learned that there was a lot of slave labour in Africa and child labour in Africa that goes into production of mass market chocolate, I didn't really want to have it anymore” (P2C). While occasionally mentioned separately, labour exploitation and child labour were consistently discussed by participants as a singular topic of concern. “Fair labour conditions,” asserted one group member, “obviously would involve not having child labour and exploitative labour and things like that” (P2F). Craft chocolate was understood to be a space where participants, as ethical consumers, did not have to worry about supporting forced labour: “because the majority

of the world's chocolate is slavery chocolate, with the craft chocolate, I just want that assurance” (P3A).

However, some participants also challenged the notion that it was truly possible for a consumer to know whether their chocolate was free from labour exploitation. “How deep are we looking?” (P5E) asked one group member, arguing that different companies’ “definition of [ethical] can be slightly different ... how deep are we going? In [our] research? How much can you really find out?” (P5E). Another participant stated that

it's very difficult to know exactly where the beans are from, and how they were produced ... a lot of those countries [where cacao is grown] are not like what we know. And it's very difficult to know exactly how people are treated in those countries ... as a consumer, I find that's a challenge. (P4C)

This geographic divide between cacao producers and chocolate consumers was seen as a challenge when it came to evaluating labour standards that participants would consider ethical.

**Environmental sustainability.** Environmental sustainability was defined by participants as both the sustainability of both the cacao growing and chocolate making processes. Group members who valued sustainability wanted the cacao used to make their chocolate to be “sustainable for the environment, considering so much impact that agriculture can have in the environment of tropical forests” (P2A). Some participants understood cacao is an “understory tree” (P2B) that grew best inside a complete rainforest: “cacao needs different trees around it so you have to protect the health of the ecosystem” (P1E). Ultimately, most participants were interested in sustainable cacao farming that did not contribute to deforestation.

Participants were also invested in a commitment to sustainable practices from craft chocolate makers, specifically when it came to packaging. “I don't like when I see plastic, wrapping and everything; I will always look for more sustainable presentation” (P6D), said one participant. When discussing packaging, another group member asked, “what happens when you're finished with the product and where it goes to the landfill, can it be recycled?” (P4E). Sustainable packaging was also understood as something that is becoming more common: “there's a few companies that are starting to put that forward that they're using [sustainable] packaging. I've even had compostable plastic packaging ... I think there's definitely companies that are moving in that direction.” (P4G). Specific packaging practices were often detailed, for example one group member described the shipping process of a company they considered to be sustainable:

The company that I buy most of my chocolate from ... now ships with this cornstarch foam. And after you unpackage the box, the box cardboard says recyclable and you just throw the cornstarch foam in the sink and it melts, just dissolves ... We need to think about the sustainability of the entire supply chain. And packaging certainly comes into it. (P2B)

While some participants believed that sustainability in craft chocolate encompasses the entire supply chain, most group members appeared to show more interest in its beginning (cacao farming) and its end (the packaging and shipping of chocolate bars) as opposed to any intermediary steps such as transportation of cacao beans or energy used in chocolate production.

### ***1.3.2. Consumer Motivations to Use DTC Craft Chocolate Websites***

Participants engaged with DTC craft chocolate websites for a wide variety of reasons, including learning about craft chocolate makers, learning about product offerings, community participation, general craft chocolate education, and finally: purchasing chocolate. Visits to sites often encompassed multiple goals, particularly if a company was initially unknown to the participant.

#### *1.3.2.1. To learn about makers*

A common sentiment across focus groups was that participants “[wanted] to know the face behind the chocolate” (P6E), i.e. the chocolate maker. “I often want to know more about [the company] if I’ve enjoyed [the chocolate]” (P2F) said one group member, “what’s their background? What’s their kind of ethos? What are they interested in? What are they trying to do?” (P2F). Another participant stated that they wanted to learn about “the point of inspiration or the point of passion” (P5C) that got the maker into the business. During the website navigation activity, participants frequented ‘About’ pages in an attempt to learn more about chocolate makers: “we’re just like, trying to figure out who they are as people” (P3B). Wanting to get to know the craft chocolate makers also extended to their appearance. When reviewing the ‘About’ section for one craft chocolate website, participants stated that they would “like to see that specific maker in the picture. We’ve all seen pictures of trays of beans drying or a *mélanger* running, but how does it relate to them or their business ... that becomes more personal” (P5F). Participants also positioned craft chocolate as a sector where it was possible to get to know the people making their chocolate:

Probably the number one marketing thing in chocolate, craft chocolate anyways, is: who’s the chocolate maker? Who are the people behind it? We just went to French Broad chocolate a couple of weeks ago in North Carolina. And you know, they’re very much that husband-wife team that founded the company, you know, that’s their story. And that’s what makes it so cool is to see that story of who did that. (P6B)

Being able to familiarize themselves with craft chocolate makers and their stories was, for many participants, a critical aspect of the craft chocolate experience. This intimacy allowed group members to feel more deeply involved with the craft chocolate community as a communal experience rather than merely a transactional one.

#### *1.3.2.2. To buy chocolate*

Perhaps unsurprisingly, participants commonly visited craft chocolate DTC sites to learn about products and purchase chocolate or plan a future purchase. As one participant stated, “I

would go [to a website] if I wanted to check out what [the company] had, potentially order something” (P4D). Another said they go to websites “to find out what products [a company has], where I can get them. Maybe the ingredients and the price point too” (P2D). Purchase intent was a clear line of conversation, with some participants during the activity stating that they were “thinking about ordering some bars now off [the site]” (P6B) and that “now [they] want to order” (P4A). One participant even independently made a purchase from one of the websites reviewed during the activity mid-focus group, letting us know by saying that “[they] just ordered some chocolate from them” (P2B) and joking that the facilitator should receive a commission from the company.

Participants identified ingredients as a crucial element of product information: “I always look right away at the ingredients list” (P2B) was a common sentiment echoed across focus groups. Minimal ingredient lists without additives or preservatives were prioritized: “cocoa beans, organic cane sugar, and cocoa butter. That's it. That's what I'm looking for, that kind of minimalist ingredient list. And if it says palm oil, I'm not going to get anywhere near it” (P2B). Beyond palm oil, denigrated additives included soy lecithin, which was considered “just so lazy” (P6B), and vanilla as “I've always been told to be cautious of vanilla as a flavour in chocolate because it's usually there to mask [imperfections] in the drying, roasting, fermenting and every stage” (P1D). Ultimately, participants were cautious of what they considered to be unnecessary ingredients in a chocolate bar. “I want to know what additives are there in the bars,” (P4B) one participant summarized. They made sure the group knew that they were “not a fan of all of the extra unnecessary additives. So yeah, I go for the ingredient list and provenance, place of origin, where they source from” (P4B).

Beyond ingredients, many participants put their trust in those they considered to be experts when considering which bar to buy: “I also look to see if they've won any awards” (P3B). Awards bodies such as the International Chocolate Awards, Academy of Chocolate Awards, and Good Food Awards were a positive product indicator that increased trust in buying a product without being able to physically experience the product prior to purchase.

**Website use for online vs in-store purchases.** While focus group participants purchased chocolate both online and in-store, many participants preferred an in-store purchasing experience. Participants reportedly enjoy being able to participate in community and being able to sample chocolate before purchase as reasons to visit a store in person: “[my local specialty store has] got people that I can talk to. And it often has tastings” (P2F). Additionally, worries about chocolate being damaged during shipping was another rationale to purchase in-store: “you always have the risk that, you order something in the summertime and it gets here, it's not in ideal condition” (P4C). However, many participants chose to purchase online due to product availability. In one such discussion a group member stated that “[they] primarily buy online because there isn't a store [that sells craft chocolate] in [their city]” (P4B). Another, commiserating, added that “there is nowhere to buy craft chocolate here. There are no specialty stores” (P4G). The lack of brick-and-mortar stores with a craft chocolate selection frustrated

many participants, who therefore valued having websites to purchase from: “I like buying in person when I can but when that's not possible, finding where I can buy it online is a great option” (P2H). Participants also appreciated being able to order bars not carried in their local specialty store, mentioning that “[they] will order off the websites direct from the chocolate companies too, if [they] want more bars than what [their store is] stocking” (P1B). Several participants also found that COVID-19 changed their shopping habits: “I believe the pandemic lockdown that really speeded up doing ordering online, whereas before I would just buy from a store” (P5D). Despite a desire to visit retail spaces and buy in-store, many participants found craft chocolate DTC websites to be an essential part of their craft chocolate purchasing.

Regardless of where participants were making their purchases, craft chocolate websites played a key role. For those buying online, the website was essential. However, for those buying in-store, websites were still a useful tool to quickly learn about a craft chocolate company. As one participant said, “if I'm in a store, and I want to know something about a brand, I'm going to pull it up on my phone” (P2D). They continued by expressing the importance of mobile optimization: “if the website isn't well designed to work on mobile—which you would think all websites these days would be, but not always—that's really frustrating too” (P2D). Participants described using sites to discover additional products beyond what a store would carry, saying “when I find a product I like, even if it's just the packaging in a store, I am very quick to jump on and Google it and go check out their main website or their socials” (P2E), and “if they have these two bars in a shop, what else do they make?” (P2H). Participants also used in-store internet searches to determine if a company they encountered was a ‘genuine’ craft chocolate maker. Ultimately, participants purchasing online and in-store both used craft chocolate websites as a part of their purchasing decisions.

#### *1.3.2.3. To participate in community*

Group members also asserted that craft chocolate websites were important spaces to learn about how to engage more deeply in the craft chocolate community. “We will travel for chocolate,” said one participant, “so I also want to know do they host events, do they have chocolate tastings, factory tours, things like that” (P6E). Many participants “[liked] going to the stores [themselves] and meeting [the makers] when possible” (P5E) and found craft chocolate websites to be a valuable resource when planning trips, especially when they included information about activities that could take place at either a maker's factory or retail location, to determine “if you can actually tour the company or not” (P1B). For example, one participant said that “it was very important for us to look and see on their website what was available [to do at the factory]” (P6B) when discussing a recent trip to a craft chocolate maker. Another said that they “shouldn't have to dig through your website to find out if [the company] is a place that [they] could visit” (P5C). During the website activity, participants were particularly complimentary of websites that had detailed event information.

I do like that [the website] has how long the classes are. I like that it tells you whether or not it's hands on and whether or not you're having a tasting ... and the price is clear. And

the time, the date, the information is clear and easy to get at a glance, you don't have to reserve to find out how much it costs and three clicks later, it's too much. (P5F)

Participants also appreciated websites that listed addresses or connected to mapping software: “say you just landed in [city], and you want to go [to the chocolate factory], all you do is click on that ... and then you can sort of pick your way there. Smarter” (P5D).

#### *1.3.2.4. To learn about craft chocolate*

Participants also visited craft chocolate websites as a place to learn about craft chocolate. “I can find information on [craft chocolate] websites that’s more in detail where I feel like I learned something compared to going to like Lindt” (P1E), said one participant. Multiple participants referenced “Manoa’s craft chocolate YouTube channel” (P6E), which is linked on the brand’s website, as a “great source of information. If you want to watch videos, it's both entertainment, and it's educational, you can learn so much” (P6E). Another group member described how they used the information they learned on craft chocolate websites to inform other chocolate purchases:

I really got into Askinosie for a while. So I read their entire site, just to get a bit more background and the story, but also to justify purchases that I might do outside of the shop. For example, baking chocolate. So I've been on the Caminos site a few times trying to understand if I want to continue incorporating it because I have 100% baking chocolate I use. (P3C)

Craft chocolate websites were also identified by participants as especially useful early in their entrance to the craft chocolate community because they functioned as a key source of education for newcomers. While group members’ knowledge often surpassed what was explained on the educational components of the sites they reviewed, they believed that those elements of the site were important “for people that haven't tried anything beyond Hershey's and they see this and are like ‘Oh it's craft’ and then they get educated and take a step further” (P6E). When engaging with the website activity, participants were often attuned to how someone new to craft chocolate might interpret the site. For example, one participant stated:

There's a lot of information here in terms of describing ... tasting origins from fruity to fudgy, like a range of different classes ... I think when I was just starting on this journey, if I had seen this website, I would have spent quite a bit of time on it. (P5A)

Even when participants felt that they had amassed more knowledge than a website could provide, they still believed that educational components were valuable to provide context and education for newcomers to the craft chocolate community.

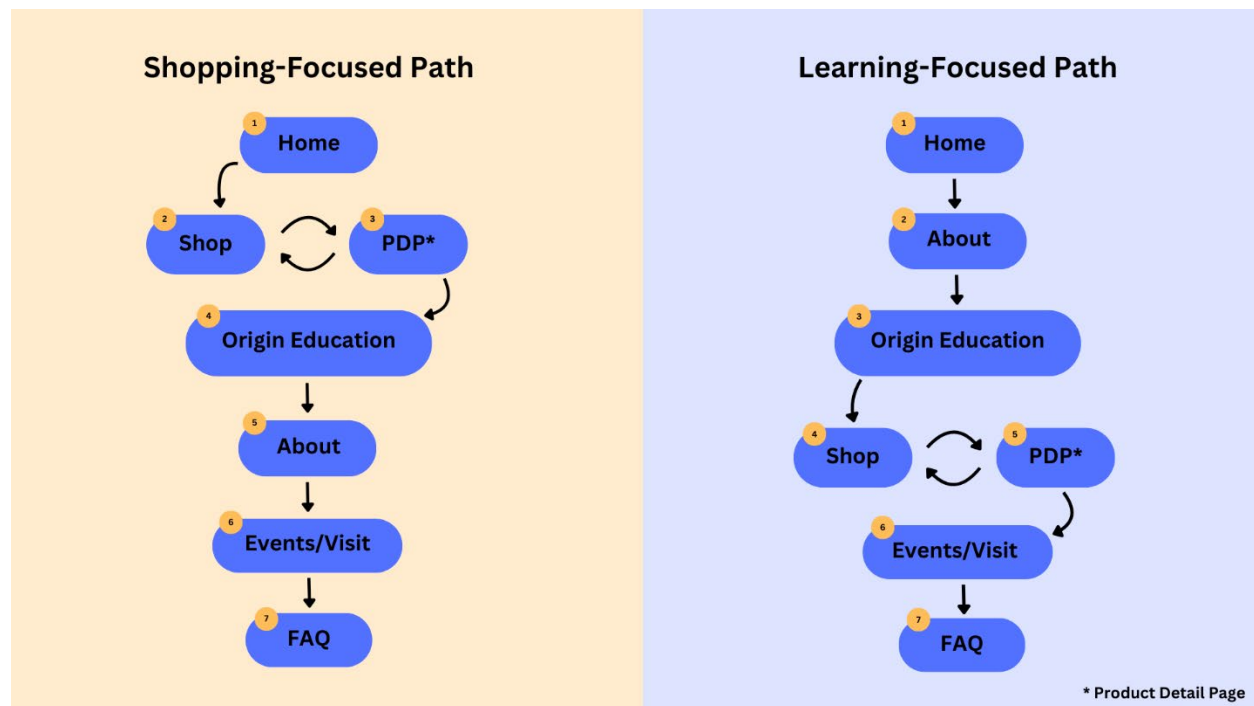
#### *1.3.3. Website Preferences*

In the following section, we describe the typical pathways through which consumers are navigating DTC craft chocolate websites, with potential implications for education effectiveness.

### 1.3.3.1. Website navigation

Participants generally expected websites to be quickly and easily navigable, with current information. As one participant stated, “I really wish more websites kept it very up-to-date” (P6E). Another believed it was important for a craft chocolate company to “state where [they are] located. I shouldn't have to dig through [the] website to find out” (P5C). There were preferences for clearly labelled, distinct pages to help consumers find information more rapidly and easily, as opposed to websites with an endless scroll: “if you're scrolling and scrolling and scrolling, it's not the best” (P1A). Participants also did not want to have to hunt for information. “So as long as you know, it's intuitive to me to go through it and I don't have to click through like 10 different pages to get to the information everything's between like two or three clicks, I'm happy” (P1E). Several group members said that “[they liked] shortcuts” (P5A) because it enabled them to find information more readily. Some participants also wished that sites felt less “flat” (P3C) and hoped for more entertaining experiences including “three-dimensional imagery [and] ... movement” (P3C).

During the website activity, participants chose to visit an average of seven pages before determining that they had learned enough about the company that had created the site. Focus groups tended to take one of two common paths for movement through each site: shopping-focused movement, and learning-focused movement. Out of the 10 websites analyzed across all focus groups, three websites were navigated using a shopping-focused movement path and seven were navigated using a learning-focused movement path.



**Figure 1.1.** Common learning-focused versus shopping-focused movement paths through DTC craft chocolate websites by participants.

**Shopping-focused movement.** During a shopping-focused movement path, participants were most interested in learning about a company’s products. They gravitated towards collection pages and product detail pages (PDPs), more frequently choosing to begin with viewing a broader scope of the company’s product offerings at the collection page level before moving on to specific PDPs that caught their interest. On PDPs, participants were interested in cacao origin information, ingredient information, and price point, although elements like tasting notes and other experiential details were also of interest. Movement was recursive between collection pages and PDPs, with participants often moving cyclically between the collection pages and multiple products. After participants felt they had a solid understanding of the products offered on the site, they then moved on to more learning-focused content.

**Learning-focused movement.** During a learning-focused movement path through a craft chocolate website, participants wanted to learn more about the company before considering its products. Participants frequently moved down the home page before continuing to “about us” pages where they could learn more about the company, or on to pages dedicated to cacao origin information. These groups were also more likely to visit pages that discussed events held by the craft chocolate company. On learning-focused movement paths, participants were less likely to revisit pages, instead moving on to a new page after they had viewed the previous one. After participants felt they understood the company behind the chocolate, they then moved on to more shopping-oriented content.

#### *1.3.3.2. Preferred ways of getting information*

Participants had a strong preference for text as the primary means of learning about a craft chocolate company. However, images, videos, and maps were identified as important supplementary content that enhanced a website’s storytelling capacity and had the potential to improve consumer trust. Participants’ purposes for visiting a site impacted the kinds of content they valued and wanted to engage with.

**Text.** Text was the preferred method of receiving information for 32 out of 34 participants. Sentiments including: “I always look at the text” (P6D) and “if it's information that I'm seeking, I would rather read text and I would rather have a clearly labelled section of it” (P2F) were common because participants largely wanted to get “all the primary information” (P4B) as quickly as possible and appreciated “more [opportunities] to control [their] experience” (P2H) on a site. As one group member put it: “I can read faster than I can listen to someone talk” (P2D). Text was also seen as non-intrusive when participants were navigating websites in public spaces: “if I'm in a store, and ... there are sounds from video or audio, I'm probably going to skip past those things” (P2D). Well-organized text was ultimately viewed as accessible and convenient.

**Images.** Images were predominantly seen by participants as a means of enhancing the on-site experience. For example, during the website activity, one participant suggested that “[having] a few more photos, like showing the process” (P6C) would add detail and clarity to a website. Group members also believed that “a picture is nice of the bar itself” (P4F) and found

that being able to view the chocolate pre-purchase improved confidence around buying. Many participants also appreciated images of cacao farms and farmers. “Having photos of the farmers [a maker is] working with or where the cacao is coming from or the production facility is always great” (P2C), said one participant. Another stated that they “like the story behind [photographs]” (P1C) of the farms, cacao farmers, and co-operatives. However, some participants expressed concerns about photographing farmers. “Is someone getting taken advantage of in this photo? Like, do they even feel comfortable being photographed?” (P3C) asked one participant. Another said that they thought some farmers looked “desperately uncomfortable being photographed” (P2C) during the website activity. Despite believing they added to the experience, group members were also critical of the authenticity of photographs in general, believing that they can be “misleading sometimes” (P1A) because “there's so much stock footage” (P1D). “Ultimately you can't prove that any of the photos are legit, you can take photos from all sorts of places and say these are the farmers and there's no way for us to prove that even if we're looking at it right like it could be all marketing” (P2D).

**Maps.** Maps were viewed as an effective means of situating a chocolate bar in place. As one group member put it: “I also like a good map where it's going to sum up all the origins” (P2G). Other participants valued being able to learn about cacao origin geographies through “[pictures] of the map of where [the cacao] is from in the world” (P4F). These preferences came into practice during the website review activity, when a participant said that they “would like to see a map of where that is” (P3B) when learning about how a craft chocolate company worked with a specific cacao origin. They continued: “if you're mentioning region, town, co-operative, just give a visual for that as well” (P3B).

**Videos.** Participants had strong negative associations with video-first information. “I’m just not going to spend time clicking on a video because it isn't necessarily going to show me what I want in it” (P2F), said one participant. Another stated that they “don't want to sit there and watch a video unless [they] can put it on double speed” (P6B). Once again, the purpose of a participant’s visit to the site was essential to understanding this perspective as group members “don’t want to be trying to listen to a silent video [while shopping in-store] and [seeing if they] can figure out enough from that” (P2H) to determine if they want to buy. However, participants felt very positive about video as “a secondary source of information” (P2H) that they could “set aside a time to [watch]” (P6E) later. When “videos [were] available for additional depth” (P6B), participants believed their inclusion “[showed] legitimacy [due to the] educational component” (P3B). One participant stated: “I do like videos if they're showing the actual practices of the farmers because you can see a lot about agroforestry practices in a fairly short film so that sort of enriches the experience for me” (P2B). Another particularly enjoyed “those little montage videos [where] it's them at a conference or something like that sort of an accumulation of how they're involved in the chocolate world” (P3B). Ultimately, participants believed that videos could contribute to an enriched experience on a craft chocolate site, but only when they were provided as supplementary rather than primary material.

### *1.3.4. Real Craft Chocolate*

During focus groups, all participants invested considerable energy in assessing whether a business was a genuine craft chocolate company or if it was commodity chocolate masquerading as craft. Group members spoke about how judging whether a company was “playing into the fact that bean-to-bar is in vogue” (P3B) was becoming increasingly difficult due to commodity chocolate companies adopting the language of craft chocolate. Ultimately, websites were seen as a source of truth for a company that enabled further vetting by the consumer.

#### *1.3.4.1. Buzzwords and marketing*

Group members were fluent in navigating the language of craft chocolate, and many of them had spent time learning the kind of language craft chocolate companies use to differentiate themselves from commodity chocolate. Participants were aware that they were being marketed to and expressed frustration at the influx of commodity chocolate companies using the language established by craft chocolate to educate and market to consumers.

In craft chocolate, there’s so many buzzwords and phrases ... honest companies are going to put those things on their labels to make sure they’re letting us know [they are legitimate] but the dishonest companies are going to do what they can to check those boxes too and [that] makes the market confusing for the consumer to figure out. Am I getting a legitimate craft chocolate bar or am I getting some commodity chocolate that's in disguise? (P6B)

Participants described an increase in commodity chocolate using the same terms as craft chocolate, at least at a surface level. They discussed how these terms emerged in an effort “to distinguish themselves from the big multinationals. And then the multinationals grab a hold of them and say, ‘well, technically, that's us, too. So let's slap that one on the label and move forward’” (P5F). One participant described the difficulty of shopping for chocolate at a local store:

I found this chocolate that seems to be craft and have a fair trade market. And when I tried to find ingredients and the origin it just don't show that. So I realized they invest a lot of marketing, and try to be like a craft one, but they don't really are (P6D).

A notable example of this assimilation was the terms ‘bean-to-bar’ and ‘farm-to-bar’. Certain participants noted that while “every chocolate is technically farm-to-bar [since] it all comes from a tree somewhere” (P5F), the term’s increased use by commodity chocolate companies in an effort to market to morally-driven consumers decreased participants’ abilities to judge what was a genuine craft chocolate company. This reduced participant trust in terms like ‘farm-to-bar’ and made participants more invested in vetting new companies before trial.

**Certifications:** Most participants did not believe external certifications, such as Fairtrade and Organic, were adequate in confirming the legitimacy of a chocolate company. “I don’t really trust or care for Organic certified or Fairtrade certified” (P1C), said one participant when

discussing the topic. Another asserted that Fairtrade “isn’t always what people think it means like you can have mass balance occurring and it's not entirely all Fairtrade” (P5E). However, one participant felt positively towards external certification so long as there was further supporting information: “I want to know, Fairtrade, direct trade, who's their certifying body, because I used to be a certified Organic farmer, and you can buy the sticker” (P3A).

#### *1.3.4.2. Vetting craft chocolate companies*

Participants frequently employed searching through websites as a tool to determine the legitimacy of a specific craft chocolate company. “The first two things [I look for on a website] are going to be definitely ingredients and origin of beans,” said one group member, “because if you're not revealing those things, it doesn't make me want to go further” (P5E). Detailed cacao origin information was the primary indicator for many participants: I look right away at what they tell us about the suppliers,” said one group member. They continued: “there's a whole lot of smoke and mirrors in the trade of all kinds of tropical crops. And if [the company is] not clear about where they get their raw materials from, then I'm not interested” (P2B). There was a commonplace understanding that websites were a place for a craft chocolate company to “show the work” (P5C). “You can learn a lot more about their social and economic practices” (P1E) said one participant. Another stated that “folks who show their cards have nothing to hide. And folks that don't have that material on their website, they're not hoping that you ask a question. They're just hoping you don't bother to notice” (P5C).

However, some participants expressed that a website that was too “slick” (P1C) made them less likely to trust the company. “Sometimes it feels performative when [ethical claims are] too in your face. And also it can feel like a copywriter wrote it and it's not actually genuine” (P5F), said one group member. “It's kind of more marketing than information” (P6A), said a different participant during the website activity, and another agreed, stating that the content “kind of loses that personal touch and connection” (P6C). Despite participants stating that they wanted websites that were “intuitively laid out” (P1A), during the website activity when there were small imperfections these were often regarded as signs of authenticity, that the people behind the brand were “real chocolate aficionados” (P1C). Group members wanted personal connection to craft chocolate makers and ultimately felt that the opportunity to connect decreased when a website was too ‘corporate’.

#### *1.3.4.3. Transparent supply chains*

While vetting craft chocolate companies, participants were extremely invested in the overarching transparency of each company. As one group member stated: “transparency is important. It's not like a bonus. It's kind of like a baseline at this point” (P5F). Craft chocolate companies’ willingness to “be open and communicative with their customers” (P2E) contributed to “feeling like we have that trust and transparency with their supply chain and their practices [which] is something that makes me want to be a repeat consumer” (P2E). Transparency, particularly relating to cacao sourcing and equitable pay, was “a huge piece” (P4B) that “makes [participants] feel a little bit better about eating [a company's] chocolate” (P4B) and improved

trust in the company. Increased specificity of cacao origin elevated trust as well. “I quite often feel suspicious of these kinds of claims of ethical sourcing ... it's very hard to see and to know, unless there's a high level of transparency” (P4A), said one participant.

A lack of transparency from craft chocolate companies coincidentally decreased trust for participants. For example, during the website activity a group critiqued the lack of ingredient information on the site, saying that “it takes 30 seconds for a company to add the ingredients list to the website, they've already got it, they have to put it on the packaging. If it's not there ... what else aren't they telling you?” (P2H). The notion that companies who omitted information were less trustworthy was also exemplified when a participant recounted a time they were trying to learn more about a specific company's cacao sourcing:

I can't tell if they're fake gimmick nonsense or what because I've even messaged them online and said, where do you get your cacao? And they don't even respond. So it's like you're doing a cool thing here using the whole pod. But I don't know if you're just slave labour and you know so it's just it's very frustrating to me (P6B).

Ultimately, transparency in terms of cacao sourcing was seen as an essential part of a legitimate craft chocolate business by participants, and a lack of disclosure marked a company as disingenuous.

#### *1.3.4.4. Small-Batch*

In addition to transparent supply chains, many participants wanted to see evidence of “an artisan-scale business” (P1C), which meant “small batches” (P1D) and “limited edition” (P5D) production runs. “The volume [a chocolate company] is producing, does that match up?” (P5D), asked one participant. Many participants were “invested in supporting small businesses” (P2F) and concerned with smaller craft chocolate companies being “bought out” (P6C, P1E) by commodity chocolate corporations. Participants wanted a craft chocolate company's website to tell them if that company was “owned by Hershey” (P1C)—or another commodity actor—because “there are so many [companies that] appear to be craft chocolate, but they're all getting bought out and owned by the same [commodity] companies” (P6C). Growth and expansion for craft chocolate companies was often seen as synonymous with becoming closer to commodity chocolate, regardless of supply chain traceability.

#### *1.3.5. Cacao Origin Geographies Through DTC Websites*

Group members used origin information on craft chocolate websites as a means of supplementing previous knowledge gained from time in the craft chocolate community. Websites were seen as a way of becoming “a little closer” (P5D) to ‘cacao producing’ geographies and the ‘chocolate consuming’ geographies that participants belonged to. “There's this almost disconnect” (P5F), said one participant about their perspective of North American craft chocolate lovers, “whereas we know one end [chocolate], and are fascinated by this other end [growing cacao]” (P5F). While some participants had experience at origin, many “[had] not travelled to any places where cacao is grown” (P5A) and used online content (including writing,

photographs, videos, maps, etc) from craft chocolate companies and other members of the craft chocolate community to enhance their chocolate experiences: “I've never been to any of the farms. I've never been to any of those countries. You ... see the pictures and you see the video ... on multiple makers' websites, social media” (P5E). Focus group members asserted that “actual knowledge of the place [the cacao comes from] is extremely important” (P3C), and that craft chocolate websites provided an important means of connection to places, processes, and people involved in cacao at origin. “I want to know the nuance of that part of Venezuela when I'm eating that bar” (P3A), said one participant. Another group member articulated how detailed cacao origin information dramatically improved their experience by telling us about their “favourite website” (P4E):

the reason that I absolutely love going to their website [is] that in their origin chocolate, they go to each of the countries and they speak about the countries and like—this is Liberia: ‘Liberia's a small country but despite its size it houses 42% of the entire region's remaining tropical rainforest. As most of the neighbouring countries’—I won't keep going. But I went through that website, every detail of it. And then they have these beautiful pictures that are associated with the country (P4E).

These increased levels of detail about cacao origins, from specific location and climate information to details about the people and cultures involved in production, were viewed positively as they enabled participants to connect further to the places where cacao is grown.

#### *1.3.5.1. Connecting flavour to place*

Focus group participants placed tremendous importance on the place the cacao was grown: the origin and the geography it is embedded in. Group members consistently gravitated towards searching for cacao origin information on craft chocolate sites, regardless if they were more focused on products or more focused on learning about the company. As one participant stated: “I want something [on a craft chocolate website] that gives me a deeper understanding of the geography” (P4A). Cacao origin was both a means of gauging a company's ethics and of determining bar preference. The concept of “terroir” (P1C, P2E, P4B, P4C, P6B, P6C), which refers to the distinct flavour characteristics imparted to a food by the environment wherein it is produced (Nesto, 2010), was commonly referenced both explicitly and implicitly while participants navigated websites together. Group members had specific flavour associations based on both country and region. For example, during a discussion about Peruvian cacao origins, one participant stated that a chocolate bar was “from the Ucayali region of Peru ... could be fruity” (P1B) rather than the ‘fudgy’ flavours other participants expected to find in Peruvian chocolate from different regions of the country. Participants also expressed preference based on cacao origin, such as when a group member stated, “I love Madagascar chocolate” (P6B) while viewing a bar from that origin. Website content therefore frequently acted as a trigger for pre-existing notions of cacao origins in addition to providing further understanding.

## 1.4. Discussion

Craft chocolate consumers choose to purchase craft chocolate, both in-person and online, because they believe it is superior to other forms of chocolate in terms of flavour and ethics. While many participants were morally invested in craft chocolate, the taste of the chocolate was an essential reason that participants purchased craft over conventional. Flavour is a critical deciding factor in food consumption choices, and consumers are willing to pay more for products that they perceive as tasting better, even when compared to discernable health and safety benefits (Boesveldt & de Graaf, 2017; Klein Hazebroek & Croijmans, 2023; Malone & Lusk, 2017). Participants' discussions about the taste of craft chocolate were also consistent with previous research findings that craft chocolate consumers believe craft chocolate tastes not just better, but fundamentally different from, commodity chocolate due to the higher quality of cacao used in production and the variety of cacao origins (Brown et al., 2020; Leissle, 2017). These discussions also indicated a sense of developed connoisseurship that impacted participants' overall perspectives of chocolate. The perceived quality and flavour benefits of craft chocolate are therefore essential to any discussion of the craft chocolate consumer perspective.

Despite the clear importance of taste, many participants were equally engaged with the ethical aspects of craft chocolate's moral market values. As a business sector that is dedicated to creating social value in addition to—and often to the detriment of—revenue generation, craft chocolate can be understood as a moral market that centers specific social goals: ethical cacao sourcing, industry transparency and collaboration, and explicit consumer education (Fourcade & Healy, 2007; Georgallis & Lee, 2020; Woolley et al., 2021). These three goals are visible in focus group participants' investment in equitable cacao supply chains, insistence on transparency from craft chocolate companies, and desire to learn more about cacao origins and craft chocolate. Participants invested substantial time and effort into determining if a company was 'genuine'; in addition to doing internet research, they would contact companies directly and compare knowledge with their peers where possible. As consumers are held personally responsible for their individual consumption choices within the neoliberal framework of contemporary market capitalism, they frequently experience anxieties about the social, economic, ecological, and even personal consequences of consumption (Carrington et al., 2016; Caruana et al., 2020; Lewis & Potter, 2011). This unease is particularly common among the upper middle class, which is the most likely class demographic for craft chocolate consumers (Leissle, 2017; Zimmerman, 2015). Participants' efforts to ensure their chocolate consumption aligns with their personal ethical values, and their commitment to dollar voting, reflects these tensions.

Focus group members' anxieties about ethical consumption, and their overall willingness to pay, were highly impacted by how much they trusted the company they were purchasing from. Trust has been identified as an essential credence attribute for chocolate consumption (Brown et al., 2020; Ford et al., 1988). For craft chocolate consumers, the most important proxy for trust is a high level of company transparency. Participants positioned companies that did not communicate supply chain information—such as cacao sourcing and pricing—to their consumers

as inherently untrustworthy. In contrast, companies that disclosed origin information were recognized as trustworthy. Corporate transparency, which can be understood as a “commitment to operating in the open” (Birchall, 2014, p. 78) is a value-driven business strategy common in moral markets, including the craft chocolate sector (Boegman et al., 2023; Cadby et al., 2021; Leissle, 2017; Richards, 2021; Veselinova & Samonikov, 2018; Woolley et al., 2021).

Transparent companies embrace consumer scrutiny; consumers who value transparency embrace the work of auditing. While transparency is often seen as a more neutral form of information delivery, it also operates within neoliberal logics of consumption as the neoliberal insistence on choice necessitates transparency (Birchall, 2014). How are ethically motivated consumers, held culpable for their individual purchasing decisions, able to make the ‘right’ decision otherwise? Transparency allows consumers to have confidence that a craft chocolate maker is conducting business honourably; as such, both craft chocolate consumers and the companies they buy from are equally invested in the reification of transparency as trust.

With over 92% of North Americans connected to the internet, websites are one of the most easily and rapidly accessible parts of a company for North American consumers. Websites have the potential to be a consumer’s only touchpoint with a business (Demangeot & Broderick, 2016; Hagen et al., 2024; The World Bank, 2024). This ease of access has led to craft chocolate websites becoming a critical site of assessment for consumers. Considered representative of the company, websites are an essential ‘source of truth’ that can be used by businesses to convey specific brand values and share information with consumers. For craft chocolate consumers, who are particularly willing to engage with craft chocolate makers’ desires to share, a website that feels genuine and aligns with expectations for transparency is crucial to establishing trust. Participants articulated that DTC craft chocolate websites were not simply a digital storefront for delicious chocolate, but rather an opportunity to enter an emotional relationship with the chocolate maker, their company, and its values. This process must happen quickly—sometimes even in just a few seconds while standing in a store aisle. As such, craft chocolates makers face the challenge of developing a website that is not only functional and easy to navigate, but also educates and engages its audience. Most importantly, they must do so authentically.

How does a craft chocolate maker develop such a positive online experience? Demangeot & Broderick (2016) assert that online shoppers seek both information and experiences when visiting websites, which aligns with focus group participants’ desires to learn about makers and cacao origins, and to engage more deeply with the craft chocolate community while online. As websites that are useable are perceived as more pleasurable, a website with intuitive navigation that allows the user to accomplish their goals is essential (Jongmans et al., 2022). Text-first information should be prioritized to communicate brand story and values, product details and credence attributes, and educational content. However, supplementary imagery and videos add to the overall experience of a DTC craft chocolate website and have the potential to increase trust and connection with a brand. As participants were somewhat divided on portraying farmers on the sites of craft chocolate companies, makers who wish to do so would likely be able to increase consumer trust by including a statement about cacao farmer’s consent to being photographed or

filmed, and—if they did not capture the content themselves—information on who they received the content from. Aligning with conventional chocolate consumers and the perspectives of many craft makers themselves, participants were ambivalent at best about the importance of showcasing external certification on a website (Boegman et al., 2023; Brown et al., 2020).

The most important piece of information to craft chocolate consumers when viewing a maker's website was clarity and specificity about the cacao origins being used. For participants who valued equitable and transparent sourcing, the ability to locate and assess this information was a prerequisite for purchase or any further engagement with the brand. For participants who were more invested in taste, cacao origin information was useful to determine a bar's flavour profile and inform purchase decisions. Website content both reinforced participants' pre-established notions of cacao origins and provided new opportunities to learn about and become connected with these geographies. Digital placemaking can be understood as a process in which the experiences of places are created, transformed, and mediated through interaction with a digital representation of that place (Główczyński, 2024). The text, images, videos, and maps of cacao origin geographies proffered by craft chocolate websites create digital representations of those places that are then interpreted by those who interact with them. Główczyński (2024) asserts that interacting with a digital representation of a place enables the creation of experiences without physically visiting that place. Despite many participants having never visited cacao origins, they were still able to engage with origins experientially through DTC craft chocolate websites. Knowing cacao origin information enhanced the experience of eating chocolate as participants were able to situate that specific bar within their understanding of what chocolate from that origin 'should' taste like. Whether their expectations were upheld or subverted, the eating experience was enriched. Transparent descriptions of cacao origin, ostensibly neutral representations that ensure authenticity and equitable treatment, are ultimately an inherently mediated form of digital placemaking that influences how craft chocolate consumers understand cacao origin geographies.

## **1.5. Conclusion**

In this study, we explored how North American craft chocolate consumers employ, understand, and navigate DTC craft chocolate websites. We also considered how craft chocolate businesses can create experiential learning for their consumers, enhancing consumers' perceived connection to cacao origins and the craft chocolate companies themselves. Our structured facilitation of research participant engagement with DTC websites allowed for assessing both informational and experiential factors. Our findings demonstrate that a navigable site which answered basic consumer questions was essential to a positive experience. In addition to purchasing chocolate, craft chocolate consumers visit DTC craft chocolate websites to engage more deeply with the maker and their brand, as well as to determine whether a company is 'genuinely' craft. This process of assessment and emphasis on cacao origin transparency as a proxy for trust aligns with moral market logics of ethical consumption. Consumer interactions with craft chocolate DTC websites also firmly position these sites as loci of digital placemaking

wherein cacao origin geographies are not just represented but *constructed* by and for craft chocolate consumers. This phenomenon merits more detailed analysis of how craft chocolate companies are shaping the stories that are told about these origins, potentially through case studies of specific cacao origins.

This research project focused specifically on North American craft chocolate consumers' interactions with DTC craft chocolate websites belonging to individual companies. Other research avenues could include investigating populations outside of North America, exploring the perspectives of non-craft chocolate consumers to determine differences in perspectives and potentially clarify how to conduct outreach into new markets, or focusing on online aggregate craft chocolate retailers such as Bar and Cocoa or Caputos instead of individual craft chocolate makers' websites. Additionally, research has indicated that consumer perceptions of businesses and products are formed through social interactions between consumers through digital platforms such as product reviews and social media (Johnstone & Lindh, 2021). As the craft chocolate community spans global borders, research into how electronic word of mouth (eWOM) interactions between craft chocolate consumers influence perceptions of craft chocolate companies would provide a novel and valuable approach to consumer interactions with craft chocolate.

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## Chapter Two

### **Incredible, Ethical, Sustainable Cacao: Exploring Language Used on Craft Chocolate Direct-to-Consumer Websites**

**Abstract:** In the North American craft chocolate sector, websites present a critical opportunity for digitally-connected consumers to learn about the value of craft chocolate and cacao origins. This study combines a counting method with two text analysis methods—term frequency-inverse document frequency (TF-IDF) and biterm topic modelling (BTM)—to identify themes in the language used on direct-to-consumer (DTC) craft chocolate websites with online sales options. We designed a mixed methods approach to study how chocolate companies are using consumer education as part of their marketing strategies. A novel dataset comprising 257 craft chocolate websites that sell chocolate in North America was combined with an in-depth qualitative framework analysis on a randomly selected subsample of 10 of these websites. Results suggest that craft chocolate companies emphasize product descriptions and purchase-focused language, constructing purchase-oriented spaces that prioritize buying over learning. Consumer education about cacao sourcing and connection to ethical ‘moral market’ claims is primarily present as a market differentiation strategy.

**Keywords:** digital marketing, globalization, food studies, e-commerce, ethical consumption

## 2.1. Introduction

Globalization has expanded consumers' awareness of where their products come from as well as the social and environmental harms associated with those purchases (Hiller & Goworek, 2023; McCabe, 2015). Ethical consumption, which focuses on individual consumers making purchase choices they believe contribute towards positive social impact, is becoming increasingly popular in North American households (Carrington et al., 2016; Davies & Gutsche, 2016; Lewis & Potter, 2011). Consumer demand for ethical products compels corporations to 'clean up' their global supply chains through better labour standards, reduced environmental degradation, and increased transparency for product sourcing (Lewis & Potter, 2011; McCabe, 2015). Some global food products, such as chocolate, face unique challenges when building and communicating ethical sourcing practices as they rely primarily on smallholder production in equatorial regions that are often distant from their primary consumer markets (Leissle, 2018; Rueda et al., 2018; Zimmerer et al., 2018). In addition to making it more strenuous to access accurate information and ensure equitable treatment of smallholders, the physical distance between producer and consumer geographies creates significant barriers to fully understanding the impacts of consumption choices. As a result, businesses with global supply chains employ marketing tactics that attempt to connect consumers to the origins of their products, often using ethical claims as a form of market differentiation (Davies & Gutsche, 2016).

Websites are a prominent marketing channel as they provide an easily accessible means of sharing information about products and brand values with consumers. They enable rapid consumer education, which is especially relevant for the craft chocolate sector as a 'moral market' focused on equitable and sustainable chocolate production (Boegman et al., 2023; Fourcade & Healy, 2007; Gallo et al., 2017). This sector has emerged over the past two decades in response to an increasing awareness surrounding the environmental and social impacts of commodity cocoa production in vulnerable ecosystems and low-income communities (Cadby & Araki, 2022; Carodenuto, 2019; Fountain & Huetz-Adams, 2023; Georgallis & Lee, 2020; Leissle, 2017, 2018; Maguire-Rajpaul et al., 2022; Pendrill et al., 2019; Recanati et al., 2018; Rueda et al., 2018; Woolley et al., 2021). Because of craft chocolate's higher per-unit pricing as compared to conventional chocolate, the craft chocolate sector has a considerable barrier to entry for consumers (Cadby, 2021). This sector often requires heightened consumer awareness of global issues, or personal motivation, to justify purchase (Cadby & Araki, 2022; Leissle, 2017). Most chocolate consumers in North America are not aware of the complex international journey cacao seeds take to become chocolate, nor of the five to six million smallholder farmers who cultivate cacao, often as a main livelihood strategy (Bermudez et al., 2022). Many companies in the craft chocolate sector have therefore assumed and embraced consumer education as part of their corporate mission. Some scholars have posited that effective consumer education about cacao origins and chocolate quality is essential to this sector's overall success (Cadby, 2021; Woolley et al., 2021). Because websites are a common touchpoint between brands and consumers, they provide a valuable opportunity to communicate key differences between craft and conventional chocolate (Hagen et al., 2024).

Since more than 92% of North Americans are connected to the internet, online interactions have become one of the easiest and most rapidly accessible means of engaging with a company for North American consumers (The World Bank, 2024). ‘Direct-to-Consumer’ (DTC) websites allow consumers to purchase from a company via their website without entering a brick-and-mortar retail location (McKee et al., 2023). This prevalence of online shopping means that, for many companies, e-commerce is a primary channel to reach consumers (Hagen et al., 2024; Vulkan, 2020). The ability for an individual to discover, engage with, and purchase from a company entirely online is extremely powerful as it means that a consumer’s only touchpoint with a business is digital (Demangeot & Broderick, 2016). These circumstances have led to business’ websites becoming a critical resource for consumers when making purchasing decisions. However, companies are incentivized to present themselves in the best possible light to encourage consumers to purchase from them, which leads to a potential overstatement of company impact at origin (Szabo & Webster, 2021).

Previous research has shown that producer-generated text-based communication contributes to understanding the context around food and beverage products, impacting consumer perception and consumption decisions (Brown et al., 2020; Calvert et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2013; Rousseau, 2015; Thomas & Pickering, 2003). Due to the prevalence of text as a medium for online communication,<sup>4</sup> DTC websites have the potential to provide insights into what information craft chocolate companies consider the most salient for conveying their brand and products. The craft chocolate sector is relatively young, with early roots in North America beginning in the 1990’s and more rapid growth from the 2010’s onward (Giller, 2017; Woolley et al., 2021). Due to the craft chocolate sector’s infancy, there is limited research into how craft chocolate companies communicate with consumers in general, but this lack is especially evident in digital environments. With this paper, we identify the current communication trends within craft chocolate DTC websites. We employ the following questions to structure our approach:

**RQ1:** What themes are prevalent in the text of DTC craft chocolate websites operating in North America?

**RQ2:** How does the commerce-driven context of DTC craft chocolate websites impact their content and messaging?

By exploring content themes on DTC websites operating within the North American craft chocolate sector, we aim to understand the effectiveness of using consumer education to promote change in purchase-oriented spaces, where the main goal is to sell a product. In the following article, we outline contextual theory, our methods, sampling, data collection, and analysis before highlighting major findings. We then discuss implications for the craft chocolate sector and suggest trajectories of future study.

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<sup>4</sup> Although there has been a semi-recent shift towards video-first communication for brands due to the rise of platforms like TikTok, website content remains predominantly text-first.

## 2.2. Theoretical Background

### 2.2.1. *Ethical Consumption and Craft Chocolate*

While ethical consumption has long existed as a social practice, over the past few decades there has been a re-orientation towards morally-driven consumption within contemporary consumer culture (Carrington et al., 2016; Davies & Gutsche, 2016; Hiller & Goworek, 2023; Lewis & Potter, 2011; Newholm et al., 2015). ‘Ethical consumption’ can be understood as an umbrella term for a diverse set of social concerns including overconsumption, sustainability, materialism, and consumer-producer relations that realize themselves in the form of politicized lifestyle practices (Davies & Gutsche, 2016; Hiller & Goworek, 2023; Lewis & Potter, 2011). The frequency with which consumers make consistent ethical consumption choices in practice is contested and depends on sociocultural contexts like personal identification with an issue, the desire to belong, or emotions such as guilt (Carrington et al., 2016; Davies & Gutsche, 2016). However, consumers are increasingly understanding themselves, and being understood by businesses, as ‘citizen consumers’ who can express a level of agency and power through ‘voting with one’s dollars’ (Hiller & Goworek, 2023; Lewis & Potter, 2011; Zimmerman, 2015). Although dollar voting is unlikely to produce substantive social change, it remains a powerful symbol for those invested in neoliberal constructions of ethical consumption and the maintenance of moral markets.

Within food systems, ethical consumption often revolves around alternatives to conventional food systems, including the organic movement, the ‘slow food’ and ‘buy local’ food movements, or a refusal to eat certain foods due to concerns about the means of production (Guthman, 2008; Jaffee & Howard, 2010; Lee et al., 2013; Slow Food, 2024; The Vegan Society, 2024; Zimmerman, 2015). These movements are often positioned as a rejection of industrialized, large-scale production and as a shift towards smaller quantities of food travelling less distance (Zimmerman, 2015). Chocolate therefore presents a certain challenge to North American consumers due to the distant geographies of cacao production. In the craft chocolate sector, chocolate makers assuage consumer anxieties around immoral consumption by leaning into small-scale, ‘artisan,’ or ‘support local business’ narratives (Caruana et al., 2020; Leissle, 2017).<sup>5</sup> Previous researchers have also articulated the racialized and classed dynamics of ethical consumption in food: those supporting—both financially and socially—alternative food movements are predominantly white and belonging to the professional middle class (Guthman, 2008; Zimmerman, 2015). Understanding how class-based and “whitened cultural histories” (Guthman, 2008, p. 433) impact *who* is instinctively welcomed into these spaces is particularly important in the context of chocolate. Early chocolate consumption in the Global North was realized through the colonial exploitation of Black and Indigenous peoples, and chocolate’s current value chains often continue to reify neocolonial patterns of trade (Clarence-Smith, 2000; Coe & Coe, 2013; Leissle, 2018; Maguire-Rajpaul et al., 2022; Walker, 2007). Additionally,

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<sup>5</sup> Within the North American context, ‘local chocolate’ could be considered hyperbolic as most businesses local to North America (excluding Hawaii) must source cacao from outside their home region.

while the price of a craft chocolate bar (often \$10-\$18 USD per bar) ostensibly improves livelihoods for cacao smallholders, it also demonstrates the limited access for specific class demographics based on affordability (Leissle, 2017; Zimmerman, 2015). Understanding who is invested in the narratives upheld by craft chocolate companies is essential to gaining insight into which messages are reified in this market sector.

The current focus on ethical consumption has also resulted in businesses positioning themselves as good, responsible citizens that uphold the same values as their consumers (Georgallis & Lee, 2020; Lewis & Potter, 2011). Social movements are a catalyst for the formation of ‘moral markets’, which are business sectors typified by a desire to provide market solutions for environmental and social issues (Fourcade & Healy, 2007; Georgallis & Lee, 2020; Sine & Lee, 2009). Similar to consumer entry into ethical consumption, business entry into moral markets depends on social context in addition to congruence with organizational identity (Georgallis & Lee, 2020; Sikavica & Pozner, 2013). Alongside forming collective ethical goals, moral markets engage in oppositional framing to differentiate themselves from more conventional industry actors when appealing to the social movements that might generate sales (Georgallis & Lee, 2020; Sikavica & Pozner, 2013). The products and services offered within a moral market are constructed as higher quality and ethically superior to conventional offerings (Georgallis & Lee, 2020; Sikavica & Pozner, 2013). Craft chocolate operates as a moral market because it emerged in part out of ethical concerns related to commodity chocolate and positions itself in contrast to this industry by claiming a higher-quality, value-driven product (Gallo et al., 2017; McCabe, 2015).

At the core of ethical consumption is the neoliberal belief that individuals' personal lifestyle choices can have tangible sociopolitical impacts. While individual actions may have some effect, prioritizing personal change over collective organization for regulatory change may harm efforts to create substantive changes on a myriad of issues, including those faced by the chocolate industry such as deforestation, economic injustice, and labor exploitation of smallholders (Fountain & Huetz-Adams, 2023; Littler, 2011). Additionally, relying on the market to solve social issues often results in businesses' overstating their impact in an attempt to appeal to the ethically-minded consumers that they court (Littler, 2011). One extremely prominent example of overstated impact within the chocolate industry and other markets is greenwashing, an action that involves misleading consumers about the positive environmental impact of a company, product, or service, through either exaggeration or misinformation (Delmas & Burbano, 2011; Fountain & Huetz-Adams, 2023; Szabo & Webster, 2021; Wu et al., 2020). Like other forms of ethical overstatement, greenwashing is harmful because it offers the illusion of solving problems without tangibly contributing to their resolution, and—if revealed—reduces consumer trust over time (Delmas & Burbano, 2011; Gosselt et al., 2019; Szabo & Webster, 2021). Szabo and Webster (2021) explore websites as a site for greenwashing, arguing that a well-designed website can be a powerfully persuasive tool for a business to communicate brand values and ethical claims—regardless of their truth. Many craft chocolate companies also

use their websites to make claims of product sustainability in addition to labour and economic justice, rendering these sites a critical area of exploration around ethical claims within the sector.

### ***2.2.2. Affordances of e-Commerce***

In most of North America, access to the internet and its accompanying digital literacies is essential to numerous actions that intertwine online and offline spaces (Gillespie, 2016; Willson, 2017). Feminist Science and Technology Studies (STS) researchers assert that there is an interrelationship between user and technology that enables each one to act upon the other in ways that can influence behaviour for both the user and the technology in question (Bivens & Hoque, 2018; Gillespie, 2016; Kitchin & Dodge, 2011; J. Law, 2019; Suchman, 1993; ten Oever, 2021; Willson, 2017). Consequently, Hutchby (2001) asserts that technologies have distinct sets of affordances that both enable and constrain particular activities for users. These affordances can come from an artifact's innate materiality, or they can be designed into being. While it is easy at first glance to view technologies as neutral due to their omnipresence in our lives, they contain specific qualities that enable us to act in certain ways and reject others. Websites are just one example of software's socio-materiality: because they and their supporting infrastructure are designed by people and the cultures we live in, they become imbued with the circumstances of their production (Balsamo, 2011; Kitchin & Dodge, 2011).

Additionally, websites are typically designed to accomplish specific goals, including but not limited to education, entertainment, and sales. e-Commerce is one arm of an increasingly financialized internet that prioritizes corporate interests (i.e. revenue generation) over the agency of end users (ten Oever, 2021). Online shopping has become an essential feature of contemporary consumption practices in North America, exemplifying how our everyday habits are becoming steadily more mediated through digital technologies (Hagen et al., 2024; Willson, 2017). Specifically, e-commerce websites have reshaped the spatiotemporality of consumption by expanding the spaces and times in which products can be purchased (Kitchin & Dodge, 2011). The primary goal of an e-commerce website is to sell products, and as such these sites contain a specific set of technological affordances (Hutchby, 2001; Vulkan, 2020). The presence of product detail pages (PDPs), virtual shopping carts, and payment processors all enable the user—or shopper—to act in certain ways. While consumers come to e-commerce sites for a variety of reasons including information and entertainment, the affordances and constraints of these websites are purchase-oriented in that they work to encourage conversion (Bleier et al., 2019; Close & Kukar-Kinney, 2010; Davis & Chouinard, 2017; Demangeot & Broderick, 2016; Jongmans et al., 2022; Vulkan, 2020). An individual coming to an e-commerce site, no matter their purpose for visiting, will be asked to shop.

However, a user is not bound to a technology's affordances. At every stage of interaction, the user has the option to refuse the encouraged course of action or to engage with the artifact in an entirely different manner than what was afforded to them (Davis & Chouinard, 2017; Hutchby, 2001). Davis and Chouinard (2017) assert that to reject the call of an affordance, the user must perceive a different path of action and have the skill to navigate outside of the

prescribed path, both of which are governed by cultural norms. And as higher numbers of users employ a technology subversively, it may be reshaped to meet those needs. Within the context of online marketing, meeting consumers where they want to go is a critical strategy for website viewer retention and one that has led to a rise in informative content such as blog articles and storytelling tactics (Almond Solutions, 2023; Gachassin et al., 2023; Shopify Staff, 2024). Especially in business sectors that require elevated consumer education, such as craft chocolate, it is likely that e-commerce sites afford information and storytelling in addition to conversion.

### **2.3. Methods**

To understand how craft chocolate companies communicate on their DTC websites, we combined a counting method with term frequency-inverse document frequency (TF-IDF) and biterm topic modelling (BTM) text analyses (Cheng et al., 2014; Law et al., 2010). Counting methods are a commonly used tool to evaluate websites by determining content type, location, and richness (Law et al., 2010). The inherent flexibility of the counting method (see Appendix A for the checklist used), facilitates analyzing diverse types of online content in a systematic and rigorous way (Law et al., 2010). Using a counting method facilitated the assessment of not only the type of content related to cacao origin on DTC craft chocolate websites, but also the location of this content on the site and the media used to communicate that information.

Given the predominance of short text on these websites, textual analysis was a core component of our iterative methodology. TF-IDF was used to conduct initial explorations of site themes, while BTM—specifically designed to analyze shorter text data by topic similarity—was selected to accommodate these smaller units of unstructured text (Cheng et al., 2014; Russell & Klassen, 2019; Yan et al., 2013). As an unsupervised learning technique, BTM identifies ‘topics’ in texts by locating terms that occur together contextually more frequently than would be presumed by chance (Calvert et al., 2023; Cheng et al., 2014; Yan et al., 2013). BTM has also been successfully used to analyze the website content of other craft industries such as cider and wine, indicating a high suitability for this project (An, 2022; Calvert et al., 2023).

#### ***2.3.1. Sampling and Data Collection***

Websites were included in the dataset if they belonged to an individual company that sold craft chocolate, operated in North America (regardless of company headquarters location), and allowed for a consumer to make a purchase directly from the website. Data collection occurred from June to October 2023. The companies comprising the dataset were identified through internet searches for all craft chocolate companies in The Chocolate Project’s<sup>6</sup> database, vendor lists from the 2022 Northwest Chocolate Festival (NWCF),<sup>7</sup> lists provided by networking contacts made at the 2022 NWCF, and additional internet research. After compiling an initial list of 356 companies, 257 (72%) of these businesses’ websites fit the sampling criteria and were

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<sup>6</sup> The Chocolate Project is Canada’s largest craft chocolate retailer and educator.

<sup>7</sup> The Northwest Chocolate Festival is North America’s largest craft chocolate festival, bringing together craft chocolate makers, consumers, and others in the craft chocolate industry.

included in the dataset. Woolley et al. (2021) identified 177 businesses located in the United States by the end of 2016, which indicates our dataset represents a significant portion of today's population.

We collected metadata such as company attributes including headquarter location, fulfilment regions, level of geographic specificity shared about cacao origin, whether the company makes ethical claims about cacao sourcing, and what third-party certifications were mentioned (such as Organic and Fairtrade). Additionally, we collected metadata about what subpaths of the website listed cacao origin information, set to one of the following categories: Home page, About page, Product page, and Other non-standard pages (including pages featuring cacao sourcing or chocolate-making information and individual blog articles). Additionally, data were collected about the media used to communicate cacao origin (text, photo, audiovisual, and map data).

Metadata were manually recorded in a spreadsheet while text data for the established page categories on all sites were retrieved by saving an offline copy of each webpage and all its sub-resources via the open-source browser extension SingleFile version 1.22.45 (Lormeau, 2023). In all, 11,205 individual web pages were collected, totalling 19.3 GB. The large size of this dataset was due to each page being fully self-contained, meaning that all web assets (text, photos, videos, etc) were not deduplicated. These webpage data were then reduced to only their human-readable text content, discarding all other web assets to total 34.6 MB.<sup>8</sup>

### ***2.3.2. Data Analysis***

The counting method for metadata was effective at identifying the existence and frequency of specific website features. However, the limited ability of this method to facilitate more in-depth analysis of website content combined with the high prevalence of text used on websites to communicate with users necessitated additional textual analysis. The website text content was gathered by SingleFile but required extraction for further analysis, which was done with a script in Python version 3.12.2 to generate a corpus made of the 11,205 text files (Python Software Foundation, 2024). These files were filtered to remove English stop words using the Python Natural Language Toolkit (NLTK) package, which is a standard tool for data analysis. Further tokenization and TF-IDF analyses were also performed using the NLTK package. TF-IDF identifies both common and rare words across a body of text and is a method of showcasing the importance of a given term when compared to an entire document or corpus (Russell & Klassen, 2019). During analysis, the word “chocolate” emerged as the most popular word in the dataset even above stop words such as “the” or “and,” appearing 159,852 times. Due to its prevalence, “chocolate” decreased stability in the BTM and was therefore treated as a stop word.

Based on the procedures outlined in Calvert et al. (2023), Cheng et al. (2014), and Yan et al. (2013), the text was analyzed using BTM. We used the package bitermplus version 0.7.0—a more performant version of Yan et al.'s original BTM algorithm—to implement the topic

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<sup>8</sup> The original webpage data was kept for the purposes of reproducibility.

modelling (Terpilowski, 2023). Biterm co-occurrences were assessed within the entire corpus as well as within subcorpora created by segmenting the dataset into the following: Product pages (5,713 pages), Home pages (246 pages), About pages (155 pages), and Cacao Origin pages (166 pages). The BTM algorithm expects an inherent number of topics within a corpus, and the model will locate distribution trends of terms (words) within this set topic number. There is currently no standard for determining the correct number of topics for a corpus, meaning each corpus must be considered on an individual basis. Current research recommends training a BTM with several discrete topic numbers to determine which number yields the highest subjective coherence within the topic clusters.

The BTM algorithm offers many parameters beyond the number of topics ( $K$ ), however given the exploratory nature of this project these parameters were set to their recommended values ( $\alpha = 50/K$ ,  $\beta = 0.01$ ) as determined by Cheng et al. (2014). BTMs were trained with a different number of topics: 9 BTMs ( $K = 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9$ ) read the whole corpus, while 5 BTMs ( $K = 3, 4, 5, 6, 7$ ) read only the Product, About, Home, and Cacao Origin subcorpora. Topics were considered coherent when a clear theme was identifiable within each cluster with little repetition of unrelated terms across topics. Python's `tmplot` package was used to visualize the BTM output (Terpilowski, 2024).

While TF-IDF and BTM analysis are effective at identifying common terms that can be used to understand important topics within a dataset, it can be difficult to understand how these text-based topics interact with other website elements. Website data was therefore also qualitatively analyzed to confirm accuracy of the text modelling and to improve the robustness and rigor of the findings by adding analytical depth. A subset of 10 websites were randomly sampled from the craft chocolate website database and explored through a 'framework' analysis.<sup>9</sup> Framework analysis is a generic qualitative method that is flexible across many different use cases and has been previously used to analyze website content (Allison et al., 2019; Ritchie & Spencer, 2002). It involves text familiarization, developing a thematic framework for analysis, charting the texts, and mapping the dataset (Ritchie & Spencer, 2002). Data was charted and mapped using this method, with supplemental thematic diagramming. By combining text analysis with a framework analysis, we elicited a deeper contextual understanding of how text on websites was spatially experienced and enhanced our interpretation of the themes that emerged during the text analysis.

## **2.4. Results**

### ***2.4.1. Company Information***

The majority of craft chocolate companies operating DTC sites that ship orders in North America are based out of the United States (74%), with Canadian companies comprising 15% of

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<sup>9</sup> Websites in the subsample reflected similar geographic location divisions as in the whole dataset.

the sample.<sup>10</sup> The remaining 10% of companies are located in countries outside North America and split evenly between cacao origin countries and non-cacao origin countries. Fulfillment availability is relatively consistent with company location, with 58% of companies shipping only within the United States, 33% of companies shipping within both the United States and Canada, and just 9% shipping only within Canada.

#### ***2.4.2. Cacao Origin Information Shared by Craft Chocolate Companies***

Nearly all craft chocolate companies in the sample (97%) share some form of cacao origin information on their websites. This is predominantly the origin countries of the cacao they source from (96%). Fewer, but still a substantial number of companies shared more granular information, such as a region within a country (69%), or a specific farm or co-operative (38%).<sup>11</sup> Only 3% of companies sampled did not share any cacao origin information. Many companies are sharing more than one type of information, with 68% sharing both country and region, and 35% sharing country, region, and specific farm or co-operative.

Sharing origin information is strongly connected to ethical claims. Most companies (96%) that share cacao origin information specifically make an ethical claim about sourcing, such as “direct trade, ethically made” (Askinosie Chocolate, 2024) or “incredible, ethical, sustainable cacao” in Figure 2.1 below (Ritual Chocolate, 2024). Only 4% of companies that shared cacao origin information did not connect it to ethics. While external certifications are generally a common way to quickly communicate a series of ethical practices to consumers, most craft chocolate companies in the sample do not appear to be certified since they do not publicize any certifications on their website (76%). For those that did share this information, certified Organic was the most popular external certification (21%), and other certifications included Non-GMO separate from Organic (8%), Fairtrade (6%), Rainforest Alliance/UTZ (2%), and B Corporation (1%).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> As the population of Canada is approximately 12% of the population of the United States, this distribution of craft chocolate companies is fairly aligned with population (Statistics Canada, 2024; United States Census Bureau, 2024).

<sup>11</sup> As websites may have engaged in multiple categories (for example sharing both a cacao origin region and country), these percentages do not add to 100%.

<sup>12</sup> Data on external certifications specifically related to dietary requirements (vegan, allergen-free, kosher, etc) were not collected due to the inconsistencies in labeling for certain diet-related certifications.

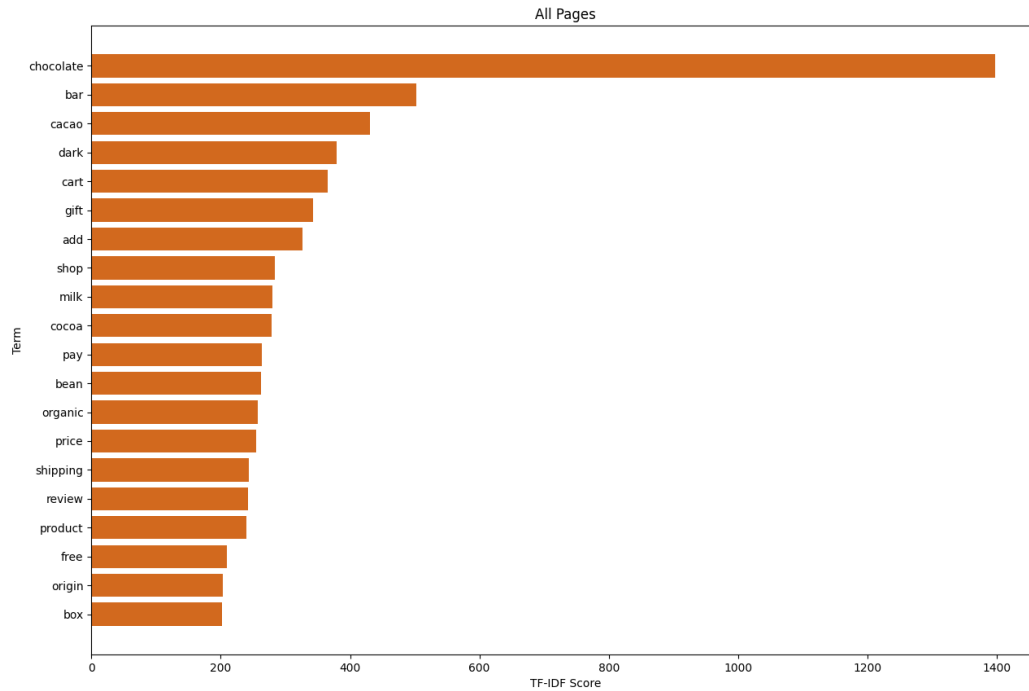


**Figure 2.1.** A screenshot of Ritual’s Chocolate’s Our Story (About) page highlighting their ethical claims around cacao sourcing. Taken March 18, 2024.

### ***2.4.3. How Craft Chocolate Companies Communicate Origin Information to Consumers***

Cacao origin information was most frequently communicated on product pages (90%). About pages (76%) and Home pages (72%) were also frequently used to convey cacao origin information to consumers. Additionally, 78% of sampled sites contained non-standard pages (such as pages dedicated to specific cacao origins, the chocolate making process and/or ingredients, awards pages, blog articles, recipes, etc). Of these companies with non-standard pages, 73% used them to communicate cacao origin information (34% of non-standard pages were solely dedicated to cacao origins). Nearly all companies discussing origin information were using text to do so (98%), and a substantial share of sites only used text (39%). Most websites also used photographs (54%), while only 20% of sites used audiovisual content (video) and just 10% of sites used maps to share cacao origin.

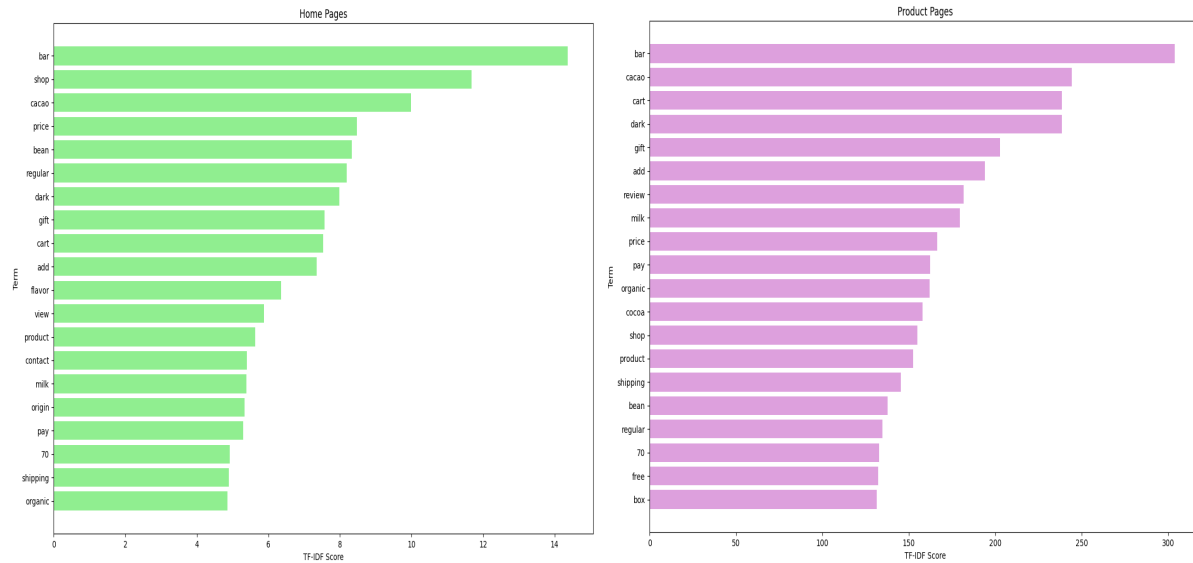
#### 2.4.4. Frequency-Based Results (TF-IDF)



**Figure 2.2.** Term frequency-inverse document frequency (TF-IDF) analysis of terms from DTC craft chocolate websites shows that the most important terms across the corpus are related to describing and purchasing products. The term “chocolate” has a high TF-IDF score of 1396.97 due to its frequency within the corpus.<sup>13</sup>

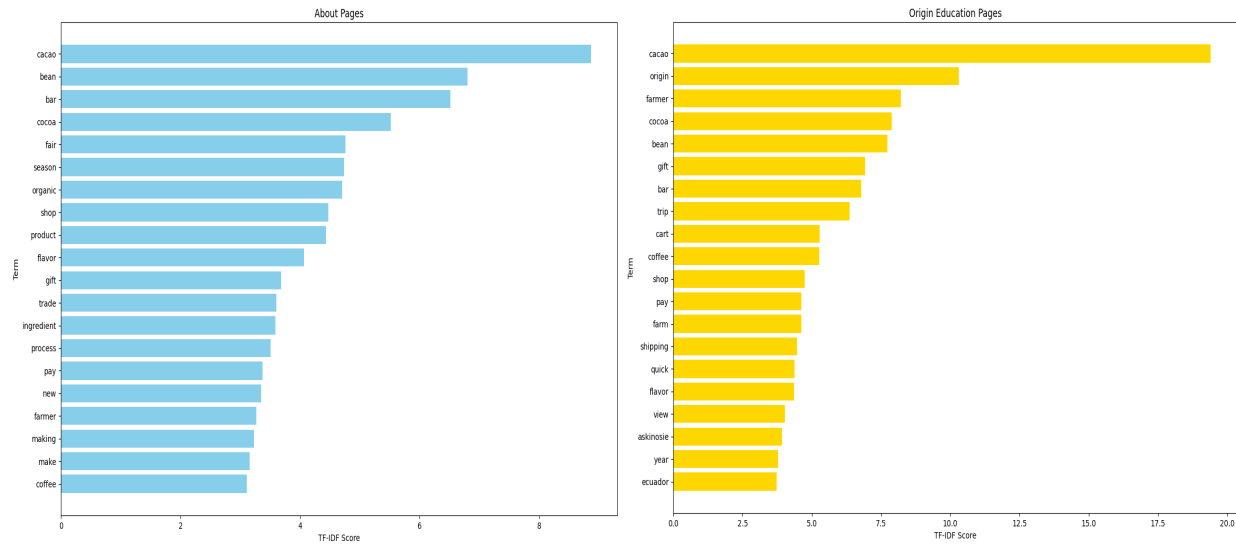
To explore differences and similarities in communication across different parts of the websites, TF-IDF analyses were conducted for all sites both across the entire corpus and in the four subcorpora (Home, About, Product, and Cacao Origin). The results of these analyses were fairly homogenous, particularly on Home pages, Product pages, and across the whole corpus. There was a consistent set of words (“chocolate” (removed from subcorpora visualizations), “cacao,” “bar,” “gift,” “bean,” “shop,” and “pay”) across all TF-IDF analyses, which are either product identifiers (“chocolate,” “bar,” “cacao,” “bean”) or purchase-oriented terms (“gift,” “shop,” “pay”). Other words that emerged across four of five TF-IDF analyses included “cart,” “shipping,” and “product” (purchase-oriented) as well as “organic” and “origin” (product-oriented). This homogeneity indicates that DTC craft chocolate websites prioritize product description and conversion when communicating with viewers above other aspects of brand-consumer interactions. This orientation towards encouraging purchase was most prominent in areas of sites that are typically shopping-focused, such as product pages and (to a lesser extent) home pages. Product page terms were heavily purchase-oriented with high TF-IDF terms like “cart,” “add,” and “review”. Additional important terms included product descriptors such as “dark,” “milk,” and “organic”.

<sup>13</sup> Larger versions of all text analysis figures (TF-IDF and BTM) are available in Appendix B.



**Figure 2.3.** Term frequency-inverse document frequency (TF-IDF) analyses of Home page content and Product page content from DTC craft chocolate sites indicate that these pages prioritize product description and conversion. The term “chocolate” has been removed from the visualizations to improve readability.

Areas of difference were most notable in the TF-IDF analyses for the About pages and the Cacao Origin pages. While these areas of the site still included product and purchase-oriented terms, they also focused more on other aspects such as the processes of cacao growing and chocolate making. For example, high TF-IDF terms for About pages included “ingredient,” “farmer,” “process,” and “make,” indicating emphasis on the practice of chocolate making. This analysis also produced high TF-IDF scores for “fair” and “trade,” showing that DTC websites are discussing ethical cacao sourcing in their About content. The Cacao Origin content analysis had an understandably high TF-IDF score for “cacao” and included high TF-IDF terms such as “farm,” “farmer,” “origin,” and “Ecuador,” making this the only TF-IDF analysis that had a cacao origin country as a high TF-IDF term. “Trip” was also a high TF-IDF term for this segment of website content, suggesting that craft chocolate companies are both discussing trips to cacao origin geographies, which is common as a part of the direct trade relationships established by many craft chocolate companies. Additionally, “flavor” was a high TF-IDF term for both About page content and Cacao Origin page content, indicating that craft chocolate websites make connections between flavour, cacao origin, and chocolate making.

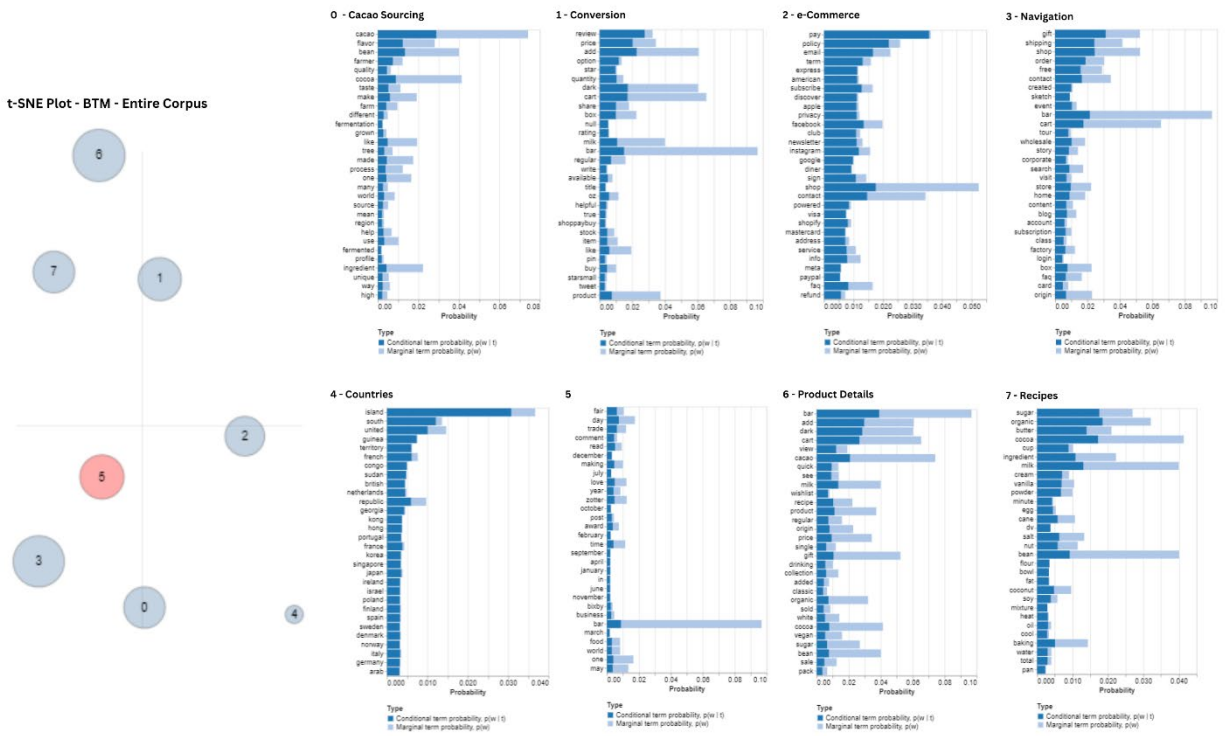


**Figure 2.4.** Term frequency-inverse document frequency (TF-IDF) analyses of About page content and Cacao Origin page content from DTC craft chocolate sites show a focus on ethical cacao sourcing. The term “chocolate” has been removed from the visualizations to improve readability.

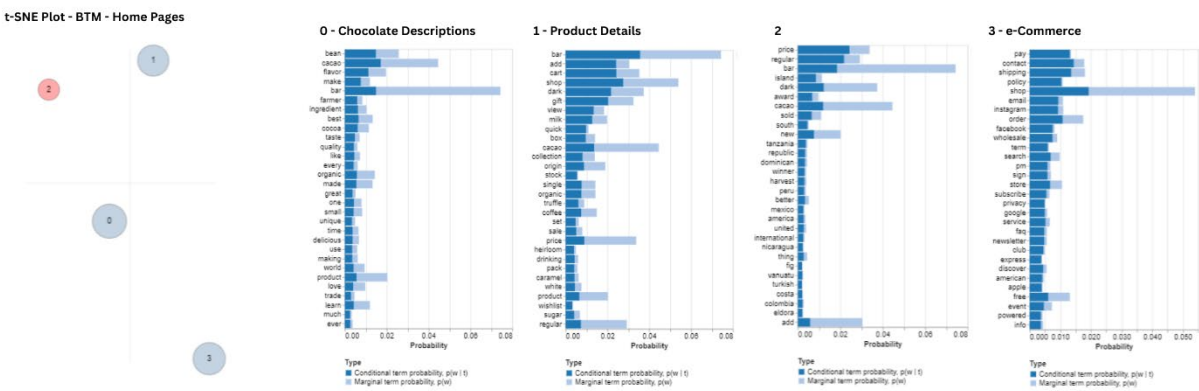
#### 2.4.5. BTM Results

In order to explore topics across DTC craft chocolate websites, the corpus was first analyzed as a whole, and then within the subcorpora. Figure 2.5 shows the eight-topic model of word clusters across the whole corpus. A total 7 coherent clusters in this model were labelled manually as follows: *Cacao Sourcing*, *Conversion*, *e-Commerce*, *Navigation*, *Countries*,<sup>14</sup> *Product Details*, and *Recipes*. Incoherent topics, which are expected in minimal numbers as a normal part of BTM, were left unlabelled (Yan et al., 2013). The most stable topics in the corpus were *Product Details* and *Conversion*, which emerged as subjectively discernible clusters in the three-topic model and could be found across all topic models. Additionally, the strength of *Recipes* as a cluster suggests that many craft chocolate sites are using recipes as a means of bolstering Search Engine Optimization (SEO) rankings in search algorithms to increase web traffic. Clusters frequently aligned with themes that emerged during the counting method and TF-IDF analyses, confirming the stability and accuracy of the model.

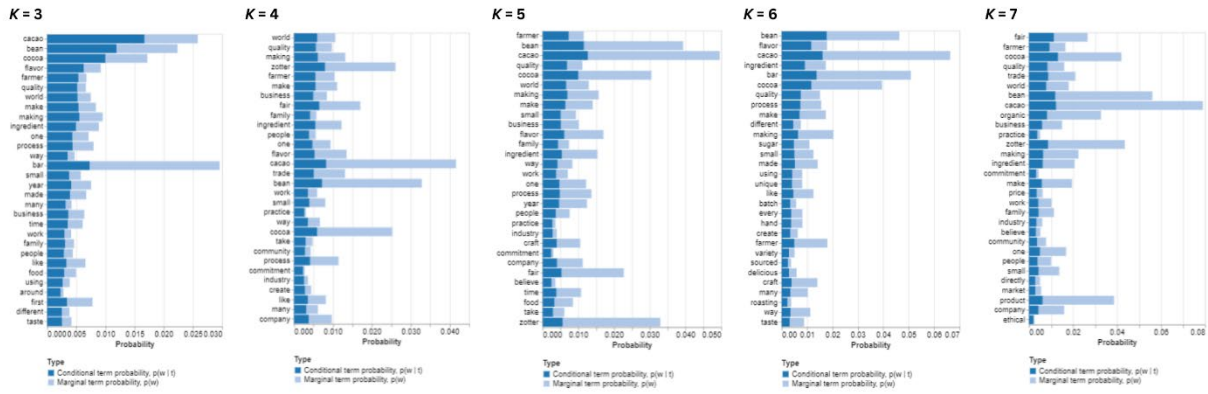
<sup>14</sup> There is a lack of differentiation between cacao-producing countries and other countries, possibly due to many sites having an automatic drop-down functionality for shipping selection which contained a long list of countries (even if the store did not deliver to that location).



**Figure 2.5.** An eight-topic ( $K = 8$ ) biterm topic model of topic clusters appearing across the entire corpus of DTC craft chocolate websites. Only coherent topics were labeled manually, while incoherent topics were left unlabeled.

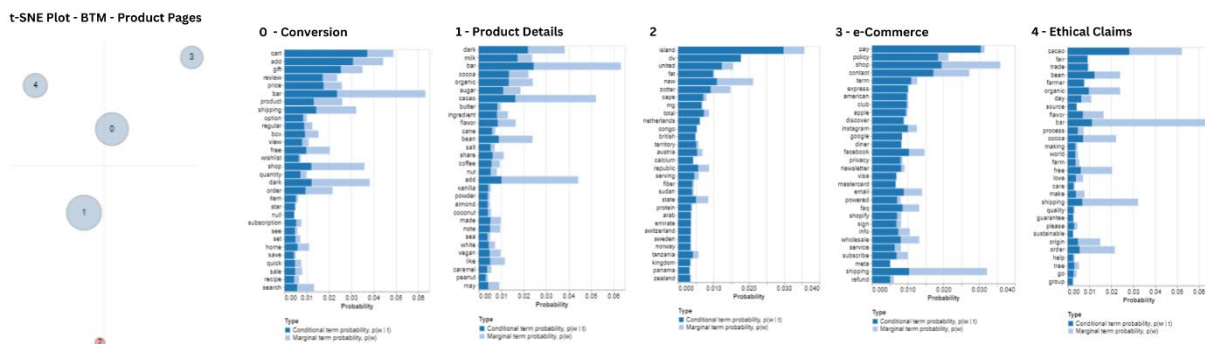


**Figure 2.6.** A four-topic ( $K = 4$ ) biterm topic model for the subcorpus of Home page content. Only coherent topics were labeled manually, while incoherent topics were left unlabeled.



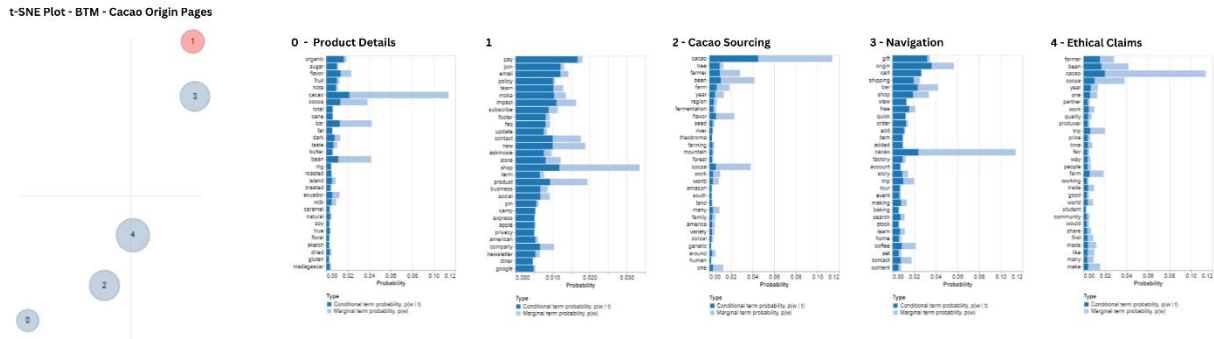
**Figure 2.7.** Only one cluster stabilized across all biterm topic models ( $K = 3, 4, 5, 6, 7$ ) for the About pages subcorpus. This cluster showed a close connection between ethical business practices and chocolate quality.

The home page content clusters were most stable and coherent at the four-topic model (see figure 2.6), including *Chocolate Descriptions*, *Product Details*, and *e-Commerce*. While there was potential for a “cacao origins” cluster to emerge due to the high number of cacao origin countries present in topic two, this cluster failed to stabilize in models with a greater number of topics. The inclusion of terms like “great,” “best,” “quality,” “delicious,” and “taste” in the *Chocolate Descriptions* cluster indicates that on the home page, craft chocolate companies focus on chocolate quality and taste to capture the attention of website visitors. In contrast, the About pages subcorpus only resulted in one stable cluster, which was persistent across all topic models for the subcorpus (see figure 2.8). This cluster included terms such as “business,” “company,” “industry,” “family,” and “process” in close connection with terms like “commitment,” “fair,” “believe,” “community,” “trade,” and “farmer,” showing connections between business practice and ethics, a common trait for moral market sectors. Additionally, these terms were clustered with “quality,” “flavor,” and “taste,” indicating that craft chocolate companies are consistently communicating brand stories that discuss ethical business practices in relation to high-quality, flavourful cacao and chocolate products.



**Figure 2.8.** A five-topic ( $K = 5$ ) biterm topic model for the subcorpus of Product page content. Only coherent topics were labeled manually, while incoherent topics were left unlabeled.

The five-topic model shown in figure 2.9 for product page content provided coherent and cohesive topic clusters with minimal repetition. Alongside showing clusters of words that encouraged conversion and enabled basic e-commerce functionality, this topic model showed a strong cluster of product descriptors including type of chocolate (“dark,” “milk,” “white”), ingredients and inclusions (“cacao,” “sugar,” “ingredient,” “salt,” “almond”), and other product claims (“organic,” “vegan”). A cluster of *Ethical Claims* terms also emerged on product pages through words like “farmer,” “fair,” “trade,” “organic,” and “sustainable,” indicating that craft chocolate companies use moral claims as a product differentiator on product pages.



**Figure 2.9.** A five-topic ( $K = 5$ ) biterm topic model for the Cacao Origin page content subcorpus. Only coherent topics were labeled manually, while incoherent topics were left unlabeled.

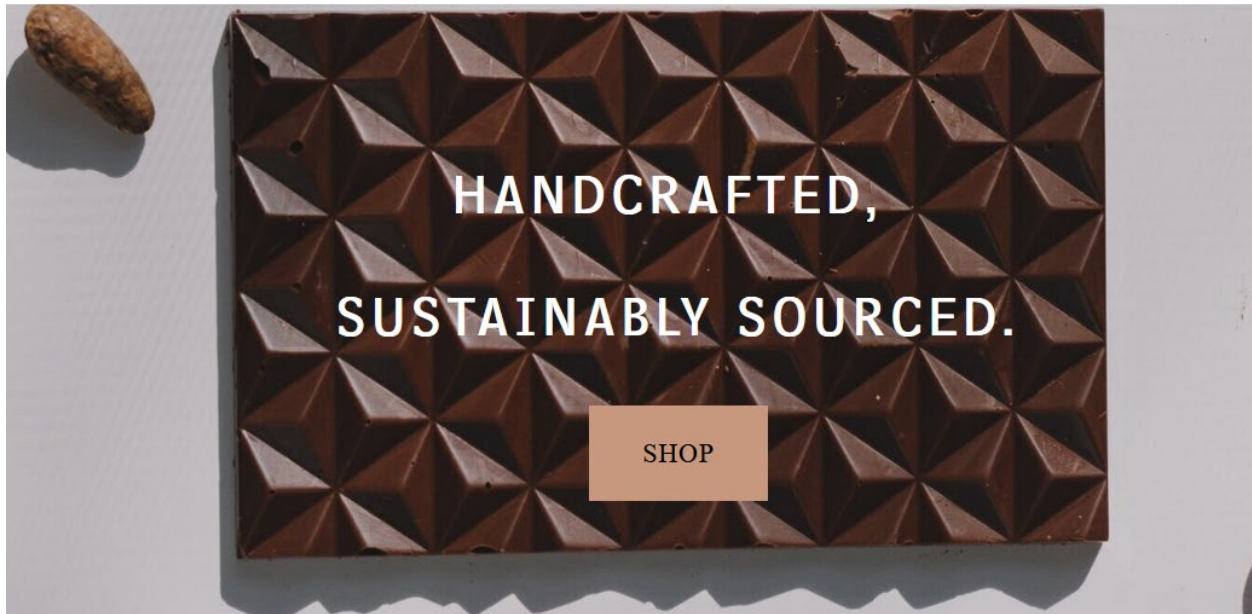
Cacao Origin content showed the most consistent and coherent topic clusters at the 5-topic model. The *Cacao Sourcing* cluster indicates that when discussing cacao origin, craft chocolate companies are naming specific origin geographies (“Zorzal,” “Amazon”) and describing these geographies in terms of their physical assets (“mountain,” “forest,” “river”). This cluster also connects cacao origins to the practices of growing and processing cacao (“farmer,” “tree,” “bean,” “seed,” “fermentation”), and makes links to “flavor.” In addition, craft chocolate companies are making ethical claims in relation to their sourcing practices through terms like “fair,” “trade,” “source,” “origin,” and “sustainable”. Product details are discussed in relation to cacao origins, and certain origin geographies such as “Madagascar” and “Ecuador” emerged primarily in relation to other product descriptors like “fruit” and “dark”. However, purchase-focused terms did not emerge as a stable cluster within this topic model indicating that these pages are less focused on conversion than the rest of the site.

#### 2.4.6. Framework Analysis Results

The framework analysis, which was conducted on a subset of 10 randomly selected websites, revealed that conversion-oriented language and design were prominent across all sites. Conversion-focused website functionality was most frequently located on home pages and product pages, including both collection pages and PDPs. All websites had purchase-oriented language and design above the fold<sup>15</sup> on their home pages by means of a “shop” button

<sup>15</sup> In website design, “above the fold” refers to the part of a web page that is visible before the user scrolls (Schade, 2015).

underneath a tagline. This is the first content a user will see when visiting the site, and its pronounced positioning immediately asks the user to begin shopping. Any website visitor is therefore drawn into the role of consumer regardless of their initial reason for visiting. Product pages were unsurprisingly the most purchase-oriented sections of each site, including pricing, “add to cart” buttons, detailed product information and photographs, and product reviews. Several sites in the sample offered subscriptions on their PDPs, which further incentivize repeated purchase by offering the product at a slight discount.



**Figure 2.10.** An example of above the fold purchase-oriented functionality on Echea Chocolate’s DTC website home page. This functionality was used across all websites included in the subsample. Accessed June 2, 2024.

While these sites’ focus on conversion was less prominent on certain pages, most commonly About pages and Cacao Origin pages, purchase-oriented language and design were present across the entirety of the site by means of website headers and banners, which remained at the top of every page. Banners promoting free shipping if a customer spent over a certain amount were present on half the websites analyzed, continuously reminding site visitors to purchase. Additionally, as is common across DTC websites, the header of all the sampled sites contained a visible page menu which included a ‘shop’ option. Most sites situated the ‘shop’ page link in the left-most menu position, which also stacks to the top of the menu when viewed on mobile. This position is particularly prominent within an English-speaking context, as viewers who speak Latin-based languages will have been culturally trained to look towards the top left corner of a screen (Mendonca et al., 2022). As such, viewers are consistently oriented back towards shopping-focused areas of the site.

Beyond purchase-oriented language and design, several key themes emerged across the subsample including an emphasis on high-quality ingredients, discussion of cacao origins, moral market claims, and identification with small or family businesses. Websites in the subsample all claimed to use high-quality cacao, communicating this message across their Home pages,

Product pages, About pages, and Cacao Origins pages. The quality of the chocolate was explicitly connected to both the production methods and the quality of the cacao. Sites discussed making “hand-crafted” (Echea Chocolate, 2024; Videri Chocolate Factory, 2024), “artisanal” (20/20 Chocolates, 2024), “high quality” (Mozna Chocolate, 2024) chocolate in “small batches” (Askinosie Chocolate, 2024; Dandelion Chocolate, 2024; River-Sea Chocolates, 2024) with “minimal processing” (Taza Chocolate, 2024) from “great cacao beans” (Soma Chocolatemaker, 2024). Minimal ingredient lists were also promoted alongside cacao quality through the concept of ‘just two ingredients’ (cacao and cane sugar). An absence of ‘artificial’ ingredients, such as soy lecithin, was specifically connected to the chocolate quality and the preservation of distinct cacao flavours that were differentiated by origin geography.

Sharing information about cacao origins was also common across the subsample. All sites shared country and region of origin for their cacao beans, and most also shared specific farms or central fermentaries. Cacao origin information was extremely common on PDPs in product titles and product descriptions, and this information was frequently connected to tasting notes. On website pages dedicated to cacao sourcing or communicating company values, sites were more likely to present themselves as having direct trade relationships with producers, but several also reported working with specialty cacao traders like Uncommon Cacao. Relationships with cacao producers at origin were frequently described as partnerships or friendships, and words like ‘community’ and ‘collaborate’ also emerged, aligning with findings from the topic modelling and communicating strong levels of maker-producer connection to the viewer. Website content consistently engaged in storytelling related to cacao origins, presenting specific producers by name, their working relationships, and incorporating geographic or cultural details alongside photographs to situate the reader. The level of detail varied, however companies in the subsample that had been established for over ten years were most likely to have extensive storytelling. Most well-established companies in the subsample also featured transparency reports discussing sourcing and other business impacts on their websites.

Additionally, all but one website in the subsample made explicit connection to the ethical impacts of their business. Two significant areas emerged in morally-driven site content: ‘people’ ethics and ‘planet’ ethics. ‘People’ ethics focused on equitable prices for cacao and fair labour standards for smallholders. Companies used their websites to assert that they pay a premium for cacao beans, improving livelihood for cacao farmers in return for high-quality cacao. Businesses also articulated that their producer partners were not engaging in coerced labour when harvesting cacao. While no companies in the subsample were certified Fairtrade, the word ‘fair’ appeared frequently alongside claims of equitable pricing and labour relations. ‘Planet’ ethics encompassed both sustainable farming practices at origin and offering sustainable shipping and packaging options to the end consumer. At origin, this included content promoting companies’ work fighting rainforest deforestation, including agroforestry farming practices. Despite several sites in the subsample using the term organic in relation to cacao farming practices, only one business promoted the Certified Organic logo on their website and claimed official certification. Some sites also discussed offering sustainable packaging options for their products, e.g. recycled

or recyclable packaging. One company in the sample also highlighted their zero-emissions cacao transportation through a wind-powered cargo ship. Ultimately, commitment to ‘doing business better’ was strong across the subsample of sites and aligned with findings from the text analyses and counting method.

## **2.5. Discussion**

Several themes can be identified across the sampled DTC craft chocolate websites, including an orientation towards purchase, detailed product descriptions with a focus on chocolate quality and flavour, prioritized presentation of cacao sourcing and education around cacao origin geographies, and explicit ethical claims. There was a strong presence of purchase-focused language including “shop,” “cart,” and “review” which emerged both in the TF-IDF analyses and the topic models. Many of these terms, and the functionalities they are attached to, are staple features of DTC e-commerce websites regardless of industry. These terms were often clustered with product description words such as “dark” or “caramel”, indicating that purchase-focused language and product-focused language are tightly connected within DTC craft chocolate sites. In the topic models, purchase-related topics were consistent and persistent across the whole corpus and most subcorpora, even on pages that are not explicitly oriented towards shopping. A high presence of shopping-centric design was also found during the framework analysis. This ubiquity of purchase-oriented language, which is connected to purchase-oriented site features such as buy buttons, carts, and payment gateways demonstrates how craft chocolate DTC e-commerce websites afford purchase and thus interpellate site users into the role of ‘consumer’. As the primary goal of these sites is not to inform or to educate, but to sell chocolate, individuals who wish to use craft chocolate sites for educational purposes must in part work against their primary function (Davis & Chouinard, 2017).

The inclusion of ethical claims and discussion of cacao origins on product pages aligns with the craft chocolate sector’s use of positive social and environmental impact as a product differentiation strategy. Because PDPs are the main place an online shopper learns about products and makes purchasing decisions, scholars suggest online retailers provide complete product information in order to effectively convert consumers (Montecinos & Bascur, 2022). Similar to product packaging in a brick-and-mortar retail location, PDPs work to both inform and convert consumers. For the craft chocolate sector, which distinguishes itself from conventional chocolate through claims of quality and social good, informing consumers about a products’ sourcing and impact is comparable to providing flavour notes or an ingredients list in that it will appeal to a certain subset of consumers: those invested in ethical consumption (Hiller & Gorowek, 2023; Zimmerman, 2015). Incorporating ethical messaging on PDPs is ultimately critical in positioning craft chocolate as better than conventional chocolate.

However, some education about cacao origin geographies and chocolate value chains occurs within these commerce-driven spaces. The clusters of ethical claims in the Cacao Origin and Product page topic models show that high ethical standards across the value chain are clearly communicated on craft chocolate DTC websites both as an element of cacao origin education

and as a product differentiator. These sections are also less likely to contain purchase-focused language, as evidenced by the lack of a stable cluster for conversion-related terms in the Cacao Origins page topic model. A reduced purchase orientation on website sections that focused on sourcing was also found in the qualitative analysis wherein conversations around cacao origins were predominantly connected to ethical claims around positive social and environmental impacts. These findings are consistent with previous research into craft chocolate, which asserts that this sector positions itself as ethically superior to commodity chocolate through values-driven cacao sourcing, sustainability commitments, and explicit consumer education (Gallo et al., 2017; Georgallis & Lee, 2020; Woolley et al., 2021).

However, the high prevalence of the terms “organic,” “fair” and “trade” across multiple TF-IDF analyses and topic models is surprising since just 21% of craft chocolate companies in the sample were Certified Organic, and only 6% were Fairtrade Certified. Consistent use of these terms with minimal external certifications was also found in the framework analysis. Previous research shows that most craft chocolate companies reject external certifications such as Organic, Fairtrade, and Rainforest Alliance/UTZ due to a perceived failure of certifications to improve circumstances for smallholders (Boegman et al., 2023; de St. Maurice, 2014; Gallo et al., 2017; Woolley et al., 2021). This suggests that while many craft chocolate companies may not be certified, they are engaging with the language of certification in an attempt to market their products using terms already familiar to consumers. Since consumers are used to voluntary certification and some may seek out these labels on product packaging, it is logical that many craft chocolate makers make the effort of engaging with common certification terms (Boegman et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2013; McCabe, 2015; Rousseau, 2015; Woolley et al., 2021).

While certain topic models and TF-IDF analyses identified specific cacao origin geographies as relevant terms, these terms were not found as consistently or coherently within the text analyses as initially expected. Based on the high prevalence of origin disclosure in the counting method findings, particularly on product pages, we anticipated that the names of specific origins would be more prevalent in the text analyses. Specific cacao origin geographies such as “Ecuador,” “Madagascar,” “Amazon,” and “Zorzal” only became relevant in text analyses on pages dedicated specifically to communicating sourcing practices or educating about cacao origins to consumers. Most notable is the discrepancy between the high number of craft chocolate companies communicating cacao origin on product detail pages (90%) as well as the consistent presence of cacao origin geography disclosure in the qualitative subsample, and the lack of these terms in the TF-IDF analysis and the topic model for the product page subcorpus. This is potentially due to the diversity of cacao sourcing in craft chocolate. While commodity cacao is primarily (but not exclusively) sourced from Cote d’Ivoire and Ghana, craft chocolate companies source from a wide variety of origin geographies (Coe & Coe, 2013; Food and Agriculture Association of the United Nations, 2024; Giller, 2017; Leissle, 2017). Additionally, there is a lack of standardization around communicating cacao origin, with some companies mentioning a country, others mentioning specific geographic regions, and some even tracing back to specific farms or farmer cooperatives. It is likely that this diversity of cacao origins and

lack of standardization in their communication to consumers hampers the ability of the TF-IDF and BTM processes to correctly group and classify these origins in a meaningful way.

A primary goal of any business is selling a product or service. While moral markets such as craft chocolate are invested in social value creation alongside, and frequently to the detriment of, revenue generation the fact remains that craft chocolate makers must make money to support the value chains on which they base their claims to superiority over commodity chocolate (Fourcade & Healy, 2007; Georgallis & Lee, 2020; Woolley et al., 2021). A large number of craft chocolate makers reportedly entered this sector due to a desire to make a difference in the chocolate industry and as such are invested in improving smallholder livelihoods (Gallo et al., 2017; Woolley et al., 2021). Many chocolate makers see their work, which includes selling chocolate, as intrinsically connected to making the world a better place. Neoliberal logics inherent to moral markets position subjects (both individuals and organizations) as responsible for solving the issues created by capitalism (Bloom, 2019; Carrington et al., 2016). The contemporary increase of ethical businesses and moral market niche creation can thus be linked to neoliberal expectations of social responsibility (Bloom, 2019; Georgallis & Lee, 2020).

The marketing of craft chocolate companies depends in part on how craft chocolate supply chains impact smallholder livelihoods and rainforest ecosystems. Craft chocolate companies therefore do not have an incentive to create consumption-neutral educational spaces about cacao origin geographies and chocolate supply chains. The craft chocolate sector's rapid growth has also introduced many new actors who may or may not be as committed to the market's original uniting ideals. However, the information presented by craft chocolate companies is not inherently incorrect or nugatory due to its presentation alongside a call to purchase. The craft chocolate sector has been shown to be a tightly knit business community that values both transparency and consumer education (Leissle, 2017; Woolley et al., 2021). Moreover, many craft chocolate companies report ongoing, mutually beneficial connections to communities at origin, or work with cacao bean traders who declare those relationships, and are better placed to disclose impacts at origin (Grabs et al., 2024). Ultimately, the reliability of the information presented by craft chocolate companies on their DTC websites is complex and nuanced, and the perception of information accuracy is frequently influenced by the amount of trust a consumer has for the brand (Lewis & Potter, 2011).

## **2.6. Conclusion**

This research offers a snapshot of current online communication practices in the North American craft chocolate industry and interrogates the quality of cacao origin education in the craft chocolate sector. In exploring the language used by craft chocolate makers on DTC e-commerce websites to explain and market their products to North American consumers, we demonstrate that DTC craft chocolate websites are understandably oriented towards encouraging chocolate purchases and focus primarily on showcasing products and offering opportunities to buy. While spaces do exist on these websites for consumer education about cacao origins and chocolate value chains, their orientation towards purchase can distract from deeper engagement

with the topics. These sites also consistently engage with moral market logic through ethical claims both about products and business practices. By asserting that purchasing a specific set of products—craft chocolate—will help create a fair supply chain, this ethical consumption framing is also likely to divert energy from other means of creating change. Through these implicit claims, DTC craft chocolate websites uphold the notion that individual consumption choices will create structural change.

This study focused most closely on text content from individual craft chocolate companies on their DTC websites. Our methods have proven useful to demonstrate how language is used on these sites but leave room for further analysis of the other mediated aspects of a website, most notably visual media. Many craft chocolate companies use imagery and video to communicate with consumers, and previous research has shown that product pictures impact product perception and purchase intent (Lee & Wang, 2017). Researching themes within visual media, perhaps across different channels such as social media, would likely provide additional clarity into how craft chocolate companies communicate with consumers and portray cacao origin geographies. One limitation of our methods is that we were unable to verify the accuracy of claims made on the craft chocolate websites within our dataset. Further research into how craft chocolate companies' claims align with their actual business practices would provide an opportunity for the sector to gain further legitimacy and technology to support this is rapidly evolving. Lastly, other actors in the craft chocolate sector have an online presence, including cacao trading companies (i.e. Uncommon Cacao and Latitude Trading Company), cacao farms (i.e. Zorzal Cacao and Hacienda Victoria), and central fermentaries (i.e. Maya Mountain Cacao, Kokoa Kamili, and Oko Caribe). Additional exploration of how traders and producers working at origin position cacao origin geographies in contrast to craft chocolate makers would facilitate deeper understanding of the goals and impact of this market sector.

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## Appendix A: Counting Checklist

### General Information

- URL
- Company
- State/Province
- Country
- Fulfils To (select one):
  - USA
  - Canada
  - Both

### Cacao Origin Level of Detail (Y/N, select relevant)

- Shares Origin Country
- Shares Origin Region
- Shares Origin Farm/Co-Op

### Certifications (Y/N, select relevant)

- Organic Certification
- Non-GMO Certification
- Fairtrade (or equivalent) Certification
- Rainforest Alliance/UTZ Certification
- B Corp Certification

### Does this company make ethical claims about sourcing practices? (Y/N)

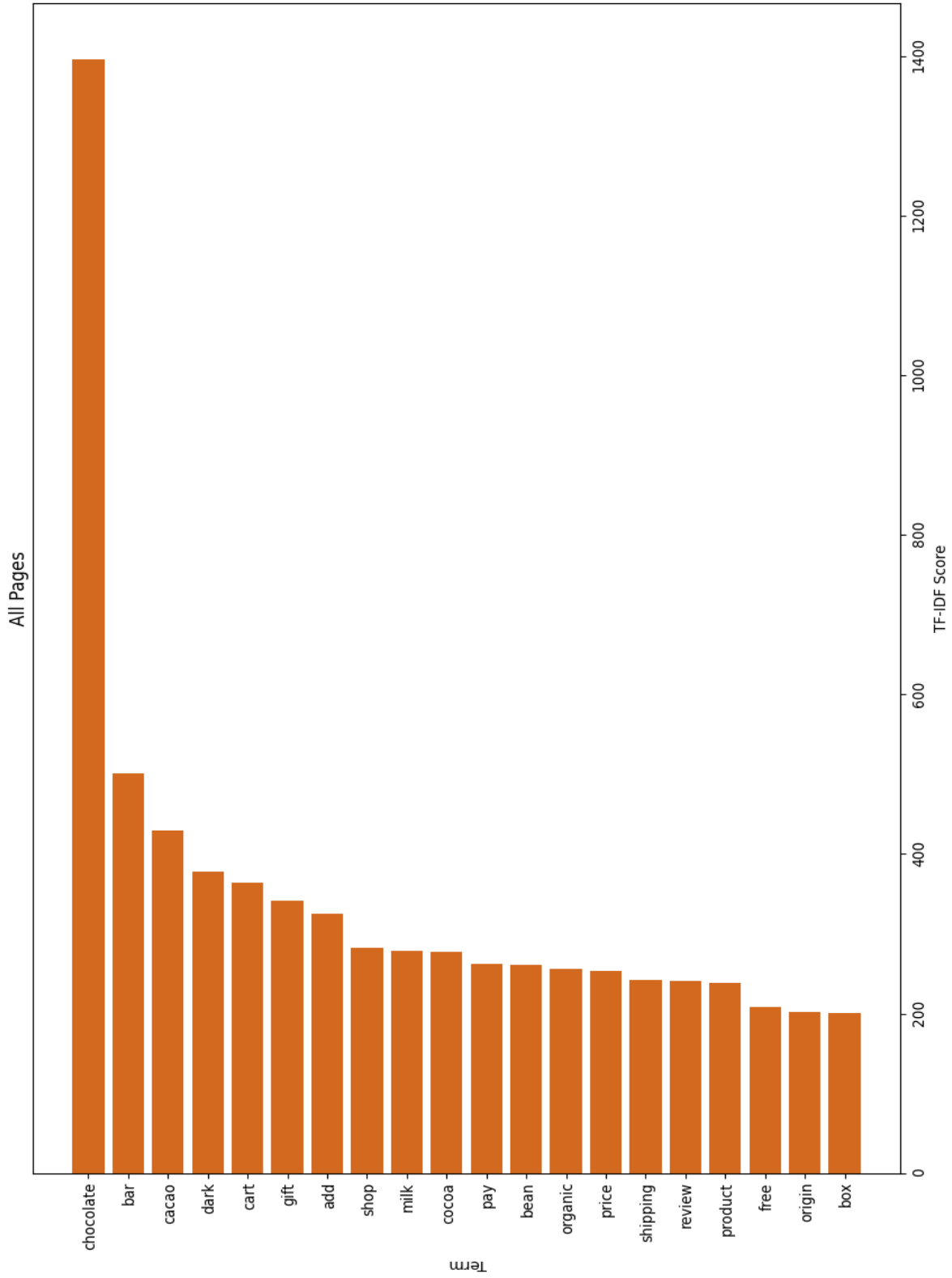
### Where does this company discuss cacao origin geographies? (select relevant)

- Home
- PDP
- About/Values
- Special
  - Text input for "special"

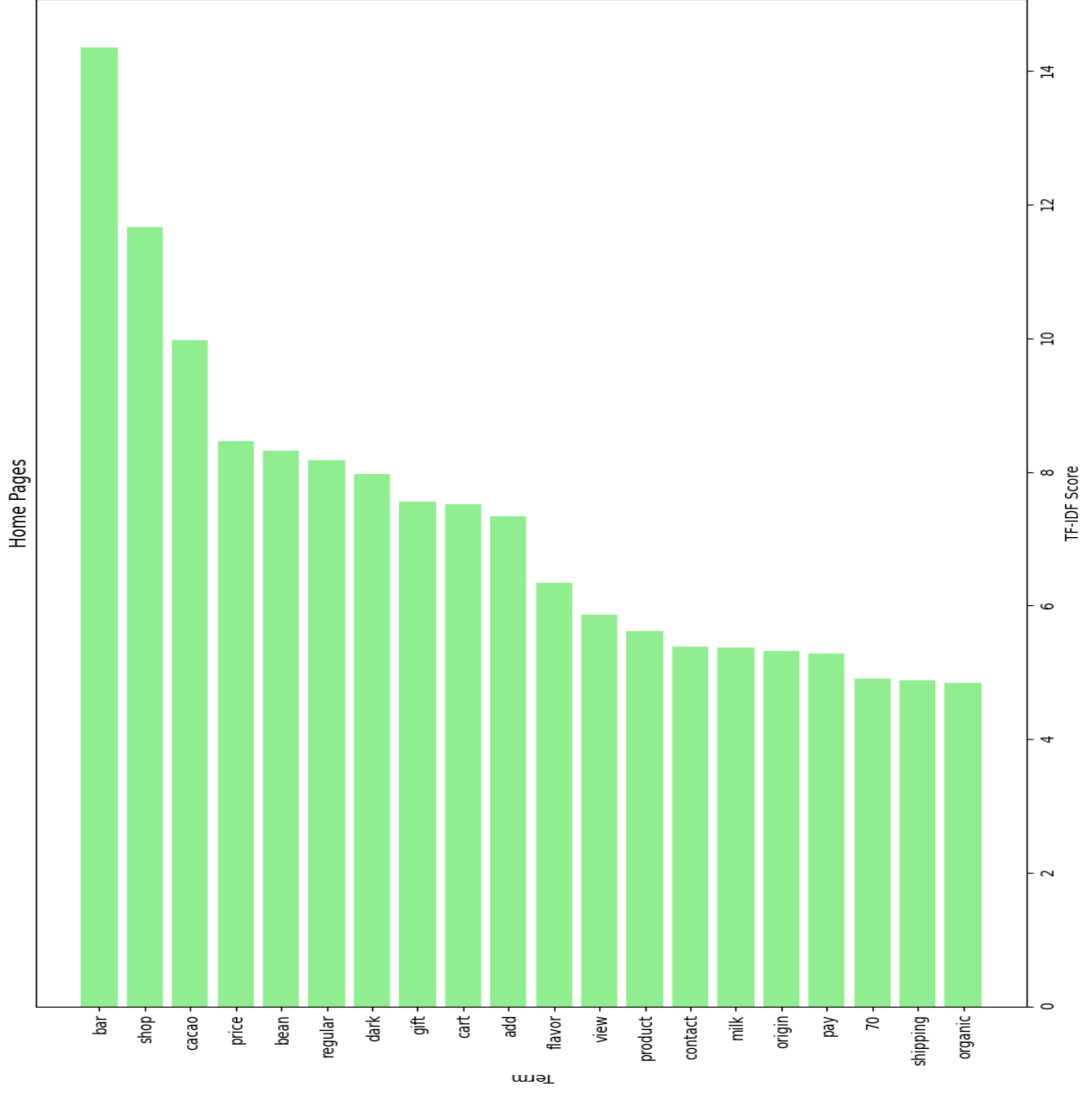
### What media does this company use to discuss cacao origin geographies? (select relevant)

- Text
- Photo
- Audiovisual
- Map

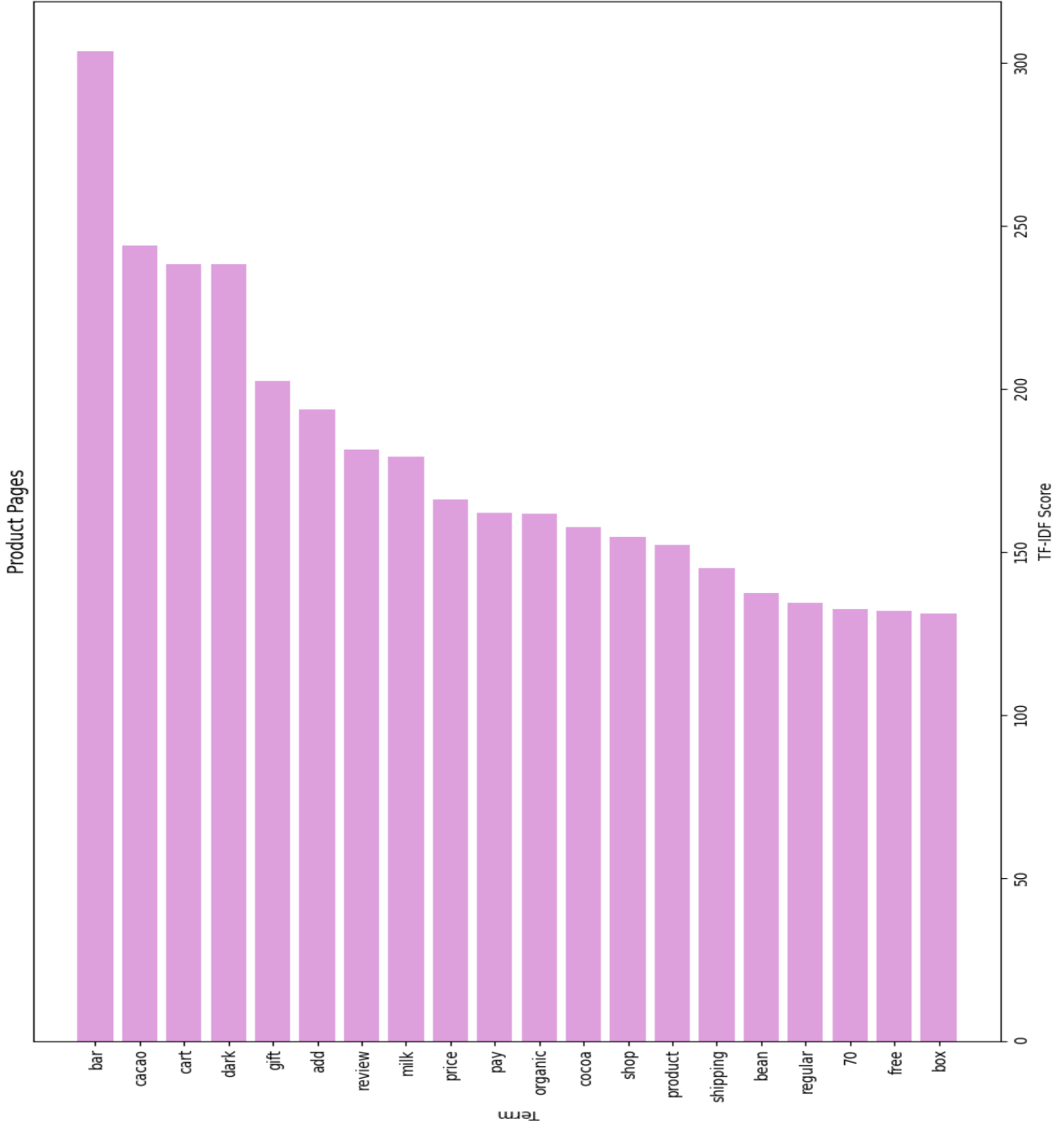
## Appendix B: Text Analysis Figures



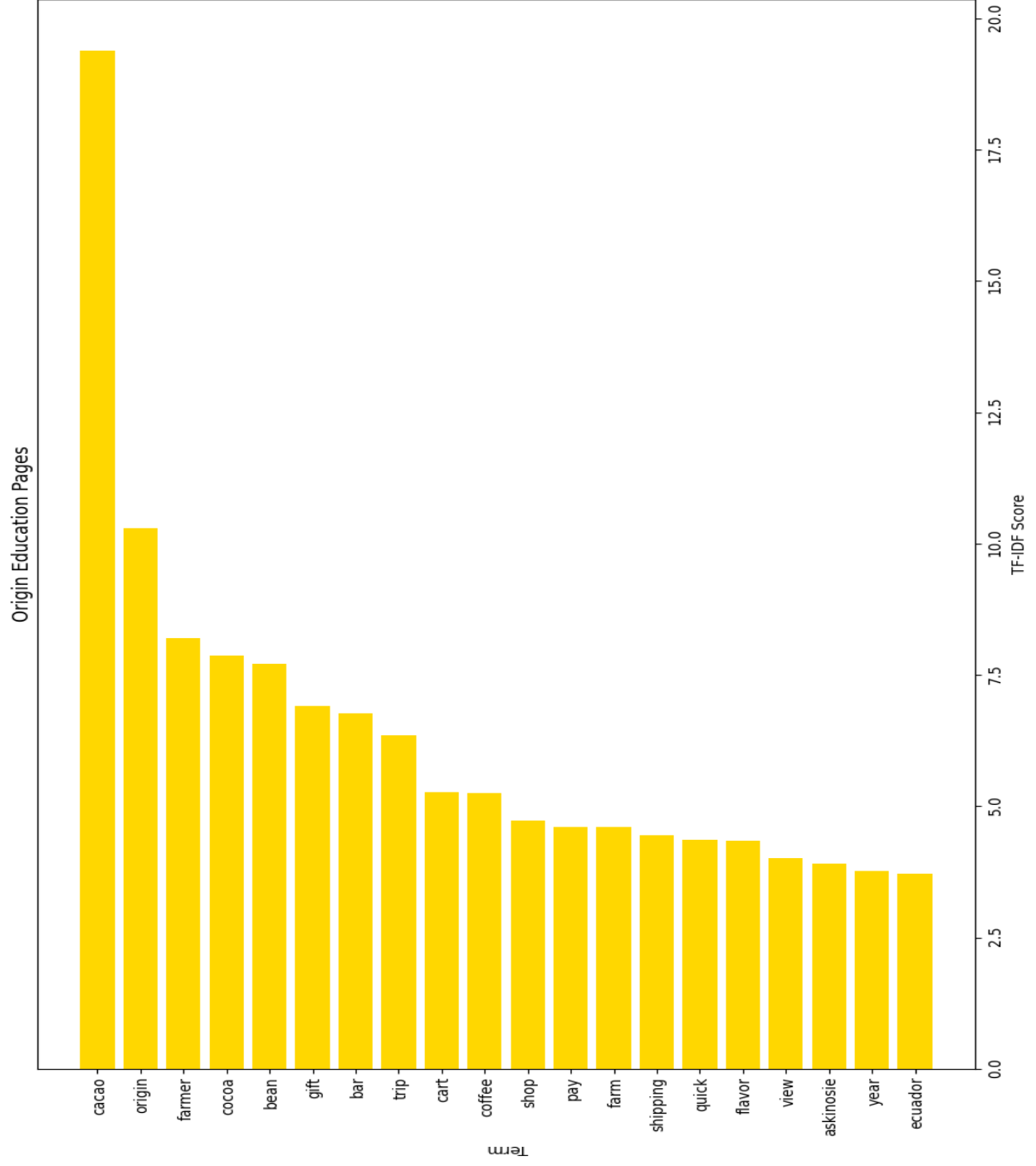
Term frequency-inverse document frequency (TF-IDF) analysis of text on all pages (from figure 2.2.)



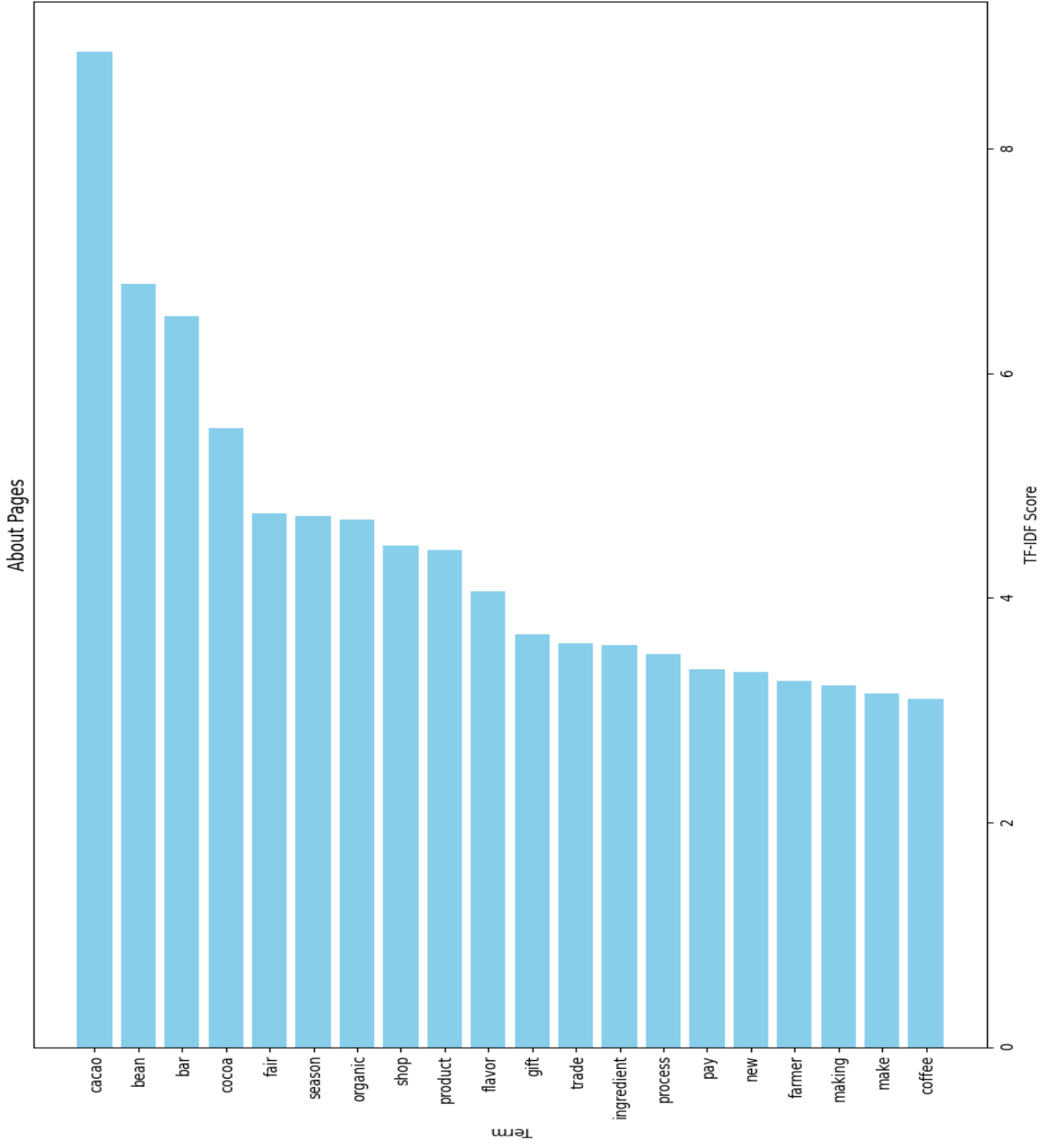
Term frequency-inverse document frequency (TF-IDF) analysis of Home page text (from figure 2.3)



Term frequency-inverse document frequency (TF-IDF) analyses of Product page text (from figure 2.3.)

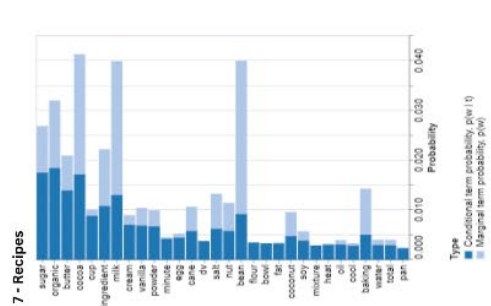
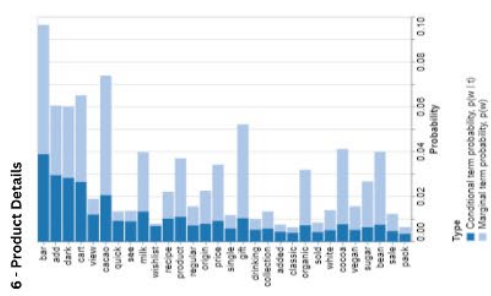
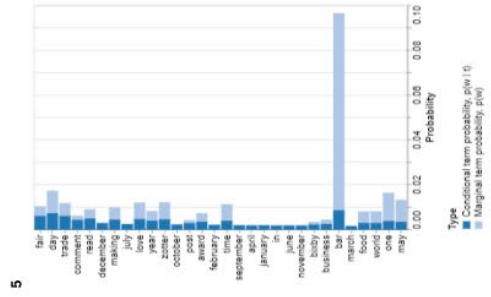
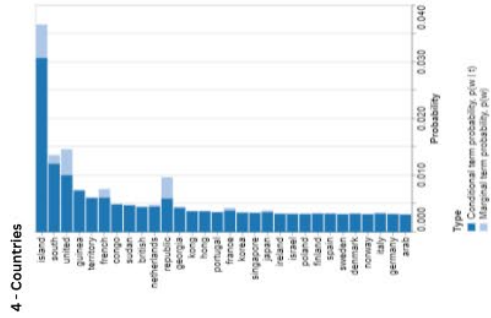
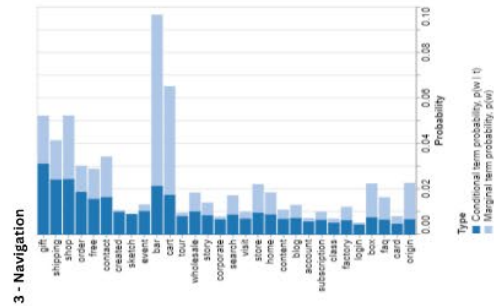
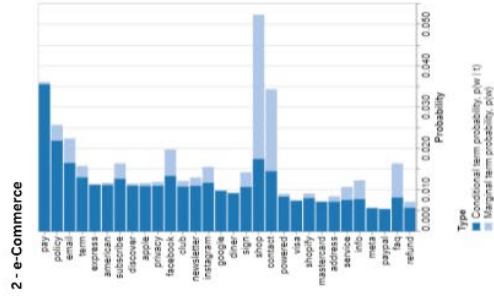
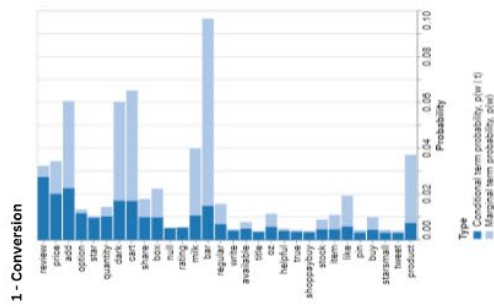
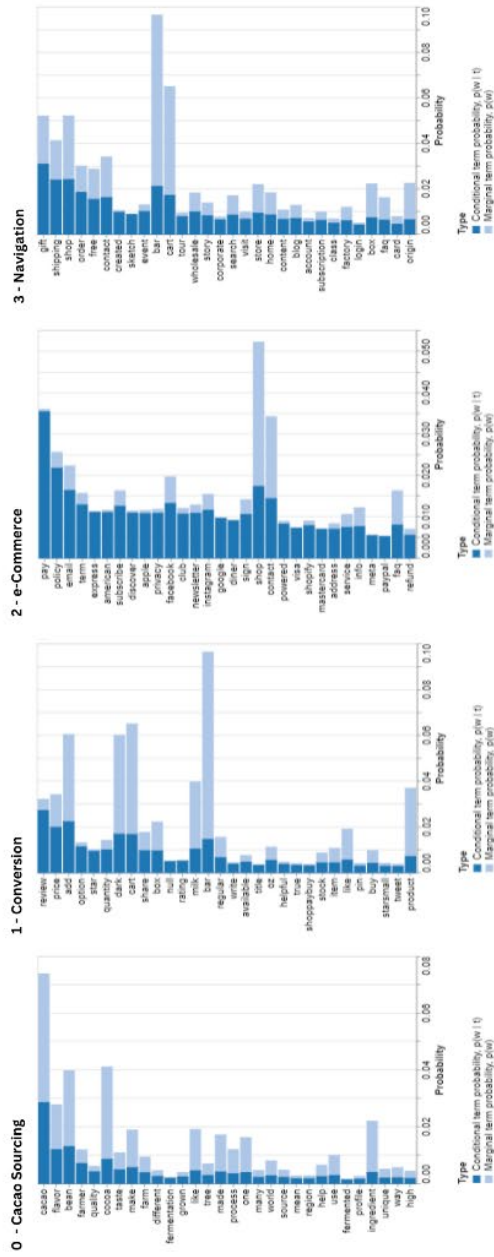
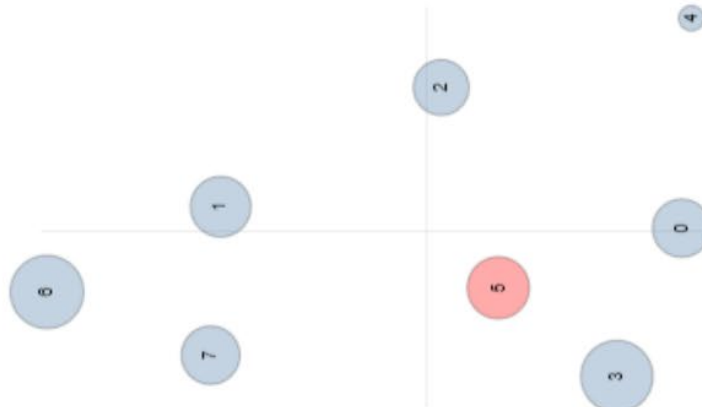


Term frequency-inverse document frequency (TF-IDF) analyses of Origin Education page text (from figure 2.4.).



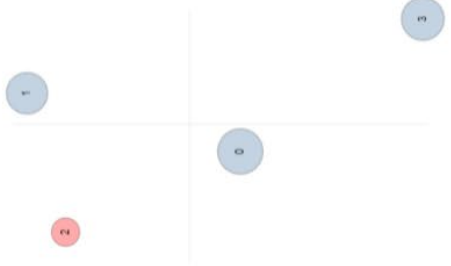
Term frequency-inverse document frequency (TF-IDF) analyses of About page text (from figure 2.24).

t-SNE Plot - BTM - Entire Corpus

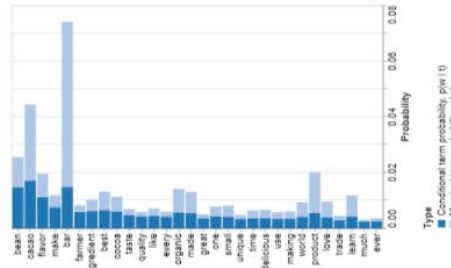


An eight-topic ( $K = 8$ ) biterm topic model of topic clusters appearing across the entire corpus of DTC craft chocolate websites. Only coherent topics were labeled manually, while incoherent topics were left unlabeled (from figure 2.5).

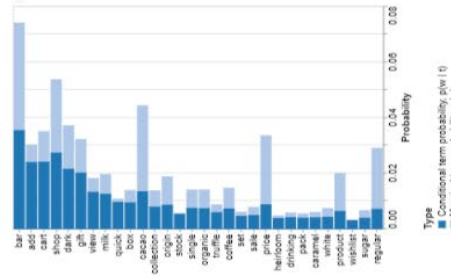
t-SNE Plot - BTM - Home Pages



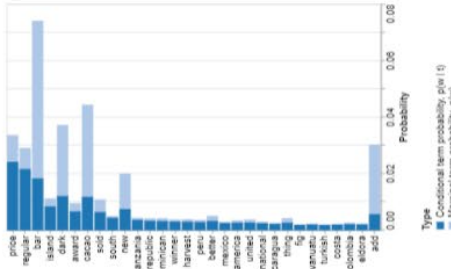
0 - Chocolate Descriptions



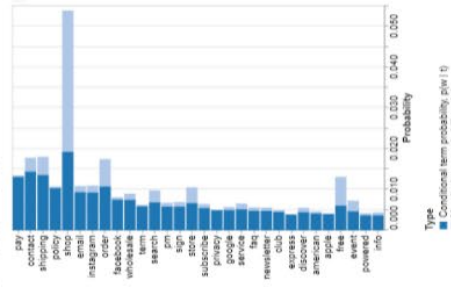
1 - Product Details



2

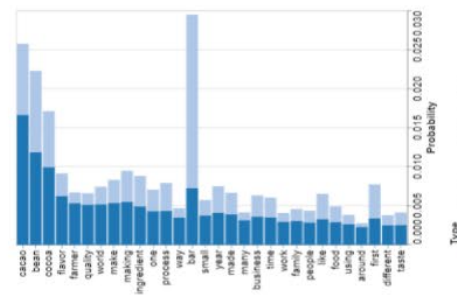


3 - e-Commerce

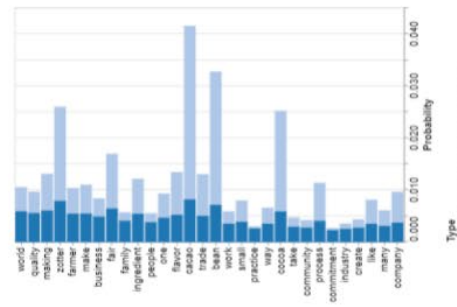


A four-topic ( $K = 4$ ) biterm topic model for the subcorpus of Home page content. Only coherent topics were labeled manually, while incoherent topics were left unlabeled (from figure 2.6.).

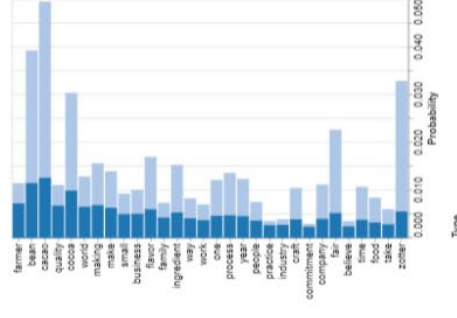
$K = 3$



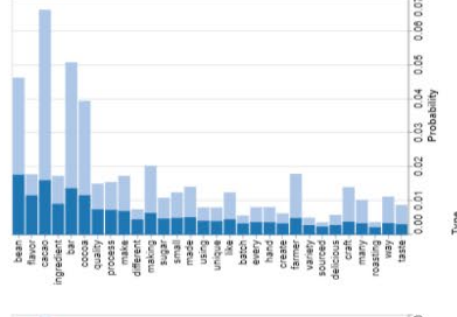
$K = 4$



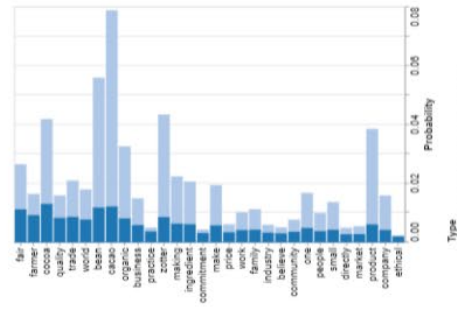
$K = 5$



$K = 6$



$K = 7$



Only one cluster stabilized across all biterm topic models ( $K = 3, 4, 5, 6, 7$ ) for the About pages subcorpus. (from figure 2.7.).



## Chapter Three

### **Place, Process, People: Digital Placemaking of Distant Cacao Origin Geographies**

**Abstract:** Chocolate is a staple of the North American diet whose main ingredient, cacao, can only be grown in equatorial regions that are distant from their principal consumer markets in the Global North. The commodity chocolate industry has been criticized for perpetuating environmental, social, and economic inequities for smallholder cacao farmers, especially those in West Africa, where the majority of cacao is produced. Craft chocolate presents an alternative to commodity chocolate, offering a promise of more ethical consumption and better outcomes for cacao producers. In addition to prioritizing alternative sourcing practices, this morality-driven sector is defined by a wide variety of cacao ‘origins’, or the places where cacao beans are grown. Many craft chocolate companies are dedicated to educating consumers about cacao origins, including the diversity of geographic regions, harvesting processes, and land stewardship—all of which impact chocolate flavour. The ubiquity of online consumption has shifted most of this education to digital spaces, resulting in increased mediation of place in online settings. In this study, we explore how digital placemaking—the construction of place that occurs through digitally-mediated experiences—is employed on direct-to-consumer craft chocolate websites operating in North America. Drawing on a human-place-technology framework of digital placemaking to analyze focus group data, we assert that these websites ‘bridge the gap’ between producing and consuming geographies by sharing experiences connected to place. We also critique the use of simplified location-based marketing narratives within placemaking practices for their potential to construct certain origins as innately ‘good’ and others as ‘bad’.

**Keywords:** digital placemaking, craft chocolate, cacao origins, consumer-producer relationships, telecoupling, global food systems

### 3.1. Introduction

Chocolate is a decadent, melt-in-your-mouth treat commonplace to the North American diet. Featured everywhere from home cooking to high-end restaurants to gas station candy, this food's essential ingredient is cacao: a tropical rainforest crop that can only be produced at a commercially viable scale in regions 20 degrees north and south of the equator. Since the early 1900s, roughly two-thirds of the world's cacao has been produced in West Africa (Maguire-Rajpaul et al., 2022). Because cacao production is difficult to mechanize and requires significant manual labour, the main farming model is smallholder systems, where cacao is generally integrated into other food crops (Off, 2007). Around five to six million smallholder farmers sell cacao as a key cash crop (Bermudez et al., 2022; International Cocoa Association, 2024a). While cacao only grows in equatorial regions, most of the world's chocolate is consumed in the global North. Given this physical, cultural, and economic distance between chocolate's origin geographies and its consuming geographies, accessing accurate information about the circumstances of production is difficult and most chocolate consumers do not engage with the food's supply chain.

Because of the vast distances between its producing and consuming geographies, it is useful to understand cacao and chocolate production as a telecoupled system. Telecoupling is an interdisciplinary framework that describes complex environmental and socioeconomic interactions between geographically distant 'coupled' (or joined) human and natural systems (Hull & Liu, 2018; Kapsar et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2013). In essence, the telecoupling theory is helpful to explain how local decisions increasingly have distant impacts. Similar to other smallholder-maintained industries like coffee, the chocolate industry can be conceptualized as a telecoupled system wherein cacao producing 'origin' geographies are connected to chocolate consuming geographies in the Global North through the trade of cacao beans, financial transactions, and information exchange (Dou et al., 2020; Leissle, 2018; Zimmerer et al., 2018). This system is shaped by numerous causes including ecological shifts due to climate change, fluctuating global market prices for cacao, and technological advances in cacao farming, but also consumer preferences (Gateau-Rey et al., 2018; International Cocoa Association, 2024a; Lawal et al., 2017; Olwig et al., 2024; Pendrill et al., 2019). For example, although certain chocolate companies may support specific cacao farmer collectives at origin, they rely on consumer purchasing and public perception of their businesses to be successful in their work.

There has been an increasing awareness of sustainability and equity issues within the chocolate industry, including negative environmental impacts in production regions, labour rights violations, and systemic financial exploitation of smallholder farmers (Bermudez et al., 2022; Cadby & Araki, 2022; Carodenuto, 2019; Fountain & Huetz-Adams, 2023; Georgallis & Lee, 2020; Leissle, 2017, 2018; Maguire-Rajpaul et al., 2022; Pendrill et al., 2019; Recanati et al., 2018; Rueda et al., 2018; Woolley et al., 2021). The North American craft chocolate sector emerged in the late 1990s partly in response to the growing awareness surrounding these environmental and social harms (Giller, 2017). Scholars have explained how the craft chocolate

sector operates as a ‘moral market’ that positions itself in opposition to the commodity chocolate industry by prioritizing high-quality chocolate made from ‘sustainably’ produced, ‘fine flavour’ cacao sourced through equitable trade relationships wherein smallholders are paid a premium for their product (Cadby et al., 2021; Gallo et al., 2017; Woolley et al., 2021). This oppositional framing includes craft makers sourcing primarily from outside West Africa. Instead, craft chocolate makers generally (but not exclusively) source from countries with originating genetic ties to cacao such as Peru, Ecuador, and Brazil, alongside areas where cacao thrived after colonial spread such as Vietnam, India, Madagascar, and the Pacific Islands (Coe & Coe, 2013; Giller, 2017; Leissle, 2013). This diversity of cacao origins is a primary lure for craft chocolate consumers, and many craft chocolate companies invest significant effort to engage in place-based marketing about cacao origin geographies (Leissle, 2013). In doing so, these companies engage in placemaking practices by imbuing cacao origins with specific meanings and experiences for themselves and their consumers (Cresswell, 2014).

Due to expanding digitalization of everyday practices, including shopping, the craft chocolate sector has experienced a rapid transition into online retail spaces. This development accelerated when the COVID-19 pandemic halted the in-person, relational marketing commonly practiced in this sector (Cadby, 2021). Digital spaces have increased access to larger audiences for craft chocolate companies, creating new ways of communicating about cacao origin geographies and the values underpinning craft chocolate (Suphawanichleela, 2017). Consequently, craft chocolate companies and consumers engage in collective (and often unconscious) digital placemaking around cacao origins. Digital placemaking is a relatively new concept that continues to develop alongside evolving technological capacity for mediating place. Various definitions currently exist. Some scholars explain the term as using digital media to cultivate or maintain a sense of attachment to place (Halegoua & Polson, 2021). Others see digital placemaking as interactions over digital media wherein place is construed as meaningful (Parini & Yus, 2023), or a process where individual experiences of place are constructed or shaped through dialogues with their digital representations (Główczyński, 2024). Within the context of this study, which explores construction of place in relation to online content, we align most closely with Główczyński (2024) and conceptualize digital placemaking as a process wherein experiences of places are created, transformed, and mediated through interaction with digital representations of that place.

Digital media have the power to both enhance and shape place experiences by using visualizations and language to alter the perceived essence of the material environment, enabling the creation of placemaking without physically visiting a geographic location (Główczyński, 2024; Rzeszewski, 2018). Even as craft chocolate consumers situated in the Global North learn about specific and distinct cacao origin geographies at home, many have not physically visited these regions (and may not ever). Consumers will experience, interact with, and develop understandings of cacao origins through digital representations: texts, images, maps, and audiovisual content provided by craft chocolate companies who are positioned as ‘experts’ of the products they sell and by extension where they originate.

Alongside a deepened understanding of place, digital technologies also have the power to confuse experiences of place by overwhelming consumers with information, casting doubt on what is real or fake, and exacerbating existing social divides around who belongs where (Relph, 2021). Craft chocolate companies have a vested interest in encouraging product purchase, and the ethical marketing strategies they employ have the potential to create specific representations of cacao origin geographies that construct moral “us vs them” divides when reality is—as always—more nuanced. One area of opportunity for craft chocolate companies is direct-to-consumer (DTC) e-commerce websites, which allow an individual to learn about and purchase directly from a company entirely online (Demangeot & Broderick, 2016). DTC websites have become a ubiquitous part of everyday consumption practices for North American consumers (Hagen et al., 2024). As such, these websites represent an essential opportunity for craft chocolate companies to not only sell products, but to engage with consumers about their company’s value propositions which include relationships with cacao origins. DTC craft chocolate websites therefore have the potential to represent a site of digital placemaking. This study explores how digital placemaking occurs through interactions between craft chocolate consumers and DTC craft chocolate websites, and is structured using the following questions:

**RQ1:** What perspectives do North American consumers hold about cacao origin geographies?

**RQ2:** How are North American craft chocolate consumers’ perspectives of cacao origin geographies shaped by interactions with DTC craft chocolate websites?

Drawing on Głowczyński’s (2024) conceptual framework of human-place-technology relations in the digital placemaking process, we explore common themes within digital placemaking for craft chocolate companies and consumers in addition to contextualizing and critiquing how the craft chocolate community digitally engages with cacao origins from a distance. In the following, we outline important theoretical concepts that framed our analysis and delineate our methodology before exploring our results and discussing potential impacts of our findings within the craft chocolate sector.

### **3.2. Digital Placemaking from a Distance**

Głowczyński’s (2024) framework identifies three key actors that, through their interactions, constitute the process of digital placemaking: place, technology or ‘spatial media,’ and humans. Place is a “constantly negotiated” (Głowczyński, 2024, p. 6) object of the digital placemaking process as it is produced, mediated, and symbolized by both people and technology. During the process of mediation, a place will gain multiple digital representations which may diverge based on the people and technologies involved. Additionally, digital placemaking facilitates the construction of place through communication *about* a particular place by documenting and sharing experiences or information about that place through digital media (Głowczyński, 2024; Halegoua & Polson, 2021). The digital technologies through which representations of place are created can be understood as a form of spatial media. While spatial media might be more immediately understood as within the context of mapping applications and

geotagged social media posts, a spatial component can also be expressed “indirectly through the indication of a place name” (Główczyński, 2024, p. 2) or other such symbolism. Any media that enables interaction with and creation of geographic information online can therefore be understood as spatial media. These technologies are the sites of digital content that create representations of places, becoming an interface between the people and places in question. Thus, physical and digital spaces become linked as they are experienced through technological processes. Digital representations of place are constantly in flux due to the ability to rapidly modify digital content and the variability in platform affordances; as such, a user of a specific digital platform may have a divergent experience of place to other users.

As both creators and consumers of digital content about place, humans are the drivers of digital placemaking. People play a dual role in this placemaking process as we have relationships with both the places being discussed and the digital platforms through which they are mediated. Interactions with digital representations of a place, filtered through both the platform and the individual user’s relationship to that platform, influence a person’s “ideas and behaviours about and in places” (Główczyński, 2024, p. 6) whether or not that person has ever been in situ. As such, the digital placemaking that occurs through interactions between human, media, and place can facilitate connection to locations that are physically distant to the person experiencing them. A person can therefore develop ideas and understandings of a place that are formed solely through digital experiences (Główczyński, 2024; Halegoua & Polson, 2021; Parini & Yus, 2023). These constructions of place are shaped by both the affordances of the technologies they are mediated by, and the sociocultural positions of those who contribute to them (Elwood & Leszczynski, 2018; Relph, 2021). As such, there is the potential for digital placemaking practices to reify or to challenge existing global power structures based on the people and technologies involved (Elwood & Leszczynski, 2018; Relph, 2021).

### **3.3. Methods**

We used focus groups to explore how craft chocolate consumers understand cacao origin geographies within the context of DTC craft chocolate websites. In addition to engaging in discussion about website use habits and understandings of cacao origins, participants were asked to navigate one to two DTC craft chocolate websites as a group and talk about the experience. This exercise facilitated human-technology-place interaction, enabling greater insight into the digital placemaking process. Due to their ability to facilitate dialogue through group interactivity, focus groups provide insight into a broader range of perspectives and behaviours from the study population (Krueger, 2015; Secor, 2010). The semi-structured intergroup discussion offered by focus groups is particularly useful as participants will encounter differing ideas and opinions from their own, enabling increased nuance within the data. Human participation in this research project was approved by the University of Victoria Ethics Board (application number #22-0576). All participants provided informed, written consent and were compensated for their time with a bar of craft chocolate (approximately \$16 CAD value).

### ***3.3.1. Sampling***

Focus group recruitment took place through email, social media, and in-person posters (see appendix A for an example of recruitment materials). Access to the craft chocolate community was facilitated by The Chocolate Project, Canada's largest craft chocolate retailer and educator, and via additional networking connections made during the 2022 Northwest Chocolate Festival (NWCF).<sup>16</sup> For the purposes of this study, "craft chocolate consumers" were delineated by currently residing in North America and having purchased craft chocolate at least twice in the last six months. Further inclusion criteria consisted of being over 18 years old, ability to communicate in English, and capacity to use the internet and navigate websites. Age, language, and online literacy were selected for practicality; however, purchase frequency was chosen to capture both committed craft chocolate consumers and those who buy casually. The geographic limitation was necessary to understanding how North American consumers, who are typically distant to cacao origin geographies, conceptualize and connect with these places.<sup>17</sup> Participants were selected through purposive sampling, which is suitable since North America is home to a community of craft chocolate makers and consumers that has been growing rapidly since emerging in the 1990s (Cadby et al., 2021; Giller, 2017; Leissle, 2017). The collective consumption practices and social values of this group mean that this population is uniquely knowledgeable about the study topic (Palinkas et al., 2015).

### ***3.3.2. Data Collection***

Six total focus groups were held in total with two taking place in-person at the Chocolate Project (a local specialty store known to all in-person participants), and four taking place online using Zoom. Groups were approximately 90 minutes long and contained between three and eight participants with 34 total participants across all sessions. Focus groups contained multiple parts to promote comfort and dialogue among participants (Krueger, 2015). First, participants introduced themselves and were asked broader questions about why they valued craft chocolate to develop comfortable discussion. Second, participants were asked to reflect on their understandings of cacao origin geographies and their perceptions of where chocolate comes from. Third, participants engaged in a semi-structured activity where the group was asked to browse and evaluate one to two craft chocolate websites randomly selected from a researcher-created dataset of 257 craft chocolate websites with DTC e-commerce capacity in North America. Lastly, all focus groups were asked if any previously covered content should be revisited or re-emphasized, or if any important topics had been missed during the discussion. All sessions were audio-recorded, transcribed and de-identified to protect confidentiality. Participants (P) were pseudonymized through code names corresponding to their focus group (1-

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<sup>16</sup> Taking place annually in Seattle, the Northwest Chocolate Festival is North America's largest craft chocolate festival and trade show.

<sup>17</sup> While small amounts of cacao may be grown in California and other continental states, Hawaii is the only North American state able to produce cacao at the volumes required for commercialization.

6), and each participant was randomly assigned a letter of the alphabet descending from A to distinguish between individuals in the same group.

Including a group website evaluation method in the focus groups enabled observation of how participants interacted with DTC craft chocolate websites in practice as opposed to in theory. Because group members engaged with actual websites, they were able to discuss, evaluate, and provide insight into the genuine ideas presented on those sites rather than their recollections of those concepts. This exercise was chosen specifically as a form of human-technology-place interaction wherein participants could interact with digital representations of cacao origin geographies on craft chocolate websites. Additionally, asking participants to navigate the websites collaboratively facilitated increased dialogue as group members actively discussed how to move through the sites, what they thought about the content presented, and why they held those opinions. This cooperative movement through the websites enabled the technology-human interactions through which a sense of place is mediated, transformed, and created online, highlighting digital placemaking in practice.

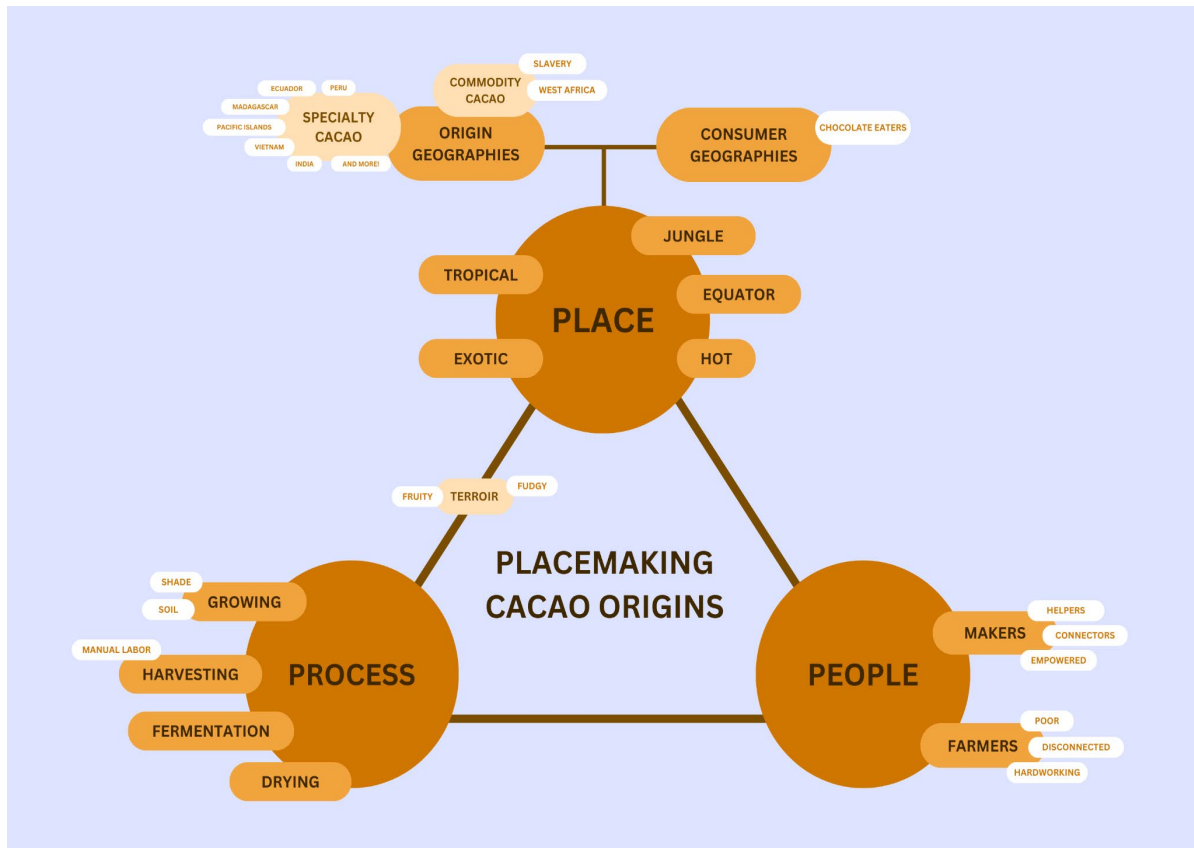
### **3.3.3. Data Analysis**

Transcripts from focus groups were analyzed through a combined inductive-deductive approach wherein findings were initially inductively analyzed through thematic analysis to generate themes, then deductively refined by applying the human-technology-place conceptual framework. We began with thematic analysis, which is an accessible, flexible approach to qualitative data analysis wherein recursive movement between the stages enables reflexive exploration of the data (Nowell et al., 2017). As thematic analysis focuses on both common and divergent perspectives between research participants, it enables less prescriptive observations and therefore richer analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). Thematic analysis involves familiarization with the data through transcription or transcript correction, then systematic data coding before generating the initial themes, developing and reviewing these themes, defining, refining, and naming the themes, and lastly producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). Application of the human-technology-place framework occurred during the recursive movement between the third and fifth stages. Transcripts were organized and coded using NVivo (version 14). Additionally, diagramming was used to generate a thematic map (see figure 3.1) that enabled development, connection, and refinement of themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). For additional data validation, we shared a preliminary summary of research findings with interested participants to provide feedback on our results.

## **3.4. Results**

Focus group participants valued knowing cacao origin and sourcing practices, and therefore frequently sought out this information while using craft chocolate websites in order to gain “a deeper understanding of the geography” (P4A) they felt distant from. In search of this ‘deeper understanding,’ participants engaged in digital placemaking of cacao origin geographies.

Three major place-based themes emerged during focus group placemaking around cacao origin geographies: origin as ‘place,’ origin as ‘process,’ and origin as ‘people.’



**Figure 3.1.** Diagramming placemaking concepts that emerged during focus groups as participants discussed cacao origins and interacted with DTC craft chocolate website content.

### 3.4.1. Connecting at a Distance

Focus group members asserted that since “the average person doesn't know where most of their produce comes from, let alone something that is so transformed from beginning product to end product” (P5F), having “actual knowledge of the place [the cacao comes from] is extremely important” (P3C). Craft chocolate websites provided an important means of connection to places, processes, and people involved in cacao at origin. Participants used craft chocolate websites as a means of “bringing the gap a little closer” (P5D) between the ‘cacao farming’ origin geographies and the North American ‘chocolate consuming’ geographies that participants belonged to. “We know one end [chocolate], and are fascinated by this other end [growing cacao]” (P5F), said one participant while describing the “disconnect” they felt from cacao origins. Group members wanted to engage with the stories of the cacao origin geographies their chocolate was sourced from because they appreciated learning about where and how cacao smallholders lived. Ethically motivated participants were interested in “social mission stories” (P3C) that discussed livelihood improvements for smallholders, such as an “all-female co-op” (P3B) in Peru that directly supported women in that specific region of the country. Group

members therefore resonated with the ethical values that were woven into portrayals of cacao origin geographies on DTC craft chocolate websites.

Storytelling is an essential part of digital placemaking around cacao origins. Focus group participants generally resonated with the storytelling elements included on DTC craft chocolate websites, such as naming specific people, using imagery, and including personal anecdotes, using these aspects to inform their understanding of the chocolate they bought and places it came from. The personal touches in the stories of makers' relationships to cacao origins enabled a more intimate connection for the consumers wherein they felt closer to the places where cacao grows. Through these stories, consumers came to better understand the value chains upholding craft chocolate: an understanding which often resulted in increased emotional and financial investment that ostensibly is reinvested in communities at origin. As such, digital placemaking around cacao origins is a direct byproduct of, and helps sustain, the material and informational flows between North American consuming markets and cacao-producing communities.

Visual content, such as maps, photographs, and videos were particularly important in a storytelling capacity as they afforded deeper connection to these different parts of the world. Maps, for example, could visually provide a more detailed origin location through a "coloured in ... region" (P4F). Group members "[liked] the story behind [photographs]" (P1C) that craft chocolate websites provided of the farms, cacao farmers, and co-operatives because this content enhanced the overall experience of contextualizing where their chocolate comes from. Participants used visual content alongside written text to inform their perspectives of origins as "dense jungle kind of rustic fermentation stations that are sort of reinforced by photos that you see ... [on] websites" (P3B). Videos were seen as useful for "showing the actual practices of the farmers" (P2C) and to "get a sense for the geography" (P4A) of a particular region. Ultimately, visual content was a critical aspect of how craft chocolate websites mediate place, working as a powerful storytelling tool to provide further emotional connection to cacao origin geographies for North American consumers.

### **3.4.2. Place**

Cacao origins were understood to be real parts of the world in "the region around the equator" (P4A) that could be found on a map and visited. Described as "places where chocolate melts" (P1C), participants connected cacao origins to a specific set of "tropical" (P6B, P1C, P1A, P2A, P2B) geographic features such as "humidity, forested, [and] lush" (P5B). The word "jungle" (P6B, P6A, P6C, P6E, P5E, P5D, P3B, P3A, P4A, P4D) was frequently used to construct place by participants as a shorthand for hot, humid, forest-filled places. While some participants had been to an origin geography, many "had never been to any farm, so they all [seemed] a bit mythical in a way. Exotic" (P5E). For some participants, cacao farming was idealized as a "more of a pure back to nature life" (P6C) that was "kind of frozen in time" (P5A). Cacao origins were firmly situated as 'external to the everyday lived experiences of the average craft chocolate consumer in terms of both geography and practices. In short, these origins were constructed as 'other'.

Additionally, discussions of origin geographies as places included a divide between ‘bulk’ commodity cacao origins and ‘specialty’ craft cacao origins. Bulk cacao was explicitly connected to unethical production practices and low-quality chocolate. Participants had “learned that there was a lot of slave labour in Africa and child labour in Africa that goes into [the] production of mass market chocolate” (P2C). They understood that the “chocolate [cacao] growing in Africa [was] unfortunately, a lot of it not great chocolate” (P2F) and asserted that its quality and ethics was “the opposite of craft”. Notably, participants and craft chocolate websites excluded certain African origins, such as Madagascar, from this narrative and instead situated them as ‘craft’ origins due to their separation from “Ghana” (P1C) and the “Ivory Coast [Cote d’Ivoire]” (P1A). The numerous cacao origin geographies more commonly producing specialty cacao used by craft chocolate makers—including but not limited to “Ecuador” (P2D), “Columbia” (P5C), “Peru” (P1B), “Pacific Islands” (P6B), “Madagascar” (P4F), “Hawaii” (P6E), “Costa Rica” (P1D), “India” (P3A), and “Vietnam” (P1E)—were positioned in opposition to geographies typified as ‘bulk’ origins. “I feel like in general, you would have a higher quality of cacao from [those areas],” said one participant. Group members therefore identified an implicit division between craft and commodity chocolate that was perceivable on craft chocolate sites, and aligned themselves with this dichotomy of origins.



The first full container of beans that Dandelion Chocolate purchased came from Bertil Akesson's Bejofo Estate in Ambanja, Madagascar. The Estate has been growing cacao since 1920 and we bought our first container of these beans in 2012.

We've been buying consistently ever since and for the first time in 2017, we finally purchased two containers (around 25 tonnes) from his estate. We are proud to work with Bertil both because we love his beans and because we believe that he has paved the way for much of the development of specialty cacao that has happened in the last few years.

**Figure 3.2.** A screenshot taken from Dandelion Chocolate's origin education page featuring their communicated relationship with Akesson's Bejofo Estate in Ambajana, Madagascar, a popular Madagascar-based cacao origin in the Sambirano Valley. Accessed June 13, 2024.

#### *3.4.2.1. Place and flavour*

Cacao origin was strongly associated with flavour. The notion of "terroir" (P1C, P2E, P4B, P4C, P6B, P6C), which can be understood as the perceptible flavour characteristics imparted to a food or beverage product by the environment wherein it is produced, was referenced explicitly and implicitly during focus groups (Nesto, 2010). Participants engaged with the origin information and associated tasting notes provided on product detail pages by craft chocolate companies. For example, while reading about the "cherry raspberry" (P6B) tasting notes for a particular bar, one group member stated "with the big tasting notes alone ... I want this bar in my mouth" (P6C). Group members expected particular flavours from specific countries and regions of origin; these opinions were reinforced and reshaped while interacting with tasting notes provided by DTC websites. For example, while discussing 'fruity' versus

‘fudgy’ cacao origins during the website activity, one participant stated that “if [a chocolate bar was] from the Ucayali region of Peru, then it could be fruity” (P1B) as opposed to the fudgy flavours other group members associated with chocolate made from Peruvian cacao. Participants overwhelmingly wanted to eat single-origin dark chocolate and expressed explicit consumer preferences based on origin geography. For example, one group member declared that “Madagascar is a primo origin in my opinion” (P6B) while viewing a chocolate bar from Madagascar during the website activity. Another participant, when looking at different company's Madagascar chocolate bar, stated “I can trust that source because I know the flavour profile ... I've never had one from Madagascar that didn't have that fruity flavour profile” (P1C). Cacao origins therefore operated as a shorthand for chocolate flavour, with the flavour of the bar becoming associated with the place itself.

[Shop](#) > [bars- Origin](#) > Ucayali, Peru, 70%

**Ucayali, Peru, 70%**

Collections: [Bars- All](#), [bars- Origin](#)

This bar is made with cacao grown along the mighty Ucayali River in the Amazon jungle. Historically this was a dangerous coca-growing region with a heavy presence of traffickers. A government program to quell narcos activity in addition to being paid premium prices, farmers are now switching to cacao as an alternate market to cocaine.

Ucayali River Cacao is a central fermentary that works with over 400 small family farms with 1-3 hectares of land each. Local varieties of cacao called "comun" and Trinitario clones (never CCN-51) are brought in by boat then carefully fermented, dried and blended to preserve the beautiful flavours of the region.

Origin: Pucallpa -Tingo Maria, Peru  
 Cacao content: 70%  
 Tasting notes: Mission fig, banana bread, orange blossom

Awards:  
 International Chocolate Awards  
 2019 Americas - Silver

**Figure 3.3.** A screenshot taken from SOMA Chocolatemaker’s product detail page for their Ucayali, Peru bar illustrating how flavour and cacao origins are connected on product pages by craft chocolate makers. Accessed June 20, 2024.

### 3.4.3. Process

Place-based conceptualizations of cacao origins were also connected to the processes of growing, fermenting, and drying cacao. Since “[cacao] comes from a tree that grows twenty degrees north or south of the equator” (P6B), participants were invested in the growing conditions at origin. Group members interacted with website content that discussed specific producers, working conditions, and environmental details in relation to cacao origin, articulating the importance of healthy “soil microbiology” (P3A) and the importance of cacao trees “being under the shade” (P6E), in addition to expressing concern about “monoculture” (P4D) cacao

farming systems. Creating a “healthy environment for the cacao tree” (P2C) was viewed as essential to high-quality craft chocolate alongside proper harvesting techniques:

If you go back down the line, you'll find [quality chocolate makers] are getting beans that were picked by somebody who didn't pick the overripe ones and didn't pick the underripe ones. That person was caring about quality too, because they're getting paid more for a bag of good beans than they would for a bag of bulk beans. (P1C)

Participants felt similarly about the fermentation process, which also occurs at origin and is therefore done by a minority of craft chocolate makers. While reviewing a page from a company located in the United States that discussed fermentation, one group member said: “I just wish more craft chocolate makers would put bold front and center that they don't do the fermentation. That's a huge part of what makes a wonderful chocolate bar” (P5A). Group members understood that “an element of knowledge” (P1E) was necessary to grow, harvest, and process cacao properly so that it reached a level of quality that could be used for *craft* chocolate, and that much of that work was done at origin.



Figure 3.4. A screenshot taken from Chequesett Chocolate’s website showing an illustration they use to educate consumers about the ‘bean to bar’ cacao harvesting and chocolate making processes. Accessed June 20, 2024.

#### **3.4.4. People**

Discussions of cacao origins involved participants' perceptions of cacao smallholders, most frequently referred to as farmers. There was a certain set of "socioeconomic associations" (P5F) associated with cacao smallholders, who were understood to live in "developing countries" (P4F) and often lacked resources:

Most of the places where they grow chocolate [cacao] are among the poorest places in the world and they also are very poorly governed in many cases and so the people, especially the poor people, are very subject to abuse by just about everybody around them. (P1C)

Focus group members asserted that cacao smallholders did hard work "out in the humid, forested jungle areas and working with big dangerous knives" (P5C), often for small rewards. "It's not a very lucrative business for the farmer" (P4A), said one participant, discussing how commodity cacao farming has typically paid low prices to smallholders. Group members aligned themselves with website content that critiqued the "volatile world-market whims" (Dandelion Chocolate, 2024) of commodity chocolate and assigned agency to impacts of the commodity market at origin: "the [commodity] chocolate industry wants to keep [smallholders in poverty] so that they're forced to keep doing the exact same thing and they can't better their situation" (P1E). Additionally, origin geographies were also seen as places that were less likely to consume chocolate, which was understood to be "driven by the desire of ... North American and European consumers to have this product" (P2F). There was a strong sense that "most farmers [have] never tried chocolates" (P2G) and "[have] no idea what the finished product tastes like" (P2B). Ultimately, cacao smallholders were perceived by participants as people who worked hard, were often financially exploited, and were disconnected from the end product of their labour.

Craft chocolate maker interactions with communities at origin also factored into participants' placemaking process. While participants understood makers existed across the world and discussed companies making chocolate both at origin and outside of it, craft chocolate makers were commonly conceptualized as being from North America and Europe: "this is a product that so often is produced, far, far away from where it's farmed. And that's the challenge of chocolate" (P4C). As a result of their oppositional positioning to commodity chocolate, makers were positioned as people who were involved in "going and helping the communities" at origin to improve "the quality of their beans and their production such that it can help boost the economy of the [farming communities]" (P1A). Makers were seen as educators and connectors who had the power and ability to improve livelihoods for cacao smallholders and link the beginning of the supply chain to its end:

[makers will] bring the bars to the farmers. So then they can then connect that 'I've grown this, I fermented this, and I put it in that bag. And now it comes back in a bar and this cool little wrapper, and you're the maker who use my beans that I actually harvested,' and maybe that will help bring that gap a little bit closer. (P5D)

However, some participants critiqued craft chocolate makers for patronizing attitudes towards cacao smallholders. For example, during the website review activity, participants felt that a maker's "description of the humble farmers and things like that does sound a bit over the top. It's almost kind of like the white saviour thing so it rubs me the wrong way, that part" (P2F). Participants felt that the maker "[didn't have] the highest opinion of [cacao farmers]" (P2C). On a different website, participants critiqued the 'top down' framing of a photograph for creating "a privileged position" (P5C) where the viewer (presumably a North American consumer) literally looked down upon a smallholder turning cacao in a fermentation box. One focus group critiqued the ethics of craft chocolate makers working at origin, asking:

"what are the ethical practices behind operating such firms with white people coming over and saying, 'I'm good. I'm a good businessperson, and I want to help you grow and make your place in the world.' Is that even okay?" (P3C)

While participants did occasionally discuss non-white craft chocolate makers who lived and worked at origin, craft chocolate makers were conceptually understood to hold a particular racialized, geopolitical position that gave them power over smallholders. Within these discussions, group members navigated mixed emotions about the privileged position of a Global North lifestyle relative to their understandings of cacao smallholders' everyday experiences.

### **3.5. Discussion**

Digital placemaking enables consumers to engage directly with cacao origins, breaching the perceived distance between producing and consuming geographies. Cacao origin geographies were positioned by makers' websites and understood by consumers as places (rural regions 20 degrees north and south of the equator) wherein specific processes (growing, harvesting, fermenting, and drying cacao) are done by particular people (smallholders). Place associations included a collection of geographic features for hot, humid, jungle environments that were not specific to any particular region, illustrating how diverse cacao origins can be entangled into a single, tropical place. The point of differentiation around cacao origins was flavour as common flavour notes for a specific origin became linked to understandings of the place itself. For craft chocolate consumers, the flavours in the bar—whether tasted or imagined through digitally mediated tasting notes—were equivalent to the place of origin.

The naming of cacao origins on product detail pages is a form of technological mediation that directly connects place to product. Because product pages have been designed to sell a product, they are an inherently commerce-oriented interface through which interaction can occur. Any representations of places that are produced on product detail pages are therefore commodified due to the specific affordances of this technology. Moreover, the sales-based interactions between person and place that occur on product detail pages further work to commodify cacao origins as consumers begin to understand the place within the context of the product. The strong connection between chocolate flavour and cacao origin, wherein 'Madagascar' becomes a distinctly 'fruity' chocolate bar on a product detail page, exemplifies how a specific cacao origin can become commodified through its spatial mediation.

In depicting the countries, regions, and farms or fermentaries they source cacao from, craft chocolate companies are creating representations of these places through communication ‘about the place’ on their websites. However, these representations must be digestible for a North American audience due to these companies’ target consumer market. Leissle (2013) asserts that craft chocolate companies often rely on “a soft appeal to the exotic” (p. 25) in their place-based advertising. This exoticization of cacao origin geographies also occurred during the digital placemaking enacted by DTC craft chocolate websites and craft chocolate consumers. Cacao origin geographies were physically distant to participants, requiring substantial time and financial investment to access; this increased effort contributed to their mystique (Koster, 2019). Additionally, cacao origins were often culturally distant due to both lifestyle and financial disparities between smallholders and North American craft chocolate consumers. The alterity of cacao origin geographies augmented their exoticism, and enhanced consumer desires for closeness through place-based experiences. By eating single-origin chocolate and engaging with maker’s stories of origins online, participants experienced and co-constructed specific cacao origin geographies as distinct, memorable places.

As craft chocolate consumers interact with these digital representations, their perspectives of cacao origin geographies are mediated and shaped by this placemaking process. Notably, each individual brings their own set of preconceived notions that will uniquely inform how they construct understandings of a place, and thus become embedded in the placemaking process during these interactions. For example, none of the websites reviewed by participants during focus groups described cacao farming as dangerous, however certain group members constructed the jungles associated with origin geographies as risky, unknown spaces. These websites also did not discuss national governance, yet participants asserted that most countries where cacao grew were poorly governed, ‘developing’ nations. Western audiences, who are frequently presented with sensationalized struggles and suffering from countries in the global South, have been habituated to understand these geographies through a specific set of assumptions (Chouliaraki, 2013). These pre-existing convictions, alongside others such as actual experience at origin, are enmeshed into the interactions North American consumers have about cacao origins online.

The processes of cacao production—growing, harvesting, fermenting, and drying—were conceived by participants and websites alike as difficult, respectable work. However, participants also felt that cacao smallholders saw few rewards for their effort. Smallholders were assumed to lead difficult lives due to their lack of resources, which also left them vulnerable to exploitation. Craft chocolate companies, while not infallible, were seen to provide smallholders with additional respect and equitable pay for their labour. Additionally, participants viewed farmers as disconnected from the end product: chocolate. If craft chocolate consumers *felt* distant from cacao origins, smallholders *were* distant to chocolate consumption. While a devoted craft chocolate consumer might go beyond learning about origins at home and visit a cacao farm in person, it was assumed that cacao smallholders had little opportunity to engage with the post-

bean chocolate value chain. Craft chocolate companies were positioned and understood as actors that could bridge the gap between producer and consumer.

The construction of craft chocolate companies as benevolent helpers towards hardworking, previously-impooverished farmers who had bettered their circumstances through trading in specialty cacao naturalizes a narrative where actors from the ‘developed’ Global North provide assistance to a ‘needy’ Global South which reinforces existing neocolonial hierarchies (Naylor, 2014; Touri, 2020). Despite craft chocolate companies positioning cacao smallholders as partners, much of the power still resided with the ‘choice’ of the craft chocolate company to pay above market price. In their attempts to build authentic relationships with consumers, many craft chocolate companies reified existing racialized constructions that “rely on the commodification of difference and the distant other” (Touri, 2020, p. 109). The value chains of chocolate, which necessitate equatorial production of cacao, make it difficult for craft chocolate companies and consumers in North America to escape these portrayals.

It is important to interrogate this gap between producing and consuming geographies within the racialized constructions of who makes and eats chocolate, and who grows cacao. While non-white makers exist both inside and outside cacao origin, craft chocolate consumers frequently upheld the construction that craft chocolate makers are white, and cacao smallholders are not. There is truth behind this position: the vast majority of cacao farmers are people of colour while white people are extremely prominent within the craft chocolate sector (Leissle, 2018). Posited by Cole (2012), the White Savior Industrial Complex (WSIC) comprises the fallacy that non-white communities need white outsiders to rescue them (Anderson et al., 2021; Helmick, 2022). As travel to origin is a prominent part of the ‘direct trade’ value chain models used in craft chocolate, there is the potential for white saviourism myths to be upheld in placemaking practices on craft chocolate websites. Through narrations about makers who visit origin to improve the lives of poor people of colour, the placemaking and storytelling practices on craft chocolate websites work to create emotional experiences for consumers that validate their privilege (Cole, 2012).

Alongside the divide between producing and consuming geographies, there was a strong distinction between the ethics of craft and commodity actors at origin. DTC craft chocolate websites situated their impacts at origin within descriptions of an area’s physical features and the people inhabiting it, linking impact to place. While some websites brought up issues in the chocolate industry openly, craft chocolate companies often focused on their positive impact at origin rather than directly mentioning the commodity chocolate industry. Underneath discussion of sustainable farming and living wage pricing was the implicit statement that these practices were abnormal outside of craft chocolate. The lists of origins on craft websites spanned the entirety of the equator but rarely featured West African regions. The harms of commodity chocolate were therefore present through what was left unsaid. Consumers engaged with this divide more directly, speaking about how education from the craft chocolate sector had informed their perspectives on West African cacao. They explicitly connected cacao origins in West Africa

to contemporary slavery and child abuse, aligning with the ‘trouble’ narratives of West Africa that entered the North American public consciousness in the early 2000’s (Leissle, 2013, 2018). Craft chocolate makers’ reluctance to source from West Africa alongside consumer rejection of this region paints a powerful picture of West Africa as a place where cacao trees and poor, hardworking people suffer in the sun due to the active exploitation of commodity cocoa buyers.

This place-based division of cacao origin as ‘ethical’ or ‘unethical’ runs the risk of makers and consumers alike assuming that because cacao comes from a specific location, it is inherently ethical or unethical. This both denigrates West African cacao—potentially reducing opportunities for livelihood improvements in the region—and upholds cacao origins common to craft chocolate as places with ethical cacao production (Leissle, 2018). While craft chocolate companies position themselves as working through different value chains to commodity buyers, these value chains exist side by side, operating in the same regions, and often forming relationships with the same people. For example, Ecuador is predicted to be the third-highest producer of cacao this year at an expected 430 thousand tonnes of cacao—just behind Cote D’Ivoire and Ghana (International Cocoa Association, 2024b). Despite being the top exporter of specialty cacao used by craft makers, this is still a higher volume than can be used by the craft sector; additionally, not all cacao will meet this sector’s rigorous quality standards (International Cocoa Association, 2024b; Martin, 2017). The lure of single-origin place-based ethics is strong, and many conventional chocolate companies are beginning to include single-origin chocolate products such as those found in Lindt’s EXCELLENCE collection (Lindt & Sprüngli, 2024). It is unclear how closely these companies align themselves to the ethical sourcing practices that have been woven into these origin geographies by the craft sector.

These more rigid constructions of place must also be situated within the context of the craft chocolate industry as a consumer market. As businesses that must make money, craft chocolate companies have a vested interest in positioning themselves in the best possible light to encourage purchase. By developing a consumer base that is invested in ethical consumption, craft chocolate companies therefore must engage in ethics-based marketing centered around the places they claim to impact (Lewis & Potter, 2011). While simplified narratives lack nuance, they are easy to communicate and therefore essential tools for building emotional connections with consumers to increase their willingness to become invested in the craft chocolate sector (Cain, 2022; Decker, 2024; Hall, 2023). If a company fails to sell chocolate, the consequences extend beyond a potential loss of revenue for the business. Less money from consumers means less money to invest back into cacao value chains, which may also result in a loss of income for the smallholders who farm cacao. Ultimately, digital placemaking plays an important role in place-based marketing for craft chocolate companies. In addition to shaping perspectives of cacao origin geographies, it also has the potential to impact the livelihoods of those who live there.

### 3.6. Conclusion

By exploring how digital placemaking about cacao origin geographies occurs between craft chocolate consumers and DTC websites from individual craft chocolate companies, we assert that placemaking on craft chocolate websites works to bring consumers closer to origin through sharing experiences connected to place. In particular, strong connections between cacao origin geographies and chocolate flavour created distinct notions of place for craft chocolate consumers. Easily digestible storytelling that connected landscapes, cacao farming practices, and narratives of social good was also prominent within DTC craft chocolate websites; notably, these stories were reified by craft chocolate consumers. Simplified storytelling around cacao origins effectively constructs notions of place and facilitates emotional closeness, which is necessary for the place and cause-based marketing strategies supporting the craft chocolate sector. These narratives have the potential to create richer experiences of place for those consumers who wish to engage with them.

Most of the people currently involved in these particular digital placemaking processes focused on cacao origin geographies do not live in those places and are not the people whose existence and labour are wrapped into the construction of what constitutes a cacao origin. DTC websites oriented towards North American consumers represent a form of media where a Western audience is both the primary producer and consumer of commodified place, which has the potential to silence the voices of those living and working at origin. Digital placemaking on craft chocolate websites therefore risks creating artificial boundaries between consumer and producer, dichotomies between craft and commodity, and simplified understandings of ethical and unethical chocolate production. Without careful consideration of how our existing biases impact depictions of place, it is likely that cacao origins will continue to be conceptualized in ways that entrench existing neocolonial power structures.

However, there is the opportunity for digital placemaking to be an emancipatory process that challenges existing stereotypical representations of cacao origins as a distant other. Placemaking practices and relationships to place frequently differ based on where an actor is located, i.e. inside or outside a cacao-producing region of the world. Prioritizing representations of place that highlight the perspectives of those closest to cacao origin has the potential to provide an alternative to neocolonial narratives. In facilitating depictions of place initially authored by those who live there, we can open these forms of participation to a wider group of people outside the dominant Western perspective. There is the potential for these voices to shift consumer perceptions of their role, and the role of craft chocolate companies, away from a moral position of benevolent saviour to reflexive supporter. While not every smallholder or community will have the desire or capacity to collaborate, and not every maker or consumer will be interested, positioning voices from cacao origin geographies more prominently can create new forms of engagement and participation in the process of digital placemaking.

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## Appendix A: Recruitment Material Sample

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# DO YOU LOVE CRAFT CHOCOLATE?

 University of Victoria 

If you're 18 years or older and live in North America, this study may be for you.

### Study: digital placemaking in the craft chocolate industry

We're looking for adults 18 years or older living in North America who love craft chocolate to explore how craft chocolate consumers understand cacao-producing 'origin' geographies based on interactions with the e-commerce websites of craft chocolate companies.

Many craft chocolate companies use digital tools to communicate with customers about the importance of craft chocolate. This research seeks to discover how craft chocolate consumers navigate these websites and imagine cacao-producing geographies based on these interactions.

Participants will be asked to participate in one focus group that will last approximately 60-90 minutes.

Participants have the option to receive a bar of craft chocolate as a thank you.

If you're unsure if you meet the requirements or have any other questions, please contact the primary researcher Sid Boegman at [sboegman@uvic.ca](mailto:sboegman@uvic.ca), or his supervisor Dr. Sophia Carodenuto at [carodenuto@uvic.ca](mailto:carodenuto@uvic.ca).


### What location?

Two focus groups will be held in-person in Victoria, BC, and one to two focus groups will be held online using Zoom.

### Am I eligible?

- 18 years or older
- Currently living in North America
- Have purchased craft chocolate at least twice in the last six months
- Comfortable navigating a website
- Comfortable communicating in English

### Interested? Complete the screening questionnaire using the QR code or at [rebrand.ly/cg-screen](https://rebrand.ly/cg-screen)



## Conclusion

The craft chocolate sector positions itself in opposition to commodity chocolate by making claims that craft chocolate provides a more ethical, sustainable, high-quality product than the commodity chocolate industry. However, the geographic and cultural distances between typical areas of chocolate consumption and cacao production have resulted in a divorce of chocolate from cacao. Most consumers are unaware of the chocolate's origins. As such, craft chocolate companies face challenges in educating consumers about the credence attributes of their product. A lack of consumer understanding, when combined with a product that is more expensive than commodity chocolate, raises the barrier to entry into craft chocolate for the average North American. Over the past four years, this sector has increased online activity resulting in new opportunities for consumer education and digital representations of cacao origins. The goal of this thesis was therefore to explore how craft chocolate companies use DTC websites to communicate about cacao origins to their North American consumer base, how consumers understand this information, and how these websites affect placemaking processes about cacao origin geographies.

This research highlighted the impact of DTC craft chocolate websites and their varying communication methods by studying their resonance with North American craft chocolate consumers. One of the main resources produced from this thesis was a dataset of DTC craft chocolate websites operating in North America. Websites are an immediate consumer touchpoint and an integral way to develop brand identity. This dataset therefore became a critical resource in analyzing how craft chocolate companies market their products and educate consumers. Based on preliminary findings from this data, focus groups were conducted to explore how North American craft chocolate consumers navigate online shopping, engage with the sector's value propositions, and conceptualize cacao-producing geographies. An essential aspect of focus groups was the facilitation of a website analysis activity wherein participants interacted with actual sites. Digital placemaking processes were also explored during focus groups through interactions with digitally-mediated communication about cacao origins on these websites. This exercise informed how human-place-technology interactions occurred regarding cacao origin geographies. The iterative, mixed method nature of this project allowed for a multifaceted assessment of the resonance of DTC craft chocolate websites and their role in representing cacao origin geographies.

By employing a practice-based approach to research design in collaboration with The Chocolate Project, this thesis goes beyond academic contributions to research on ethical consumption. This project offers a material benefit to the craft chocolate community by providing information to a market sector predominantly consisting of small businesses who have a limited ability to collect and analyze broader industry-level data. This thesis also offers guidance on how to improve website content based on consumer preferences, which has the potential to increase sales and improve overall business success. In addition to exploring the effectiveness of current website communication practices within the craft chocolate sector, this

thesis critiques these practices and suggests alternatives with the goal of reducing barriers to sector entry and encouraging equitable supply chains. Furthermore, this research contributes to digital placemaking theory by providing a case study that extends spatial media beyond geolocation technologies. Before addressing project limitations and potential directions for future research, this conclusion considers two topics that emerged across all three papers: the congruence between consumer expectations for websites and the sites' actual content, and the narratives of authenticity around craft chocolate companies and cacao origins.

### ***Alignment Between Consumer Desires and Website Content***

There was a high level of congruence between consumer expectations and website content within the craft chocolate sector. Specifically, consumers and websites aligned on purchase orientation, media used for communication, and value-based marketing claims. DTC craft chocolate sites consistently orient site visitors towards purchase by spatially prioritizing opportunities to learn about and buy products. This focus on shopping was appreciated by participants who understood themselves as 'consumers' and wanted to be able to use these sites for their intended purpose. Additionally, the use of text-first communication on DTC craft chocolate websites with supplementary images, videos, and maps aligns exactly with consumer preferences for browsing online. Despite consumer concern about a shift towards video-first communication, the fairly minimal use of video to date suggests that this change is unlikely to occur.

Consumers and craft chocolate companies were also in agreement about which values should be used as product differentiators (i.e. high-quality, delicious, ethical chocolate). Many consumers spoke about using websites as a site for learning, suggesting that consumer education from craft chocolate companies is a central factor in alignment between consumer-website values. However, website content was frequently superficial and primarily oriented towards marketing claims. Consumers were often interested in more detailed information about the creation process and supply chain than was provided. As websites that offer more information are seen to be more persuasive and decrease uncertainty around decision-making, additional high-quality information can increase trust in a site (Demangeot & Broderick, 2016). Craft chocolate businesses must balance effective education versus overwhelming a site user, alongside the allocation of their company resources. Nevertheless, these findings indicate that there is consumer appetite for educational spaces and that provision of this content would create deeper connections and boost legitimacy.

Moreover, many consumers wanted further opportunities to be engaged while browsing DTC craft chocolate sites. While many sites effectively used storytelling to entertain users, consumers still identified that some websites fell short. This insufficiency was often due to issues like broken links, out of date information, unintuitive navigation, and a lack of mobile optimization. These issues reduced the consumer's ability to experience feelings of discovery and excitement while using the site. As noted when participants critiqued 'flatness' and 'endless scrolling' on some websites, but praised interactive navigation that answered their questions and

provided interesting content on others, the immersive stimuli of a site—including visuals and interactive elements—are critical to creating an engaging website (Demangeot & Broderick, 2016). A functioning, usable website enhances engagement by making the process of exploration effortless.

### *Authentic Craft Chocolate*

The ‘authenticity’ of a craft chocolate company rapidly became a central theme within this thesis. Consumers reported seeking to build authentic relationships with genuine craft chocolate companies where they became emotionally closer to the brand. Whether they cared about ethics, chocolate quality, or both, consumers wanted to buy ‘real craft chocolate’ which included specific cacao sourcing, ingredients, and production methods. In turn, craft chocolate companies sought to prove their legitimacy primarily through disclosure of their cacao sourcing. Transparent companies appear more authentic due to their commitment to openness and this willingness to share is highly valued by consumers as a means to assess legitimacy. While transparency is praised for its objectivity, even information that appears to be objective has an implied perspective as the selection of which facts to include is not a neutral act (Birchall, 2014; Flyverbom et al., 2015). Digital placemaking around cacao origin geographies also became embedded in narratives of authenticity. Craft chocolate companies sought to communicate, and consumers sought to understand, the impacts of craft chocolate at origin through technologically mediated representations of cacao-producing regions. With regard to cacao origins, ‘transparent’ companies tell the ‘truth’ about these places, presenting a single ‘objective’ narrative that resonates emotionally with North American consumers. But which information is disclosed and how it is communicated shapes consumer understandings of these places and the actors within them.

Most of the educational content offered by craft chocolate companies on their websites can be understood as providing valuable information with an end goal of driving sales. Perceived sales pitches in this content created tension for consumers, particularly as they used site content to determine a company’s legitimacy. Consumers struggled with the lack of non-standardized language particularly around ethical claims, such as the inconsistent use of terms like ‘organic’ which was observed in the website text analyses. Makers therefore often employ words they believe will resonate with consumers but may or may not support those claims effectively. Thus, there is the potential for non-standardized communication to obfuscate meaning and contribute to a lack of perceived authenticity. Consumers are also particularly sensitive to commodity chocolate companies beginning to co-opt the language of craft chocolate. As this may cause a craft consumer to buy non-craft chocolate, the practice is seen as deceitful and reinforces efforts to assess a business thoroughly before purchase. Because craft chocolate is a relatively new market that continues to grow rapidly, it is unsurprising that term standardization has not fully occurred within the sector. However, there are active attempts to standardize language within craft chocolate, most notably the Fine Chocolate Industry Association (Fine Chocolate Industry

Association, 2024) Fine Chocolate Glossary. Due to the newness of the glossary, its level of uptake and impact will have to be measured over time.

Consumer assessment of craft chocolate companies and search for authenticity additionally extended a situation wherein visual content—used by most companies to discuss their supply chains—was not immediately trusted. This distrust manifested in two key areas: concerns around smallholder exploitation and concerns around misleading ‘stock’ images. Images of cacao smallholders were prominent on many craft chocolate websites. Participants both enjoyed being able to see farmers while being concerned that they had not consented to the use of their image. Photographs of farmers in equatorial regions, including cacao smallholders, are at a high risk to be employed in a manner that commodifies producers’ representations and positions them either as victims, or as beneficiaries of Western aid (Touri, 2020). However, automatically assuming that cacao smallholders did not consent, consented because they did not feel they could decline, or could not understand what consent meant in the context of North American product marketing does a disservice to both the makers or traders purchasing at origin, as well as the smallholders themselves. For example, farmers may choose to share their faces and stories with the goal of educating Western consumers about their role in a product’s origin (Touri, 2020). This issue requires continued, dedicated commitment to reciprocity and reflexivity from those working at origin and sharing images from cacao-producing geographies.

Furthermore, consumer concerns about the use of ‘inauthentic’ imagery to create a false perception of a company’s values and practices is aligned with rising distrust in images (Bournousouzi, 2023; Knight, 2023; Lu et al., 2023). The widened public availability of Artificial Intelligence (AI) image generation in 2022 has led to a veritable flood of AI imagery over the past year and a half, to mixed reactions. While some praise AI-generated imagery as a new art form that allows people with fewer resources to produce high-quality images, others decry it as deceptive or inauthentic (Bournousouzi, 2023; Knight, 2023). Faked images are not new. However, they have never been easier to create and humans have difficulty accurately assessing which images are AI-generated (Lu et al., 2023). AI images ultimately contribute to a cultural distrust of images and other digital content that makes trusting photographs more fraught for all internet users (Bournousouzi, 2023; Twomey et al., 2023). Using AI to create visual representations of cacao origin geographies also has the potential to deepen neocolonial biases about these regions and the people who live there. Bias in AI algorithms is a known problem across many demographic categories including age, gender, and race (Allen et al., 2023; Hall & Ellis, 2023; Lawrence, 2023). It is therefore foolish to believe that AI-generated images made on software created in the Global North would not reify current Western biases about regions in the Global South. When combined with the powerful storytelling capacity of images, AI representations would therefore be extremely likely to continue entrenching neocolonial perceptions of cacao-producing regions.

Ultimately, the expectation of ‘authentic’ relationship development between consumers and brands is part of a neoliberal doctrine where authenticity has become commodified as a

marketable feature of a brand (Plesa, 2023). Through practices like transparency, consistency and emotional connection, companies work to present themselves as authentic so that they can develop deeper, more trusting relationships with consumers (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Plesa, 2023). These relationships can feel personally meaningful for both consumers and individuals representing the company (i.e. makers), and they serve the company's goals of revenue generation. Banet-Weiser (2012) asserts there has been a shift away from participating in consumer movements to identifying as a consumer activist, which exemplifies "the intensifying blurring of boundaries between the corporation and the citizen" (p. 131). Community participation in the craft chocolate sector predominantly revolves around consumption—both in terms of eating chocolate and spending money. Craft chocolate consumers express themselves as consumer activists: advocates for a different form of chocolate that not only does good, but tastes incredible. This politicization of consumption practices provides space for identity formation as part of a consumer group, making the transactional personal.

### ***Limitations and Future Directions***

Although the internet is a multimedia environment that is only becoming more immersive through increases in video-first communication and augmented or virtual reality technologies, website analysis in this thesis focused primarily on text-based communication (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022; Rzeszewski & Naji, 2022). While this choice was made due to the prioritization of text by both consumers and websites in the craft chocolate sector, this narrowed focus may have excluded additional contextual depth or information that is primarily present within multimedia content. Findings from this thesis suggest that visual content portraying cacao origins is a crucial site of tension for consumers. Multimedia communication therefore presents an opportunity for a craft chocolate company to build or destroy their legitimacy in the sector. Research considering image and video media in more detail would provide additional understanding about how cacao origins are represented. Projects focusing on this direction would likely benefit from moving beyond website content towards other channels such as social media. Moreover, consumer desires for entertaining informational online experiences suggest the potential of immersive technologies like virtual and/or augmented reality as a powerful tool for consumer education.

This project specifically targeted North American craft chocolate consumers due to the strong craft chocolate community present within this region. However, North American perceptions of cacao origins are likely to differ from those of stakeholders further up the supply chain such as cacao traders and smallholders. Further investigation into how traders and producers at origin position cacao-producing regions would facilitate greater comprehension of how origins are portrayed within this sector. Additionally, focusing solely on people already invested in craft chocolate limits understanding of chocolate supply chains and cacao origin geographies across a broader population. To expand more equitable forms of chocolate production across the entire chocolate industry instead of isolating those values in craft chocolate, additional research will be needed that explores effectiveness for other consumer groups to prove broader value chain viability.

Lastly, this thesis explored and critiqued the claims made by craft chocolate companies about cacao origins and business impact at origin, with regard to how this information was perceived by North American craft chocolate consumers. Many craft chocolate companies make claims about their supply chains and business practices that are difficult for the average North American to verify due to geographic, cultural, and financial barriers, which is one of the reasons trust is prioritized so intensely by craft chocolate consumers. However, technologies that can provide further insight into cacao supply chains are rapidly advancing and can facilitate deeper exploration into how craft chocolate companies' claims align with their actual business practices in greater depth. Research in this area presents an opportunity for the craft chocolate sector to further legitimize itself and gain additional support.

### *A Movement Away from Moral Marketing?*

Even though the craft chocolate sector has positioned itself as a moral market and relies heavily on narratives of ethical consumption, craft chocolate may benefit by shifting away from ethics-focused marketing. For example, this research revealed that while not all craft chocolate consumers are ethically motivated, all are invested in product quality and taste. Ethics are a strong purchase motivator for many craft chocolate consumers. However, ethics play a secondary role to flavour. Taste was the most important reason that consumers decided to enter the craft chocolate community and begin purchasing regularly. Focusing more closely on chocolate quality and taste, and how cacao origin relates to flavour, has the potential to continue developing a sense of connoisseurship in established craft chocolate consumers. An emphasis on taste can also facilitate expansion into new consumer markets who are less invested in ethical consumption. In an age where consumer attention capacities are substantially shrinking because of increased exposure to commercial messaging, marketing must be efficient to be effective (Ahn et al., 2018). Prioritizing taste and quality over ethics is likely to more effectively cut through the noise of current digital communications.

Furthermore, marketing communications that focus on impact at origin have a higher likelihood of perpetuating white saviour narratives of Global North-South relationships. Many craft chocolate companies link their impact claims to representations of cacao origin geographies. This connection often creates simplified narratives that uphold 'benevolent' craft chocolate makers and consumers as helping 'needy' cacao farmers. While these narratives help create brand-consumer relationships that feel transparent and therefore authentic, they risk relying on racialized, neocolonial constructions of cacao origins that influence the perspectives of North American consumers. Because of the inherent geographic parameters of cacao sourcing and chocolate consumption, and the colonial histories that created these patterns of trade, there will always be racialized pitfalls for chocolate companies and consumers from the Global North. However, highlighting cacao origins without directly connecting to impact enables more nuanced perspectives on these regions that portray a diversity of perspectives.

Despite the potential issues of focusing primarily on ethical consumption marketing, the values-driven sourcing practices of the craft chocolate industry should still be communicated.

Providing sourcing information which is easily accessible but not the primary messaging may contribute to more trusting relationships with morally-motivated consumers while opening the door to new audiences. Additionally, portrayal and discussion of cacao origins should not be omitted as they are the foundation of chocolate's value chains and directly impact chocolate flavour. By working to prioritize the voices of people living and working at origin in portrayals of cacao-producing geographies, craft chocolate companies have an opportunity to challenge stereotypes about cacao origins and engage in supportive partnership with cacao smallholders.

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