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Virtually Crafting Communities: An Exploration of Fiber and Textile Crafting Online Communities

Theresa M. Winge and Marybeth C. Stalp

Introduction

In the last few decades, handcrafts (i.e., knitting, crocheting, quilting, etc.) experienced a renaissance, after suffering near extinction in the light of modern technology, feminist critiques, and pressures on leisure time. Would the current global resurgence of handcrafts been possible without the Internet? The virtual communities on the Internet serve as a way that handcrafters connect and sustain activity, as well as establish and maintain local and global social networks. Crafters also use online resources to order supplies, learn new techniques, and seek assistance for crafting mishaps.

As most open source tools/systems, the Internet offers both positive and negative involvements. Crafters experience advantages and disadvantages using the Internet as part of their crafting experiences. For example, a knitter can find and secure just the “right” kind of yarn for a project online, instead of settling for what is available at his or her local yarn store (if she or he has a local yarn store). The drawback to this example may be the paralyzing indecision with the sheer number of choices of materials, patterns, and tools sold online, the delay of a project in waiting for the arrival of the ordered yarn, and the neglect of supporting the local economy and the local community.

In this paper, we explore online communities, including blogs, social media sites, meetups, and e-commerce domains, for fiber and textile designers and handcrafters. We share how our qualitative research findings address the gap in the literature about the significant impact of online fiber and textile communities. We conclude with a discussion about the benefits and drawbacks regarding online crafting communities influencing the current paradigm shifts, which are both manipulating and empowering fiber and textile enthusiasts and practitioners simultaneously.

Casting On (Methodology)

In 2004, we launched an ongoing qualitative ethnographic research study of handcrafters. Our research draws on experiences of handcrafters, including knitters, crocheters, weavers, textile designers, and quilters. For the last nine years, we collected interviews from fiber and textile handcrafters; observed and participated in various handcrafting groups; attended fiber and textile related events; visited fiber and textile shops and private design studios; and observed and participated in online handcraft communities. Our recent research recognizes contemporary handcrafters (see Stalp and Winge 2008; Winge and Stalp 2013) and in this particular paper, we concentrate on the significant presence of crafters on the Internet. Previously our research focuses primarily on face-to-face, generational, and familial interactions essential to the phenomenological experiences of the handcrafters (see Stalp and Winge 2008; Winge and Stalp 2013). With emerging technologies and social media, the ways in which crafters communicate

with one another have also changed, and their communication strategies are more reflective of the globalized society.

We employed ethnographic qualitative research methods in this study of handcrafters and their culture, ideology, and crafts in relationship to the Internet. Beginning in 2004, we studied handcrafting places both physically (i.e., craft stores, craft fairs, and visiting crafters work spaces) and virtually (i.e., websites, blogs, and surveying people who craft). From 2004 through the present, we participated in eleven individual crafting circles and collected fieldnotes, toured forty-eight craft stores, attended twenty-one craft fairs, surveyed seventy-eight crafters (2005–2006), 162 craft websites (including blogs, videos, and instructables), and photographically documented eleven crafter's stashes and their crafts. In addition, the Craft Yarn Council provides current data on handcrafters through ongoing studies (www.craftyarnCouncil.com/know.html; Accessed: March 2013).

Picking up the Dropped Stitches

In this study, we explore virtual crafting communities, including blogs, social media websites, meetups, and e-commerce domains, for handcrafters. We share how our qualitative research findings address the gap in the literature about the significant impact of online fiber and textile handcraft communities. We highlight and discuss four well-known websites, which provide resources for crafters; and we explore how these websites contribute to the construction and maintenance of the online crafting communities. We conclude with a discussion about the benefits and drawbacks within these online crafting communities influencing the current paradigm shifts that is both manipulating and empowering fiber and textile enthusiasts and practitioners.

In this paper, we offer examples of online entities that serve and support the crafting community, and at times communities beyond crafters. Many of these online communities are created and sponsored by crafters in order to meet personal needs/wants not being met in more traditional ways. The virtual crafting communities range from political activism (CraftivistCollective.com) to education (Threadbanger.com) to e-commerce (Etsy.com) to wide-ranging objectives (Ravelry.com). These online communities reshape and redefine our perceptions of crafts and crafters, who challenge assumptions about gender, age, and motivations for creating, promoting, and selling crafts.

Crafting in Circles

Historically, crafting circles were primarily composed of homogeneous women, who lived in close proximity within towns and cities. On the other hand, contemporary society crafters from all races, gender, social classes, and economic backgrounds come together in public (and private) venues to craft (Stoller 2004). These diverse experiences of interactions are possible because of the Internet. Virtual crafting communities create spaces for crafters to share, interact, critique, brag, browse, buy, sell, and establish/develop a crafting identity, regardless of geographic or physical location.

Through websites such as Meetup.com, crafters can locate other crafters in their community and schedule one time or regularly scheduled crafting circles. Subsequently, contemporary crafting circles are more diverse in age, gender, race, and social class because of the democracy of online resources. Not all online communities result in in-person meetings, but craft-oriented websites are beneficial tools for crafters in need of support, resources, feedback, inspiration, problem-solving, etc.

Craftivists

Within the contemporary craft movement are individuals and groups who utilize their crafting skills to demonstrate their political worldview within creative and thoughtful products, activities, and events. This type of crafter is known as a “Craftivist,” someone who strives to change the world with his or her creative crafts (Greer 2008). Frequently, Craftivists display their politics in their living room or bedroom on a throw pillow or quilts stitched with humorous political sentiments or images, such as the cross stitch patterns featured in the book *Subversive Cross Stitch* (Jackson 2006) or a socio-political images such as embroidered image of a rainbow flag (supporting gay rights). Some political crafts, however, are part of protests in public spheres. Consider, for example, the Mexican political embroidered handkerchiefs documenting those citizens who mysteriously “disappeared” and the display and wearing of the handkerchiefs functioned as a political protest (see: <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2012/08/01/mexico-embroidering-for-peace/>; Global Voices Online 2014).

Craftivist protests take form as both virtual (online) and physical activities and events typically producing individual crafts or large community craft; both types tend to have an online presence afterward offering the potential of “going viral” (being widely circulated and re-circulated on the internet or social media sites). Numerous successful protests are featured prominently in organizational websites, such as Government Free VJJ, a group that encouraged women to knit and crochet representations of women’s reproductive organs as a way of communicating the inappropriateness of governmental interference in reproductive rights in the United States (governmentfreevjj.com 2014).

Crafters also use the Internet for more everyday reasons. Some look to crafting websites to request assistance on larger projects, which sometimes result in a “viral” request for assistance. Consider, for example, the pink tank cozy in Copenhagen, Denmark. Marianne Jorgenson, Danish crafter and artist, used the Internet and word-of-mouth to request crafters from around the globe send her pink granny squares (typically crocheted squares). Jorgenson received more than 4,000 squares in a variety of shades of pink, from which other community crafters and she constructed a large cover for a World War II-era military tank located in a public area of a town. Not only does the pink tank cozy titled “Pink M.24 Chaffee” (Jorgenson 2006) represent Jorgenson’s and others’ anti-war sentiment against the Danish military’s involvement in the Iraq war, but the tank cozy also came to be known as an anti-war symbol worldwide because of its “viral” position on the Internet.

Craftivist Collective

Craftivism is a social craftivist movement in recent years that is frequently organized using online entities. For example, in 2009, Sarah Corbett founded the Craftivist Collective in London, with 10 additional groups in various locations. The Craftivist Collective is an online organization that encourages and facilitates the activities and events of craftivism (see <http://craftivist-collective.com/about/>). Currently, the Craftivist Collective has 1,000-plus members worldwide (Wikipedia, Accessed: January 14, 2014).

Beginning in October 2012 and concluding in March 2013, the Craftivist Collective organized via the Internet the “I am a Piece...” social endeavor to benefit the Save the Children’s Race Against Hunger campaign. The Craftivist Collective posted to their website a jigsaw puzzle pattern and instructions for the creation of the jigsaw puzzle piece that would eventually be assembled into a larger piece (January 19, 2014). Members of the Craftivist Collective expand the reach of the Collective by further sharing the project via emails, web posts, etc. with their online contacts (i.e., family, friends, co-workers, etc.). The result was thousands of puzzle pieces embroidered with messages were sent in to the Craftivist Collective in London. Volunteers for Craftivist Collective assembled the “uniform” puzzle pieces with their individual embroidered messages about hunger into a large tapestry (to see images of the I am a Piece project access: <http://craftivist-collective.com/all/introducing-our-new-and-biggest-project-yet-eeek-the-drum-roll-please-craftivist-jigsaw-project-imapiece/>). The completed “I am a Piece...” exhibit toured Ireland and the United Kingdom in 2013. The goal of the exhibit was to draw attention to starving children in the United Kingdom and raise money to help the Save the Children’s Race Against Hunger campaign.

Craftivist Collective is but one example of a virtual crafting community within the larger whole of the craftivism movement. Crafters with activist inclinations are able to find or create a virtual community that suits their craftivist needs. In the next example, we explore the virtual community created around a well-known website—Threadbanger—that promotes non-traditional education of sewing skills, and subsequently creates a virtual community of sewing peers that can offer support and inspiration.

Threadbanger

Threadbanger (Threadbanger.com) is another online entity, primarily accessible through Youtube, Facebook, and several social media sites, which encourages its subscribers to contribute videos with instructions for specific projects, in order for viewers to watch the videos and build and/or improve their sewing (and designing) skills.

Threadbanger is a network for people who love to DIY, recreate, refashion and craft. Forget about corporate stores, we're here to help you create and find your own style! From our episodes, forum and blog to our newsletter and contests, there is something for everyone. Our goal is to bring together people who can share their ideas, tips and advice with others and help make the world more fashionable Threadbanger style!
(Threadbanger.com, Accessed: February 10, 2014)

Threadbanger has aided in the recent “sewing” resurgence in Western society, which is trailing decades behind the resurgence of quilting (Stalp 2007) and knitting and crocheting (Turney 2009). Anyone with Internet access can upload and watch “instructable” videos (free of charge) repeatedly and teach themselves a range of sewing skills, as well as some designing and pattern drafting skills. Accordingly, viewers can create unique garments, accessories, and home accents using the project-based instructional videos. Subscribers who post videos are sharing their knowledge and gaining a positive online crafting reputation. By working outside the traditional venues of book and magazine publishing, Threadbanger users are also developing a unique “brand” for one’s creative self.

Threadbanger is an open-source educational online entity serving a wide range of crafters. While its videos tend to emphasize completion over quality, and may even cause some Home Economics teachers and 4-H judges to pull out their hair with the frequent creative construction details, incorrect directions, and even bad advice in terms of fabric selection; the online entity provides accessible project-based learning with enthusiastic peer instruction. Novice sewers have 24-hour access to sewing assistance through these online venues, and seek out both multiple teachers and multiple methods. While earlier crafting instruction methods often relied on family members for instruction may become enmeshed negatively with family roles (see Stalp 2007), the Internet allows people to learn crafting techniques how they want, when they want, and from whom they want.

The Internet can be both a democratic and powerful tool to anyone around the world with a computer or hand-held electronic device connected to the Internet. Subsequently, website developers and managers are interested in documenting the “traffic” or demographics of visitors (subscribers, viewers, unique and repeat visitors) to their sites. In recent years, this information has become known and is available as “analytics” (i.e., data documenting the “traffic” on the website). Through the use of analytics, websites can be re/structured to provide more user-related content, and even encourage new visitors to subscribe.

Threadbanger’s analytics document their site has 365,910 subscribers, with 61,004,000 views (60,540,000 daily) as of August 5, 2014. The website features accounts with Google+, Twitter (social media with 140 character limit per post/“tweet”), Facebook (social media), Pinterest (virtual scrapbooking and stash), Instagram (image sharing and social media), and Tumblr (image sharing, social media, and blog). When these online entities have multiple interactions with other virtual communities, the overlap of outlets benefits crafters with an array of options with more diverse choices for vendors, resources, and people. The next example we discuss is Etsy, an e-commerce resource for crafters (and other producers/sellers) to buy and sell handmade products.

Etsy

Etsy (Etsy.com) is an e-commerce site for handcrafts (and other “handmade” products). Etsy’s motto is: “Turn Your Passion into a Business” (Etsy.com, Accessed: September 21, 2013). The site provides “makers” an online venue to sell goods, instead of individuals investing in brick-and-mortar shops. Providing members with access to a global audience and shoppers, Etsy increases the likelihood of commerce and, for some, profits.

In 2013, Etsy reported \$895,000,000 in sales for its users (Hess, 2013). The exact number of “active” sellers is critiqued and even disputed (Hess, 2013). According to Amanda Hess, there are 94,000 “active” sellers (Hess, 2013), which was later disputed by Etsy as having 525,926 “active” sellers (Etsy.com/teams/7718, 2014). Still, it should be noted that approximately 65% of Etsy sellers earn less than \$100 a year through the site (Hess, 2013).

The online communities prove profitable for some; however, there is concern that sites such as Etsy may diminish the DIY and handcraft movement overall. There are additional sites similar to Etsy, such as Aftcr, ArtFire, BigCartel, DaWanda, Paperstitch, Storenvy, and Zibbet. Storenvy, for example, offers free listings but charges for membership fees to the “shop” owners for domain names, etc. Through these online sites, crafters are empowered to become small business owners and/or entrepreneurs, and in turn become vendors from which other crafters are able to buy supplies.

Since the DIY movement is closely associated with the handcraft movement, these two social movements often share ideological positions. Both the DIY and handcraft movements claim to be “anti-commerce.” Accordingly, when many sites promote handcraft commerce, this predominance challenges a key ideological point of these movements. Still, many crafters gain independence and agency through sales (and profits) of their crafts.

Etsy, and Ravelry.com to a lesser degree, is profitable despite the fact that it exists contrary to a key ideological point of DIY and handcraft movements. Subsequently, Etsy has come under scrutiny from some crafters. Etsy charges listing fees (.20 USD) per item listed and transaction fees (3.5%) for commerce on their site (Etsy.com/policy, 2014). Etsy is featured as a crafters’ e-commerce site, where both “makers” or crafters and consumers visit the website. In the next example, we discuss Ravelry, which is an online entity that is growing in popularity among crafters because the site offers more than just a single craft focus.

Ravelry

One of the most notable online crafting communities is Ravelry (Ravelry.com), a website offering subscribers/members searchable databases for craft supplies, virtual communities, and online space for crafters to virtually collect “stash” items (see Stalp and Winge 2008). Ravelry.com was founded in 2007 and as of March 2013 has more than three million members for its social networking website. The Ravelry.com motto is “a place for knitters, crocheters, designers, spinners, and dyers to keep track of their yarn, tools, and pattern information, and communicate with others for ideas and inspiration” (Forbes, Ravelry.com/about, Aug 22, 2013). Members share images of their handcrafts, patterns, and projects, and discuss their crafting issues and needs for critiques, support, praise, and/or gloating. The website serves as more than a social media platform for handcrafters as it provides members with a means of commerce, such as selling yarns and patterns.

The Ravelry website offers several searchable databases allowing subscribers to virtually peruse and shop yarns, knitting needles, crochet hooks, and other crafting supplies from around the world. Among the searchable databases are several that individuals can build for themselves,

such as “My Patterns” (a digital collection of patterns purchased by individual subscribers), and the “Queue” (an online collection uploaded with items ranging from a skein of knitting yarn to a crochet hook to an image of shawl). Many users of this feature on Ravelry.com refer to the “Queue” as “the Dump,” because they dump all of the crafts and materials viewed on the website for future use. These virtual resources are not only beneficial when online shopping, socializing, or planning the next project, but they also serve as documentation of past and future projects, as well as online resources accessed with smart phone devices while subscribers are physically shopping in brick-and-mortar stores.

Additionally, the “Stash” feature on Ravelry is a way to catalog individual yarns, fabrics, and other crafting materials. Ravelry website users take images of their stash items and upload the images to “Stash” with descriptions and quantities. Users of Ravelry comment in the forums that the “Stash” database is their favorite and most used area of the website. Similar to a corporeal craft stash (materials, tools, etc.) the “Stash” database offers a virtual space to place items crafters want or have without the regard for actual storage space and allows for searches based on visual icons.

Virtual Crafting Communities

The findings from our study further revealed ~~there are~~ both benefits and drawbacks to participating in virtual crafting communities. The benefits range from the ability to have faster exchange of communications and information between crafters, to no geographic boundaries to e-commerce. The social networking that also takes place in the virtual crafting community creates a sense of belonging and support for the members/subscribers. In addition, crafters benefit from the mobility of their crafting community being virtual (i.e., available on laptops, smartphones, office computers, etc.); allowing for comparison shopping between online and brick-and-mortar supplies; sharing images of tools, materials, and projects; and interacting with the community for any location at any time.

Conversely, the drawbacks to joining virtual crafting communities range from ~~the fear of~~ scams and (computer) virus threats, to overwhelming amount of resources and information, to time wasting. These drawbacks were expected because they are similar for anyone using the Internet. Still, crafters seem willing to cope with the drawbacks. Crafters, for example, noted in the comments sections of the websites highlighted in this paper that they spent a great deal of time online really enjoying spending (wasting) time looking through patterns, yarn choices, or other supplies.

More subtle outcomes from being part of a virtual crafting community include support, challenges, and empowerment. These outcomes were drawn from comment sections of websites reviewed for this study. Accordingly, some crafters noted that the people they met online encourage them to: finish a project or offer advise to solve crafting issues, and challenge them to experiment with new techniques or materials in their crafts. We also argue that crafters in virtual crafting communities demonstrate agency through their comments posted to designated website spaces.

Bind Off (Summary)

The Internet enables and encourages the creation of virtual crafting communities, which sustain and promote the crafting movement, and at times supporting socio-political agendas (i.e., craftivists). Furthermore, the Internet democratizes the handcraft movement for anyone with Internet access to participate in the virtual craft communities. The online communities create social networks around commonalities, such as crocheting, knitting, sewing, and quilting. Crafters support the online entities, while the sites support the crafters' virtual communities. The exchange is not simply reciprocal; it is a progressive interaction.

In this study, we found online entities designed specifically for and by crafters were vast and varied in content. These online communities provide networks for crafters to share experiences, techniques, questions, patterns, stash items, and projects (future, in-progress, and completed). Furthermore, some these virtual crafter communities also offer in-person meeting opportunities, such as activist groups and craft circles, supplementing online interactions.

Overall, crafters are becoming increasingly technology savvy because the benefits of varied interactions far exceed the drawbacks of locally based craft social circles. Accordingly, crafters will have the ability to grow, change, or alter the craft movement via their presence on the Internet. The future of the craft movement may very well need crafters to be part of the virtual craft communities, connected to the paradigms of social media, which spreads crafting agendas and empowers crafters.

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