



h.woven
Weaving Hearts, Hands and Humans.

Creating a Shared Future in a Fractured World
through indigenous textile stories.





Hi, my name is Mayu. I am a Graphic Designer from Tokyo, Japan.
Before coming to DSI, I had a chance to work in multiple African countries, mainly in West Africa for several years, and I had lived there and made a lot of friends.
From those experiences, I began to care about these people.
And I grew my love for traditional cultural crafts, handmade by local people.

The foreign-born population from Africa has grown rapidly in the United States during the last 40 years. However, being underrepresented in society makes it difficult to know who they are and their cultural roots. My thesis project h.woven addresses the unintended chasm between African-born immigrant vendors and their customers in their new home. Let's create a Shared Future in a Fractured World through their rich, indigenous stories.

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Weaving Hearts, Hands and Humans.

Masters of Design for Social Innovation Thesis
from the School of Visual Arts in New York City
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Special thanks to:
Moctar Yara, President of Yara African Fabrics
Dame Diouf, Traditional textile vendor in Malcolm Shabazz Harlem market
Tariq Shahid, Manager of Malcolm Shabazz Harlem Market

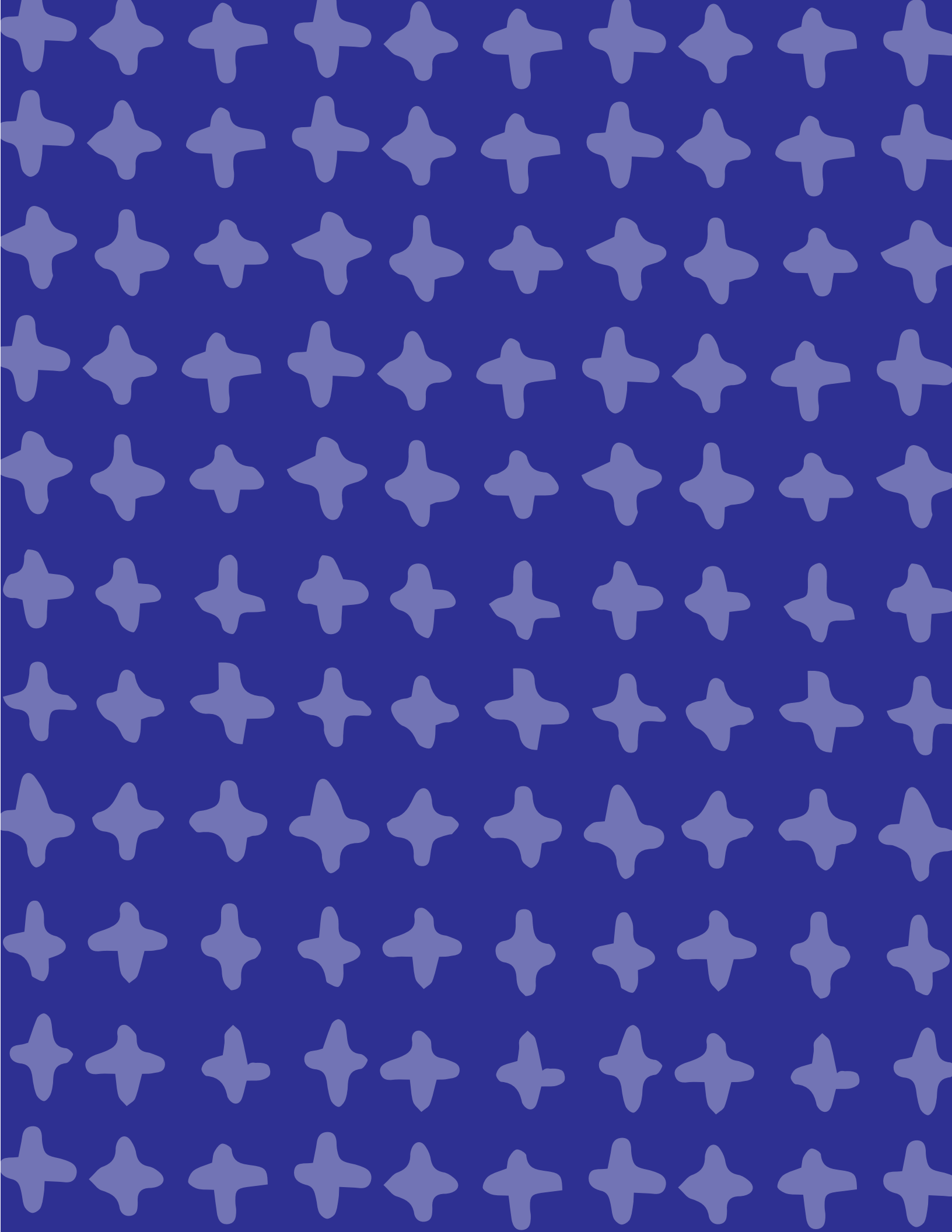




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“When you don’t know the culture of the people, you can’t respect those people. When you know, you can respect.”

Dame Diouf,
African-born immigrant vendor in Malcolm Shabazz Harlem Market

1.1 The Big Problem

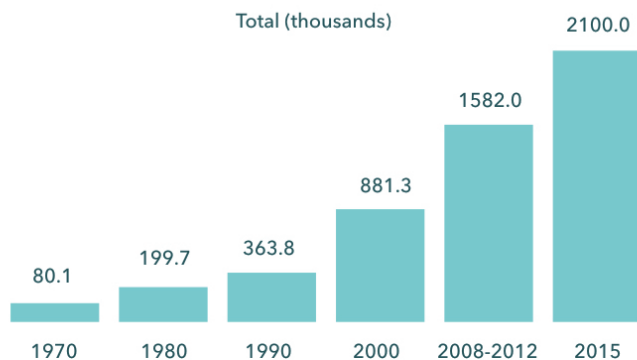
A Black African-born immigrant vendor in Malcolm Shabazz Harlem Market, Dam Diouf stated:

“When you don’t know the culture of the people, you can’t respect those people. When you know, you can respect.”

In 2017, the importance of the dialogue was stressed in the World Economic Forum in Davos. The next year, the theme of “Creating a Shared Future in a Fractured World” was discussed. Germany’s Chancellor, Angela Merkel, stressed the importance of multilateralism and warned that the world has not yet learned from the darkest days of history: “We know that shutting ourselves off doesn’t help to protect your borders. You also need good cooperation with your neighbors, you need good agreements, and valid agreements, that are respected.”¹

The world is fractured into small communities. The world is globalized: there is a rapid increase in cross-border economic, social, and technological exchanges under the umbrella of capitalism; however, the world community is still not globally connected. So how can we make the world more globally connected in situations where dialogue does not exist and communities are fractured? Our definition of community needs to be enlarged. We should not be divided by race, nationality, or social status. To be able to achieve this, we need to have a deeper understanding of the communities that we belong to. How do we go about forming this deeper understanding? We need to have more communication. Communication is one of the keys to create a shared future in a fractured world.

African Born population in U.S. increases since 1970



Source: US Census

1.2. Why Is This Significant?

The United States has a long and proud history as a nation that welcomes immigrants. However, the communities in which these immigrants live have been left paralyzed by fear following President Donald Trump’s sweeping immigration reforms². Immigration has long supported the growth and dynamism of the economy of the United States, as immigrants and refugees are entrepreneurs, job creators, taxpayers, and consumers. They add trillions of dollars to the gross domestic product (GDP) of the United States every year.

Despite the positive impacts of immigrants on the economy and society of the United States, the laws of the new administration threaten to move the United States to a more restrictive policy on immigration. Increased immigration enforcement—as well as potential restrictions on legal immigration and refugee resettlement—is threatening immigrants, their families, and their communities across the country.

Nearly one in six workers in the United States is an immigrant; they make up a vital part of the country’s labor force across a wide range of industries. Over 27 million immigrant workers comprised 16.9 percent of the labor force of the United States in 2015. Furthermore, 43.3 million immigrants comprised 13.5 percent of the national population in 2015³.

In addition to those facts, the population of immigrants born in Africa and who now reside in the United States has grown rapidly during the last 40 years⁴. However, as they are underrepresented in society, it is difficult to know just who they are and what their cultural roots are. The quote mentioned earlier from the African-born immigrant vendor implies that there is a cultural and emotional disconnection between these immigrants and the society surrounding them.

Therefore, to attempt to solve this problem, my thesis project addresses the unintended chasm between African-born immigrant vendors and their customers in their new home. Through harnessing the cultural dialogue that exists between them⁵, I would like to create a shared future in a fractured world through their rich, indigenous stories.



1.3. The Specific Problem

My target audience is African-born immigrant vendors and their customers in New York City. The customers will also include potential ones. To better understand the problem, I chose Harlem as my target research area as there are a lot of African-born immigrants there. I conducted research and held interviews to address the problem.

From the research I conducted, I found that most of the African-born immigrants sell their traditional crafts without showing any cultural value. Though many products have interesting cultural meanings as well as hidden stories, and traditions, the customers who purchase these products do not have a chance to know anything beyond the actual products themselves. The vendors of these products do not have ways to communicate to the customers the stories behind the products.

During my observations, I learned that although African-born immigrant vendors have interesting stories to tell about the traditional products that they sell, they do not speak about those stories because they doubt the customers are interested in knowing about them. However, when customers ask them about the products, the vendors are more than happy to share their stories. Unfortunately, this does not happen very often, even though the customers are interested in the stories. This then leads to an unintended disconnection between the vendor and the customer. I argue that this unintended disconnection is a contributing factor to the underrepresentation of African culture in American society. I would like to challenge this issue through my thesis project.



2.THE DESIGN PROCESS

2.1. Ethnographic Research

To fully understand the problem, I conducted more than forty individual interviews with African-born immigrants, including the President and Vice President of the Senegalese Association, the manager of the African Market, shop owners and shop keepers in the Malcolm Shabazz Harlem Market, individual men and women who participated Senegalese cultural event, African fashion designers and creators, and an African cultural guide for Airbnb. I wanted to learn what these people were thinking, feeling, doing, and struggling with in the city. This would help me in understanding what I could do for them in their space. I began by working with traditional accessory vendors. Here I observed that some customers seemed interested in hearing the hidden stories. To understand better customers' behavior when they purchase something, I set up a booth at Astoria Market and a space at school and sold some of the vendors' products by using different forms of interactive media such as QR codes and videos and placing signs and informative flyers on the table.



From my research at Malcolm Shabazz Harlem Market, I learned of

two unmet needs that formed **an unintended disconnection**:

- (a) vendors wonder why their customers leave the stall without talking to them or touching anything and
- (b) the customers think that the way the products are displayed is confusing. They do not feel like asking about the products.



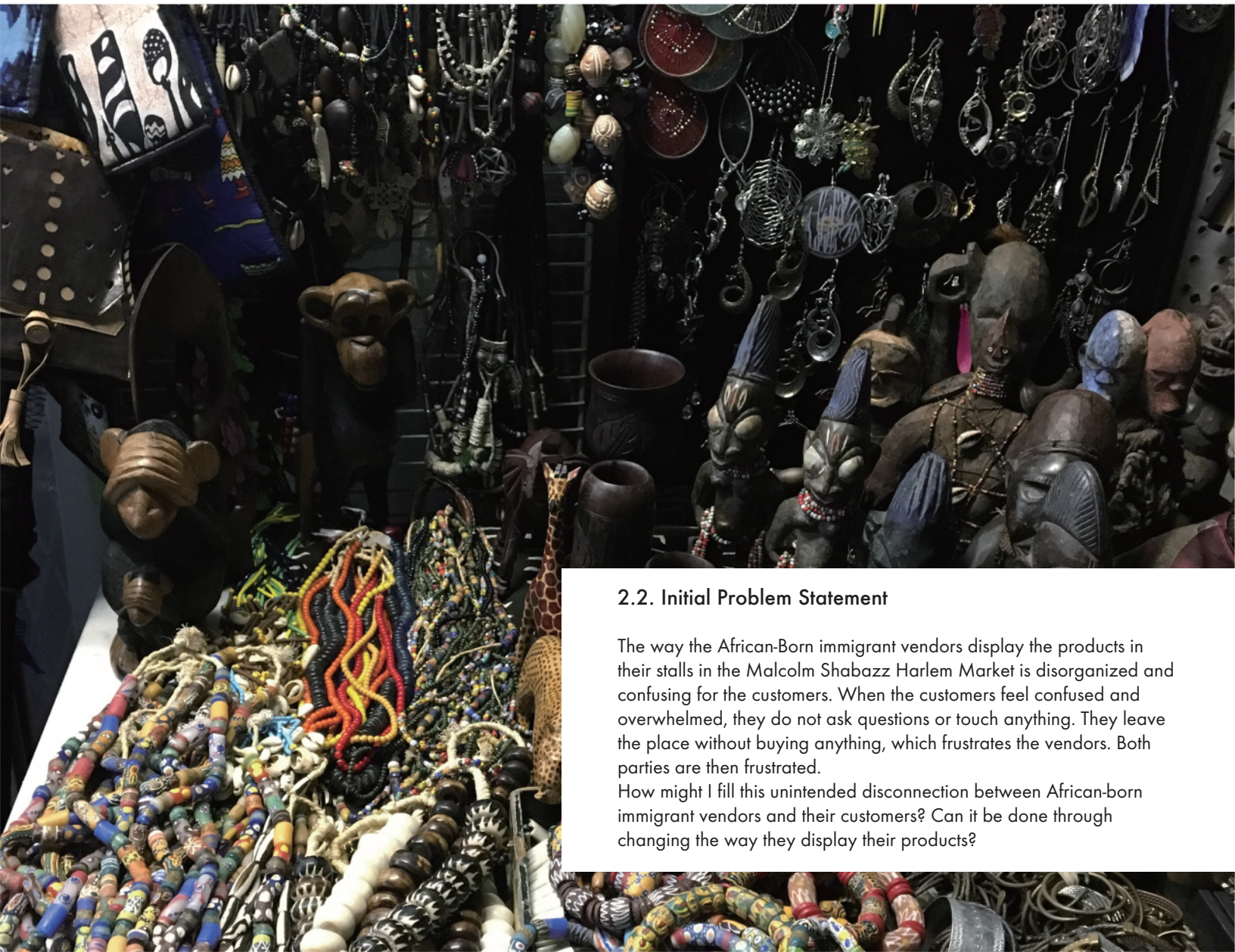
Customers



Vendor



And, from the research I conducted at Astoria Market and at school space (using interactive media and informative tools), I noticed that the customers did not interact with the media by themselves unless they were spoken to by me. I understood the following from this: Customers are interested in the background stories of the products and vendors, but they do not take the initiative to find this out by themselves. I reached this problem statement from these insights.



2.2. Initial Problem Statement

The way the African-Born immigrant vendors display the products in their stalls in the Malcolm Shabazz Harlem Market is disorganized and confusing for the customers. When the customers feel confused and overwhelmed, they do not ask questions or touch anything. They leave the place without buying anything, which frustrates the vendors. Both parties are then frustrated.

How might I fill this unintended disconnection between African-born immigrant vendors and their customers? Can it be done through changing the way they display their products?

2.3 Quick prototype and user test at Malcolm Shabazz Harlem Market

After these research, I created a wood display for accessories that shows its' provenance and brought this to vendor' s stall to discuss.

The vendor was named Aisha, who is from Guinea and has been selling traditional products since she was a little girl. Aisha revealed an interesting fact when I interviewed her:

“I have to sell as much as I can to make ends meet. To do that, I need to talk to many customers at a time. If you put out this kind of display that sparks conversation between me and the customer, the customer is going to ask thousands of questions and I will have to focus on one customer, which leads to the fact that I will lose other customers looking at my products. So I do not want to put anything that sparks the conversation of customers.”

Aisha, African-born immigrant vendor

This was a surprising statement as during the many previous interviews I had conducted with her, she did not state clearly that she did not want to talk about the products and tell stories to the customers. She made this statement after roughly a month of conversation with me. From this, I found that a good relationship with the interviewees is necessary in order to find out what they are really thinking. I also learned from this interview that the vendors who can tell stories to the customers should already be economically stable in order to be able to conduct lengthy conversations with potential customers. And this person should be selling products that have interesting stories which is not always the case. This case was also hard because not every craft has historical or cultural stories. So, I decided to look for other opportunities.



MOCTAR YARA, PRESIDENT OF YARA AFRICAN FABRICS

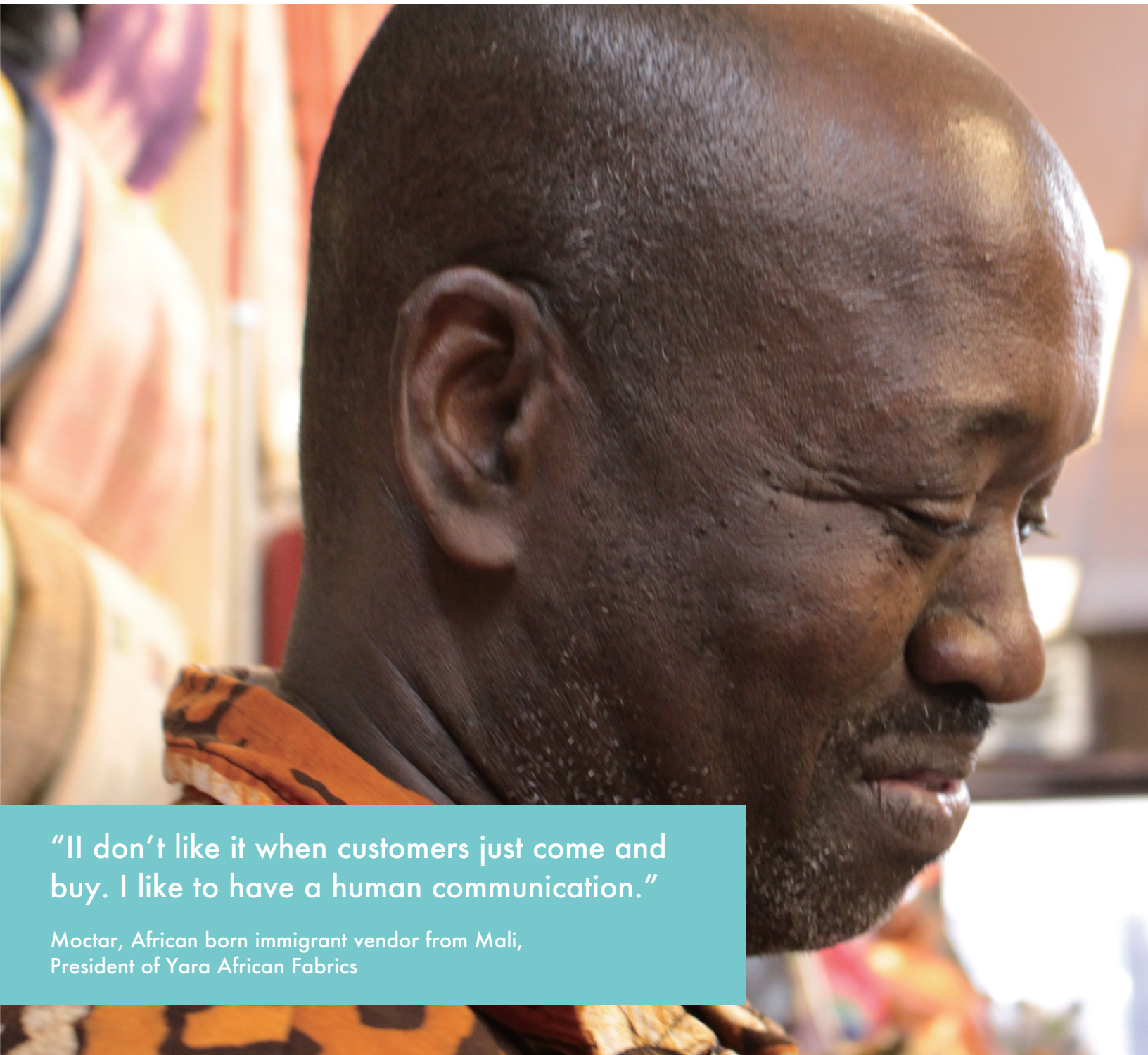
The manager of the Malcolm Shabazz Harlem Market, Tariq Shahid, helped me to find another vendor as a collaborator. He introduced me to his friend, Moctar Yara, an African-born immigrant from Djema, a small village in Mali, who is the President and owner of Yara African Fabrics. Moctar came to New York with nothing on 4 January 1992. Moctar's cousin was selling fabrics, and he started to do the same. He now has his own shop in Harlem, on 125th Street. He became my representative user.

2.4. The User and Their Journey

From the interviews I conducted with Moctar, I learned who his customers were and what kind of interaction he has with them at his shop.

This is what I learned:

- Moctar does both retail and wholesale, but his main profit comes from wholesale.
- There is an online store. The physical shop space is for retail selling.
- Moctar is interested in sharing stories about traditional, Malian, cotton-fabric techniques that are at risk of dying.
- 90 percent of the physical shop's customer is women, aged between 25 and 65.
- Most of his customers are those who do wholesale of textiles in California and Arizona.
- 70 percent of the customers are African-American; there are some European and Japanese customers too.
- The stories he is interested in sharing are about Malian traditional cotton fabric techniques.
- Customers usually buy the fabric he sells and then make things such as curtains or clothes with it.
- Customers are interested in African symbols.



“I don't like it when customers just come and buy. I like to have a human communication.”

Moctar, African born immigrant vendor from Mali,
President of Yara African Fabrics

2.5. Communication Tools

Based on the discussion I had with Moctar, I co-created three possible communication tools.



And, these three are the tools co-designed and prototyped at Moctar's shop space.



Accordion style booklet showing the process of making cotton fabric and the local community



Table signage showing local people doing mud cloth paint by using his photos taken in Mali



Card Matching game using the African symbols to facilitate the conversation



2.6 Conclusions from User test of these Communication Tools

Learning from this prototype and user test:

- The customers did not interact with the tools—no questions were asked.
- Moctar felt awkward talking to the customers by using these tools because the customers did not ask him anything inspired by these communication tools

I concluded that my communication tools had failed to provoke interaction. So, I went back to the shop and again observed the customers' and vendor's journey in the shop space and try to embed interaction in it.



Here is an observation of the journey of both the customer and the vendor in the shop:

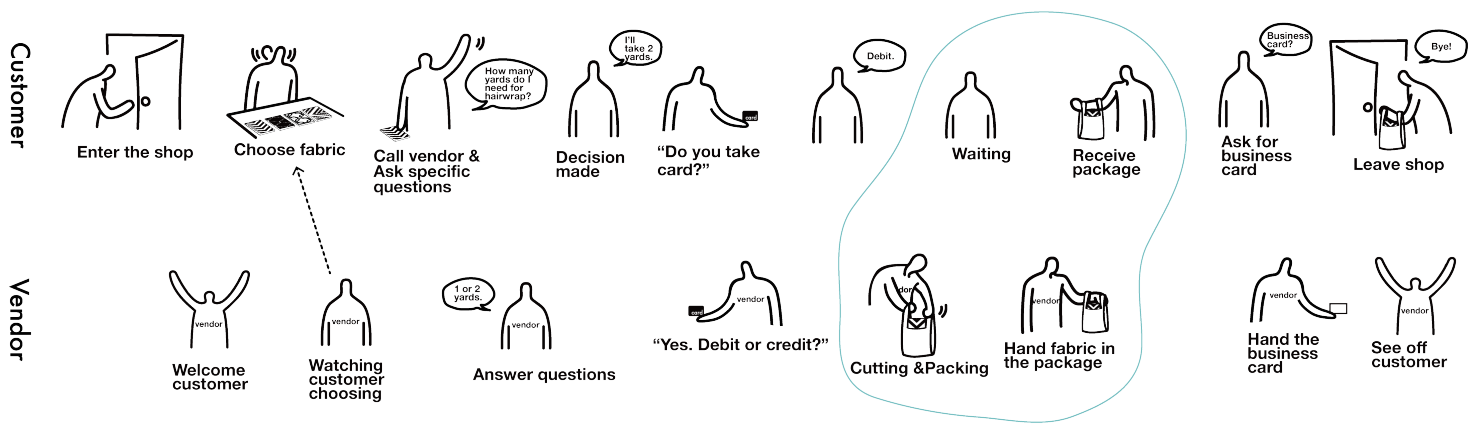


Figure 2-1 Vendor and Customer Journey

From this observation, I learned that both journeys intersect at the point of “packaging.” The way I create an interaction should be changed based on what I found out from the user journey.

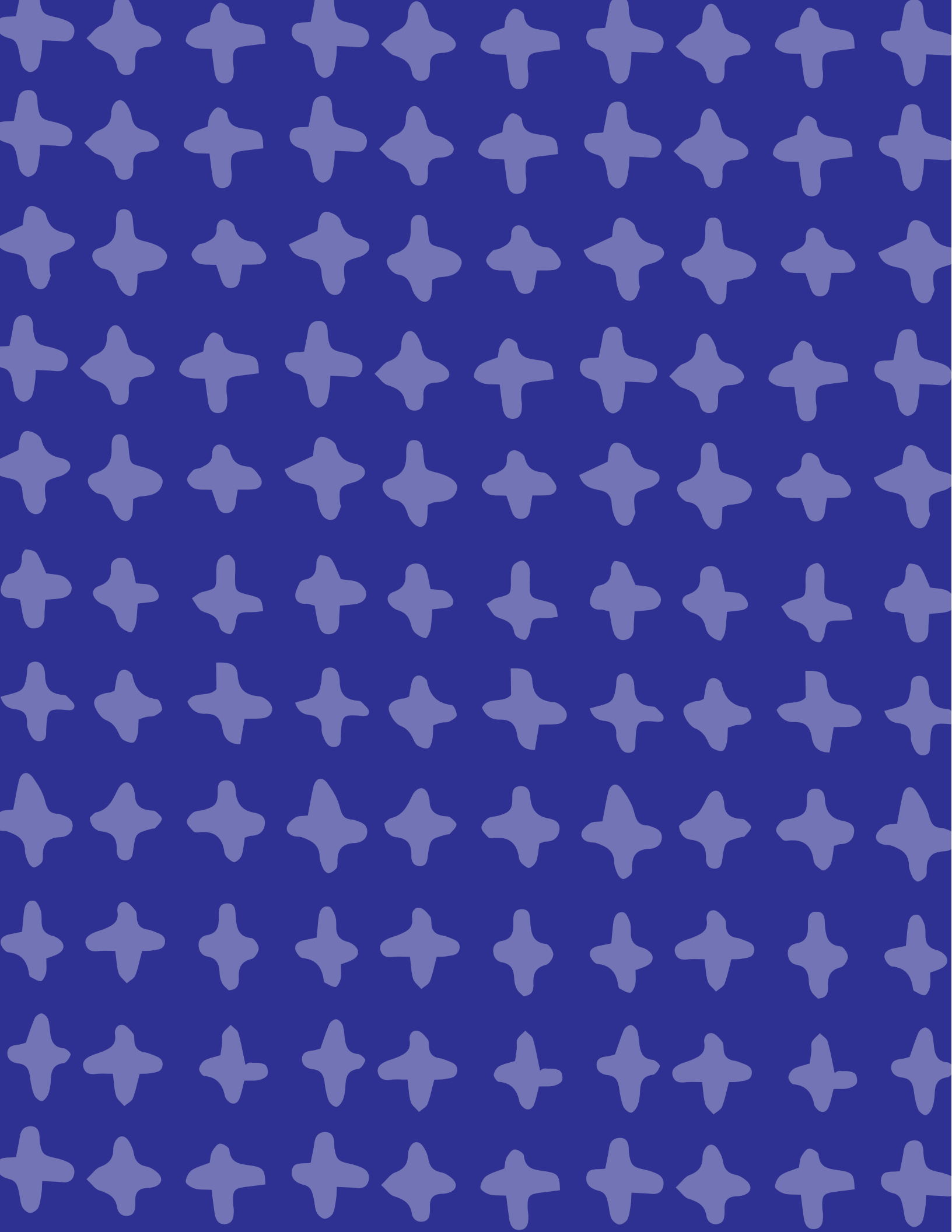
Problem Statement

The customers’ experience of buying from African-born immigrant vendors remains impersonal and void of any cultural exchange. When this happens, people are losing out on an important opportunity to know about a culture that is lesser known. This might be causing an unconscious disconnect in society.



2.7. Hypothesis

Based on all the research, interviews, prototypes, and user tests, I finally reached a hypothesis: If I create a communication tool that helps African immigrant vendors tell stories to the customers that are embedded into both the customer and vendor journey that is already happening, the vendors will share their stories more frequently with the customer. The customer may interact with the vendor by themselves without being spoken to by the vendor. They might do this by asking questions in depth.



3. IDEA GENERATION

To test and prove the hypothesis, I again discussed the issue with Moctar and decided to create packaging for the products that communicates the story of the product. The packaging should be aesthetically beautiful to target high-end customers by first attracting their attention.

Idea#01: Storytelling Package

The target customer for this idea is African-American female customers who are interested in African print fabric and would like to do a hair wrap with the fabric.

At this point, Moctar's schedule became hectic and he could not continue working with me. So I decided to conduct user tests outside of his shop space where I aimed to get feedback from potential users about my idea.

Some of the questions I was thinking about in relation to this idea were:

- What kind of aesthetic appeal do these customers like?
- How can I get them sufficiently inspired by the packaging to interact with the vendor?
- How do they engage when they want to talk more about the product's story or their own story?

When I observed customers in this shop, I noticed that many were interested in making a head wrap with the African-print fabrics. I thought it might be a good idea to use the content that most customers were interested in as a leverage point to start a conversation.

Idea#02: Storytelling Tag

I sought other vendors in the same category as Moctar. Then I met with a man whose name was Dam Diouf. He is a traditional, handwoven African textile vendor in Malcolm Shabazz Harlem Market who was introduced to me by a Haitian fashion designer, Junny that I met coincidentally at a coffee shop.

Some of the questions I thought about while observing the customer and vendor journey here were again;

- How do I get customers to interact in their journey?
- How do I make vendors use the tool without effort or difficulty?
- How do I make the tool compact so that the tool does not occupy the shop space?

Dam's shop space was smaller than the Moctar's one. Many textiles are piled up on the table up to the ceiling. Then I had to co-design a tool which suits this environment.





4. INTERVENTION

4.1 Final Prototypes and User Test

Based on what I learned from my observations in two shop spaces, I created these tools based on the ideas mentioned above.

Prototype#01: Storytelling Package



a. How the Tool Works

The storytelling package is a tool that helps African-born immigrant vendors tell the hidden stories behind their products. A story related to African textiles is written on the package that a vendor uses to put the textile once it is bought. When the customer waits while the vendor cuts the fabric, the customer can look at the package and can learn more about the products that the vendor sells.

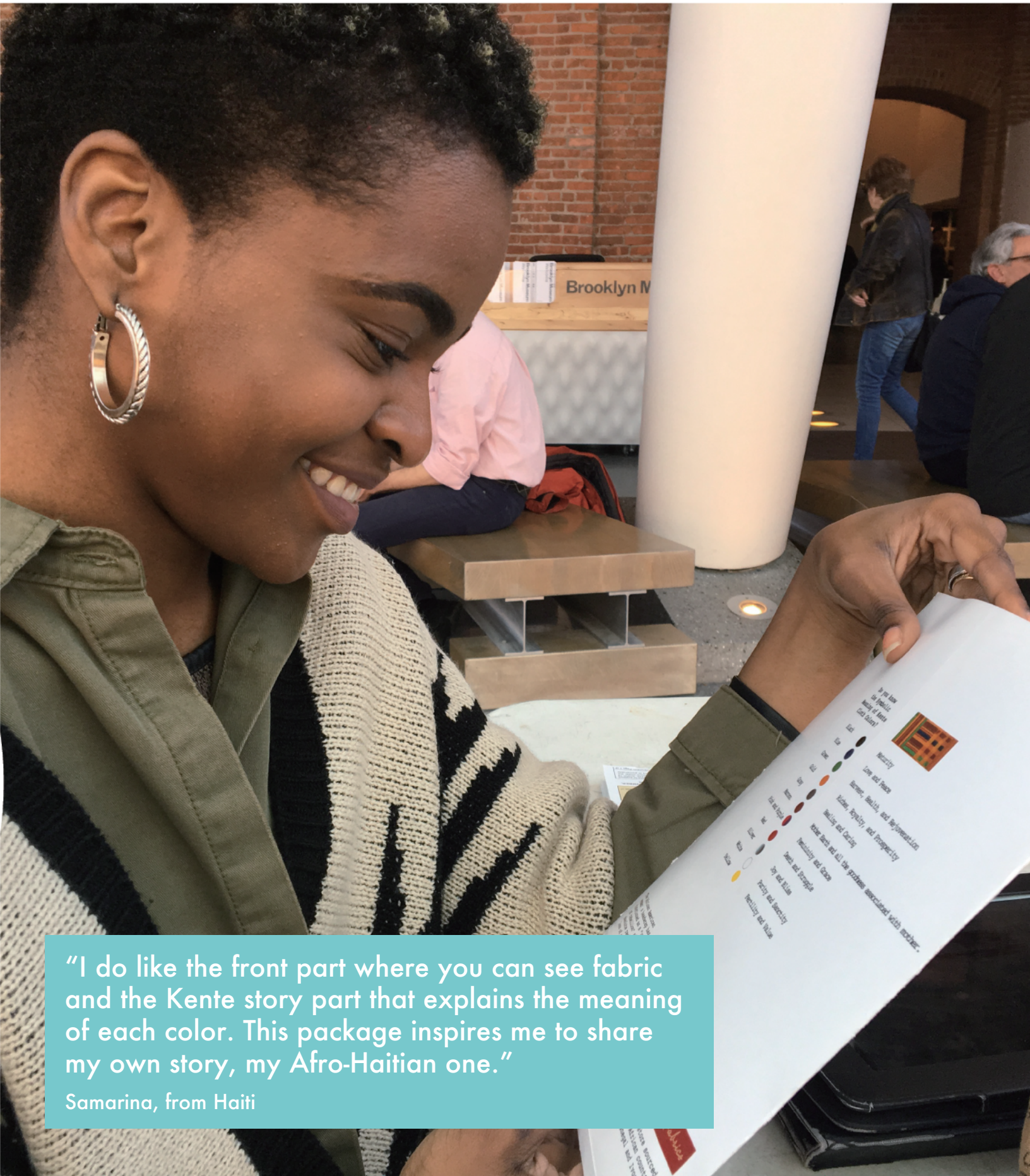
b. Key Questions to Test

- Will people be interested in the stories written on the package?
- Will they show any interest in how the package looks?
- Will they interact or ask about the story?
- What kind of aesthetic will they like?



c. Feedback from User

I user-tested this tool near the Brooklyn Museum and at a Starbucks. People successfully interacted with my tool. Here is some feedback from the users:



"I do like the front part where you can see fabric and the Kente story part that explains the meaning of each color. This package inspires me to share my own story, my Afro-Haitian one."

Samarina, from Haiti

Prototype#02: Storytelling Tag

a. How the Tool Works

The storytelling tag is a communication tool that helps a vendor share the hidden stories about different African textiles with their customers. The customers themselves can also start a conversation with the vendor by using this tool. This tool can fit between piled up textiles on a table in a narrow shop space or booth, as displayed in this photo.




Mali
Dogon

Dogon textile is made from 100% cotton, softer than Mud cloth.

The Dogon are an ancient tribe living in Mali, West Africa. They claim to be the living conduit between heaven and Earth and to possess not only knowledge of the cosmos, but of man's true origins.

The Dogon are believed to be of Egyptian descent and their astronomical lore goes back thousands of years to 3200 BC.



Kenya
Kikuyu

Kikuyu textiles made from 100% hand spun cotton and used for many purposes locally.

Kikuyu tribes are mostly interested in farmers' fertility and sustenance. Their main source of wealth comes from their cattle, which they bring from fertile volcanic highlands.



Mali
Mud Cloth

Mud cloth designs were originally created by poor, indigenous craftsmen in Mali and it is now considered a symbol of national identity for Mali.

Black background and white traditional coloring of the cloth. A rust color is supposed to represent blood from either the hunt of game warfare and is useful as a form of camouflage.



Guinea
Lipy

Lipy textile is made from 100% cotton, handwoven by Fula tribe.



People use this cloth to make Grand babouas for men and dress for women. These days, they sometimes put gold-metal-look threads and weave it together.

Mali
Dogon

Dogon textile is made from 100% cotton, softer than Mud cloth.

The Dogon are an ancient tribe living in Mali, West Africa. They claim to be the living conduit between heaven and Earth and to possess not only knowledge of the cosmos, but of man's true origins.

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Burkina Faso
Danfani

Danfani (Faso Dan Fani) is known as Burkina Faso's national cloth. For Danfani, the Faso Dan Fani means "woven cloth of the homeland." All the words are Doulak: Faso = the words are Doulak: Faso = woven cloth (weaver (Faso)). It is known locally as FDF. The Faso Dan Fani is a handwoven cotton cloth of the weaving style and pattern, all depending on the ethnic group.



Mali
Mud Cloth

Mud cloth designs were originally created by poor, indigenous craftsmen in Mali and it is now considered a symbol of national identity for Mali.

Black background and white design are considered the traditional coloring of the cloth. A rust color is supposed to represent the strong supernatural powers that protect the hunter. It also signifies blood from either the hunt of game warfare and is useful as a form of camouflage.



b. Key Questions to Test

- Will the customer interact when they see this in the shop space?
- Will the vendor use this tool to have in-depth communication with the customer?
- Will this tool contribute to increase sales?

c. Feedback from User Testing

I prototyped and user tested at Dam's shop space for two weeks.

And I learned that most users reacted positively, and interaction happened actively.





Dame Diouf, from Senegal,
African Traditional Textile Vendor in Malcolm Shabazz Harlem Market

He is also my representative user.

"I really love it. When customers can learn the cultural meaning behind products, they buy. Can you make this for all types of fabrics I have?"

" (After two weeks of user test) The tool increased the sales!"

"Almost everybody asked me questions!"

"More than 10 textile business persons are really interested in the tool and I had a meaningful conversation with them."



“I would ask them about their background, some history, how it’s used in the country.”

Keisha, African-American



"I think it is good as a conversation tool to build interest and inspire dialogue."

Bridget, African-American

4.2. Insights from the Intervention

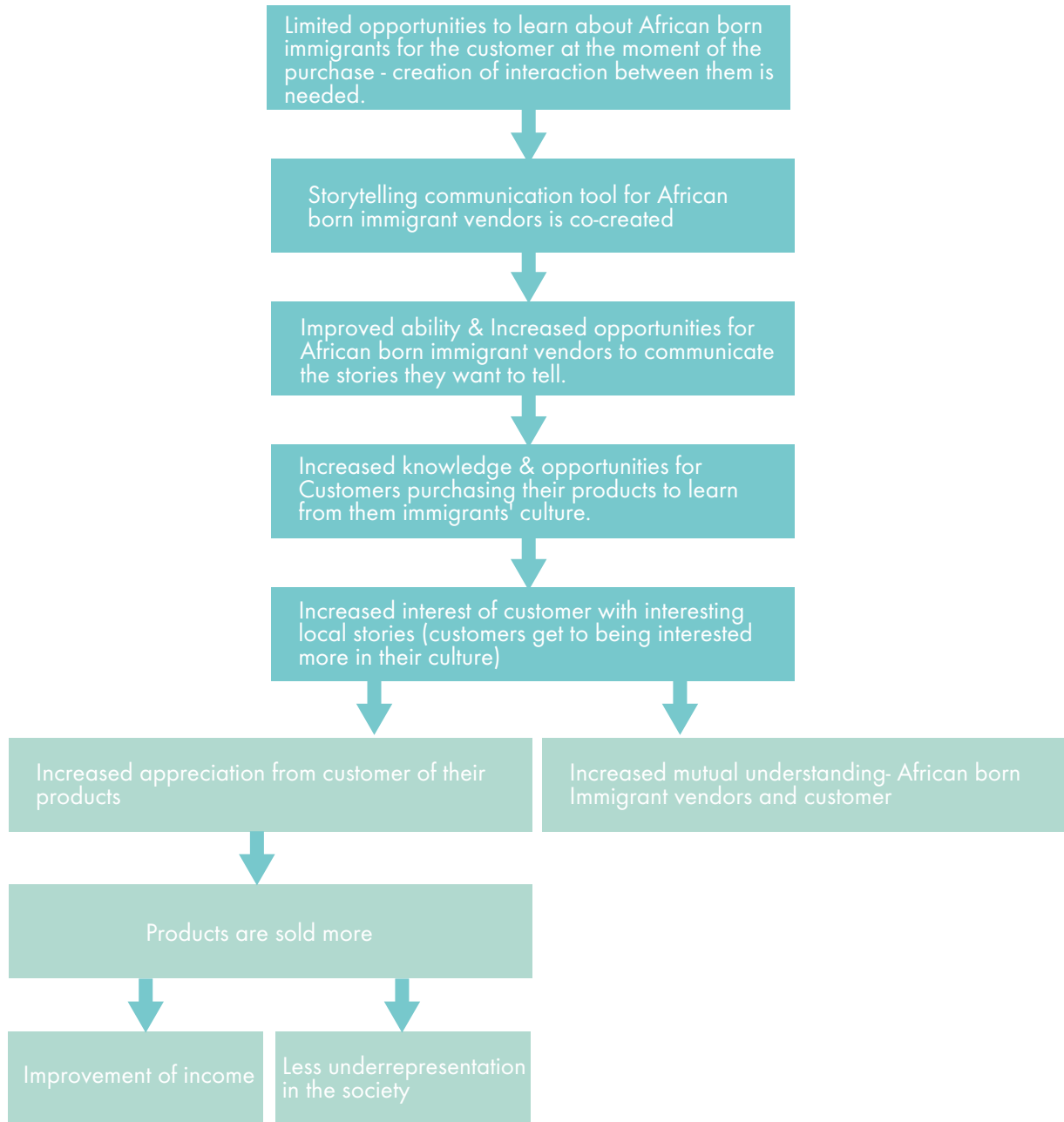
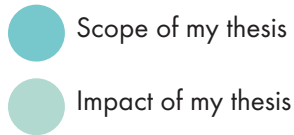
What I learned from the final user test confirmed that embedding the interaction into the user journey was the right decision. I understood the importance of carefully observing the user's journey in order to understand the user and to be aware of the correct leverage point in which to intervene.

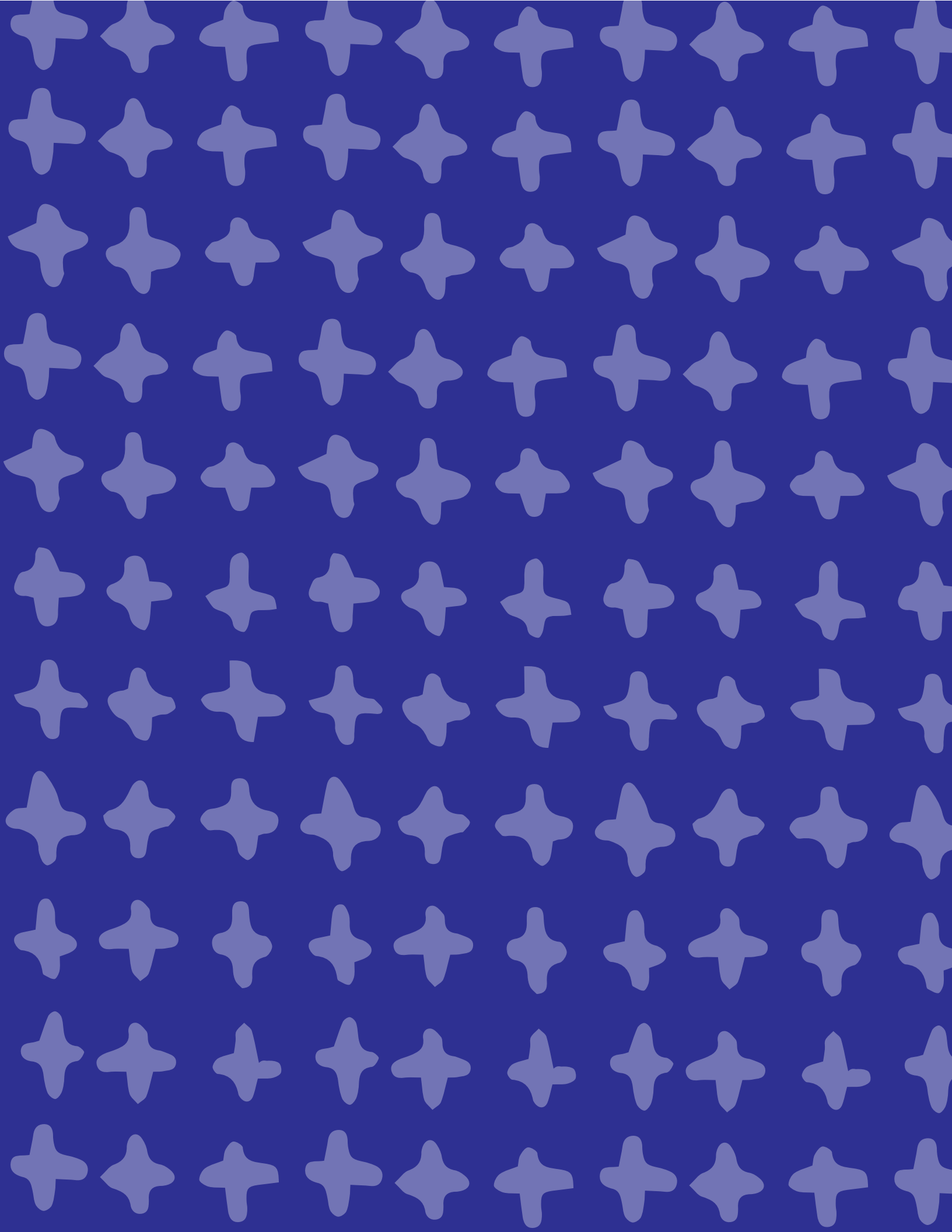
In terms of the storytelling of the product, first conducting in-depth research into which products have cultural meaning or interesting hidden stories is important when you want to make people interested or interact with the stories. I decided to go for the traditional crafts (like accessories and jewelry) without investigating which products have more stories behind them. I did not think about that in advance. It took me a while to realize that textiles have more cultural "stories" than crafts. The more meaningful the story behind the product is, the more people will interact. When the products have valuable back-stories, vendors care more about these stories and thus are easier to work with. Thus, finding the right user is key.

The tools also need to be beautifully designed. When the tools look ugly, people will not want to interact with them, even though the contents are interesting. This insight seems quite basic, but it is easy to overlook when you are too focused on the contents.



5. THEORY OF CHANGE



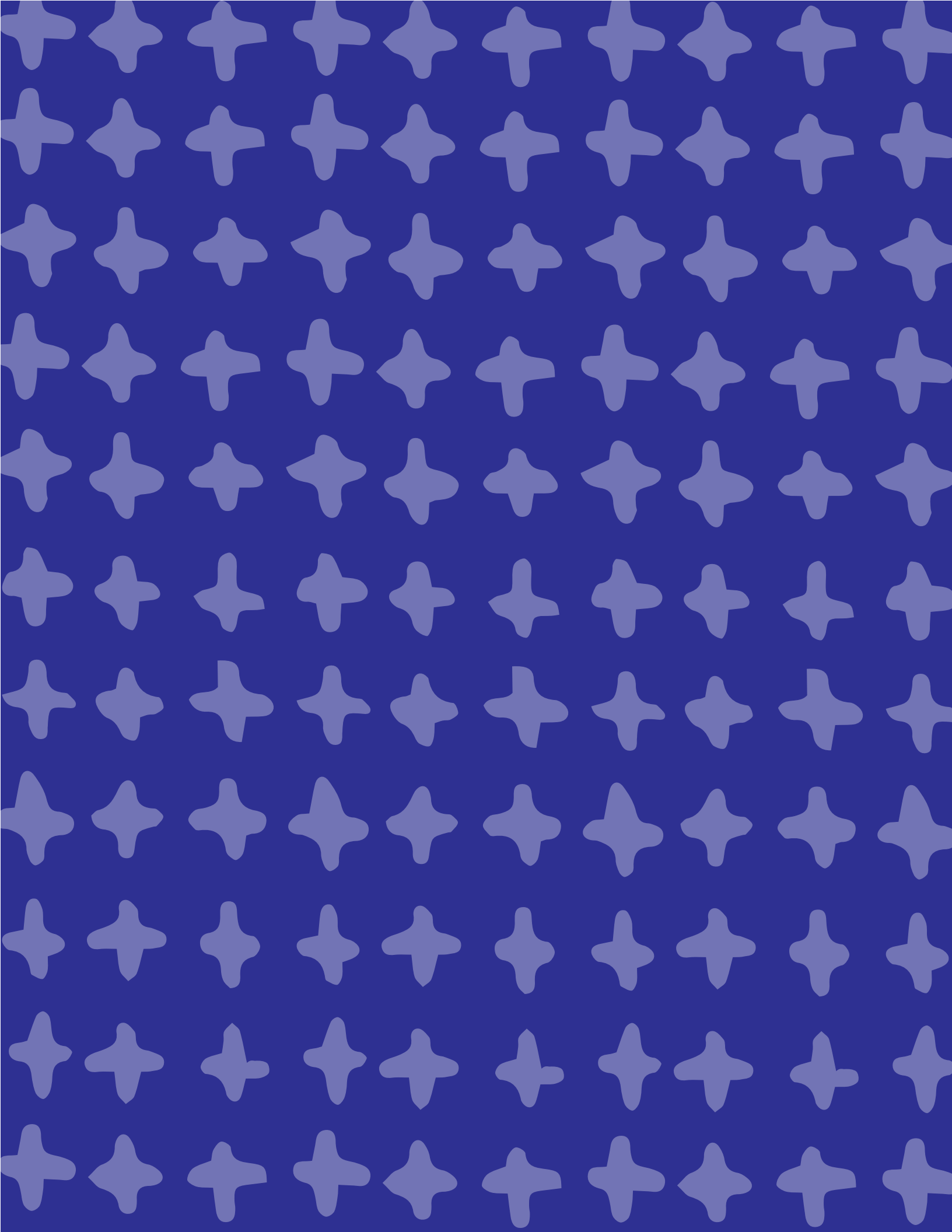


6. LEARNINGS

The most important lesson drawn from this process concerned user and stakeholder management. Getting the people who are closely related to the main user involved is as important as the main user management, even though those people are not your main target. In most cases, these people who have a close relationship with the main user are strong influencers and decision-makers for the user. If those people are not involved in the project, they might become obstacles in the whole process. Understanding the power dynamics is highly important in the design process.

In addition to that, I should also think about first building a close human relationship with both the user and stakeholder. Without doing this, the project will not be proceeded correctly.





7. NEXT STEPS

7.1. Scalability

My project is scalable because:

- The artisan sector is the second-largest employer in the developing world, worth over \$32 billion annually.
- Every vendor/creator of traditional products who is not currently telling the stories behind their products can benefit from this tool.
- There are thousands of artisans making traditional products in their local communities. Thus, there are a lot of stories to be told.

I secured for now a collaboration with an Airbnb cultural tour guide in Harlem, Bunmi Davis, who responded to the storytelling package. I will find more vendors with the passion to tell their hidden stories. This will scale up my project.

The communication tool “Storytelling Package” is specifically designed for African-print fabrics. My storytelling package tool is suitable for:

- the shops where the digitally printed African fabrics are sold
- the business people or PR enthusiasts like the Airbnb local culture guide

The “Storytelling Tag” tool can be used for other products with slight modifications. The size of the tag should fit the size of the product, and the operation to attach it to the product should be redesigned according to the type of craft being sold.



“I love it! I usually give my participants small pieces of fabric as a gift. Now, I can use your Storytelling Package for that.”

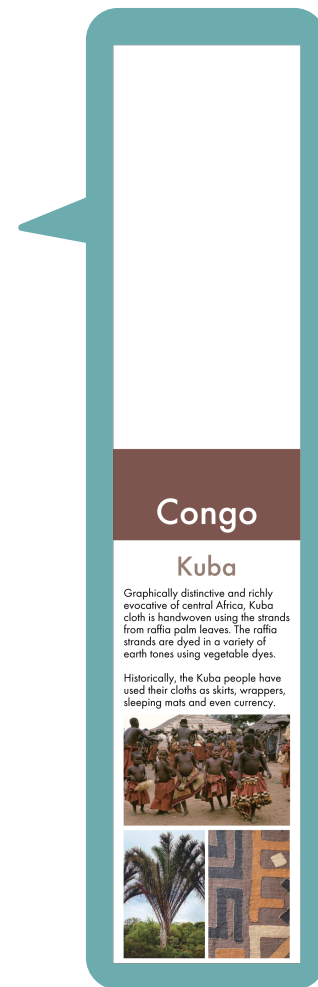
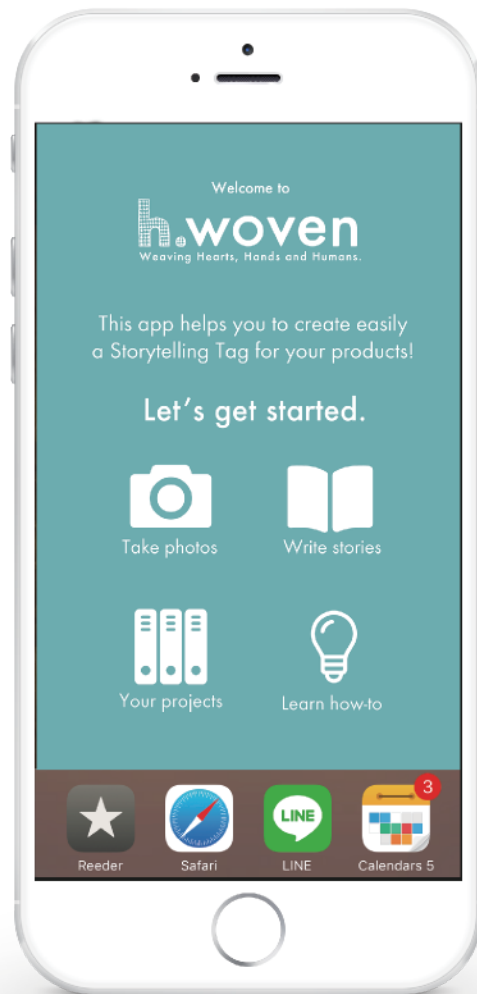
Bunmi Davis, Airbnb cultural tour guide

7.2.Sustainability

As I mentioned previously, a precondition for success in this product storytelling project is the type of stories being told; they should be culturally meaningful and interesting. These meaningful stories come from the local community. So I envision my next step to involve the creation of a Story Collection app.

With this Story Collection app, the vendor will be able to collect interesting, indigenous stories, which they can source locally. They can use this app to make their own storytelling tag by taking photos and typing directly stories inside the apps that can make automatically a Storytelling tag!

In terms of the "Storytelling Package", they can use collected stories to be printed on the package simply.



Your own tag will be exported as JPEG!

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<https://www.cnn.com/2017/02/14/us/trump-us-immigration-reaction/index.html>
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- 5 The importance of dialogue was stressed also in the Davos meeting in 2017.

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