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‘DOES ANYONE HAVE A PATTERN FOR A SOMBRERO TO FIT A CROCHET MONKEY?’ KNIT AND CROCHET AMATEURS SHARING MAKING IN ONLINE / OFFLINE CRAFTING COMMUNITIES

YARN | AMATEUR | AGENCY | COMMUNITY | DIGITAL

ABSTRACT

AMATEUR TEXTILE MAKERS IN KNIT AND CROCHET ENGAGE IN LOCAL, SOCIALLY-MOTIVATED YARN-CRAFT GROUPS AND ‘GLOCAL’ ONLINE COMMUNITIES RICH WITH EXPERTISE AS THEY SHARE ADVICE, IMAGES, QUERIES AND PRAISE.

This study explores women’s perceptions of their textile creativity, skills-exchange across generational boundaries and begins to look at the extent to which they see their crafting as socially-engaged practice: How do they weave social connections as they present yarn objects ‘hot off the hook’ or as ‘works in progress’? Are Lippard’s (1978) suggestions that women combat isolation through sharing craft patterns and thereby make emotional connections with one another, still valid? How are women collaborating in real and virtual communities to promote social agency and personal empowerment through their use of yarn-based textiles as creative art?

This project-in-progress is part of a larger PhD study which explores wellbeing and personal identity in women engaged in knit and crochet, alone or in groups, both online and 'in real life'. Data has been purposively collected from hundreds of women invited through Twitter and other Facebook crafting pages to join a closed group, created exclusively for research. Interviews, focus group discussions and making workshops will also be undertaken with a selection of UK participants from within this pool and beyond. With the researcher engaged as participant-observer, the ethics and tropes of feminist (Skeggs 1995), visual (Pink 2013) and virtual (Hine 2015) ethnography are also being explored.

Early findings indicate that some participants seek connection and belonging, seeking to assuage loneliness (Turney 2004) through queries, positive strokes of accomplishment and emotive responses to the soothing qualities of the tactile. Shared narratives and images also reinforce the concept of the family as 'greedy institution' (Coser 1974) and that yarn-crafting women may feel deviant (Stalp 2006) in engaging in textiles as a leisure activity. However, there is a far greater prevalence of participants celebrating agency and empowerment through their amateur making (Metcalf 2007). This is being achieved through quiet, reflective creativity demonstrated in 'choicefully' making alone (Hemmings 2014) and in working as part of a wider, sometimes perceived as global, group social identity (Haslam et al. 2009, Cruwys et al. 2015), where participants feel enriched through collaborative acts of co-production.

INTRODUCTION

Amateur textile crafters in knit and crochet engage in local, socially-motivated yarn groups and 'glocal' online communities rich with expertise as they share accounts or images of their making and proffer advice, queries and praise. Research into the value and impact of women's making in amateur settings remains relatively limited, particularly where it may contribute to a sense of personal agency (Myzelev 2009, Riley et al. 2013) or group social identity (Haslam et al. 2009, Cruwys et al. 2015). This paper seeks to explore how participants weave social and creative connections as they present yarn objects 'hot off the hook' and needles or as 'works in progress'. It explores women's perceptions of their textile creativity, skills-exchange across generational boundaries and begins to look at the extent to which they see their crafting as socially-engaged practice. This paper reflects part of a larger PhD study which explores wellbeing in women engaged in knit and crochet, alone or in groups, in digital and physical spaces. Qualitative data has been purposively collected from over 400 participants in a closed Facebook group created exclusively for this research and face to face focus group discussions in making workshops. Participants are beginning to contribute towards a clearer understanding of the ways in which knit and crochet may impact on wellbeing.

Firstly, this paper will discuss some of the literature on women's amateur textile making, including work concentrating on the ways that participants weave social connections. The methodological tools for the research will be briefly presented, with a focus on the impact that using a social media platform for initial data collection may have had. Next, participants' views on: presenting

making online; skills exchange across generational boundaries; sharing patterns for social connection; and engaging in social activism will be explored. Finally, the paper will close with some reflections on what has been learned to date, including challenges to assumptions about the benefits of sharing making or perceiving knit and crochet as a socially engaged craft.

LITERATURE OVERVIEW

In exploring the reasons why amateur knit and crochet makers engage in groups, drawing together to share progress or celebrate the accomplishment of a finished object, a key thread appears to be the strong sense of belonging and social connection. This, according to Myzelev (2009: 153), satisfies a 'desire to be in public and yet be able to undertake a personal, intimate activity of creating craft objects'. A similar idea is proposed by Corkhill et al. (2014: 36), in acknowledging that knitting, whilst often a solitary pastime, is 'also a vehicle for making social connections, both virtually... and in real time' where participants can improve confidence and self-esteem. However, the ways in which one can correlate the 'significant association between membership of a knitting group and feeling happier and better' (Corkhill 2014: 38) are not easily evidenced. Moreover, Hemmings (2014) raises the query that recent academic study has prioritised the image of group occupation and social connection above that of the quiet, individual maker. She suggests that the concepts presented here devalue the creativity of women who elect to make alone.

The popularity of yarn-based crafts in the 21st century is frequently linked to the benefits of electing to use luxurious leisure time, hard-won from frantic and busy lives, to create an artefact that

requires slow movements. Minahan and Cox (2007: 14) suggest this is as likely to be an ironic parody of the demands of the past as a 'nostalgic response to a world no longer present', where participants may take a rare opportunity to establish their own, independent time-scales. A similar concept is found in Myzelev (2009: 152), where knitting that:

allows for socializing with others or being able to contemplate or daydream is connected to the luxury of having free time, of being able to produce something inefficient in terms of the modernist understanding of the world as moving at specific speed towards specific goals.

This echoes Parkins' (2004: 434) focus on the reassignment of yarn craft as 'pleasure and care for the self' rather than labour driven by necessity. The use of knitting to take control of the pace of one's life is often presented as a positive and empowering psychological benefit, where the physical experience of creating with yarn, constructing an object through 'countless repetitions' (Myzelev 2009: 152) has also been considered to support self-care relaxation, daydream and thoughtful mindfulness.

The engagement of imagination in knitting, such as making simple choices of colour or texture can also be perceived as promoting a sense of independent action, as the participant responds to design which 'allows the agency, the decisions to be made by the amateur' (Myzelev 2009: 152). Determining such choices can promote creativity, purposefulness, self-esteem and pleasure in 'groups who have no experience of these in other aspects of life' (Corkhill et al. 2014: 41) and where 'being actively creative as opposed to being a passive recipient of a destructive force such as an illness or traumatic event' (ibid.). Such

independence and agency can also develop into engagement with social activism, where communities of yarn-crafters feel they can be productive in contributing to collaborative projects:

Knitting as a communal activity lends itself particularly well to collective arts projects that often blend nostalgic feelings with the concerns for current political and social issues.

(Myzelev 2009: 155)

Similarly, Orton Johnson (2014) explores the building of a socially active community on *Ravelry*, a dedicated yarn-craft social media platform, as members share connections with other amateur makers and designers. She has presented participants' use of Web 2.0 technologies to promote agentic activities in making the crafting process visible through social media archiving and in engaging through collaborative events such as 'knit-alongs'.

Work in the *Stitchlinks* study by Corkhill et al. (2014) also explored how the physical construction of a stitching group may support creative sharing. It was suggested that it may be that the position of knitters in a group setting, with hands closed around the front of the body and eyes cast down, focused on making that helped to create personal space, acting 'as a buffer to the outside world' (Corkhill et al. 2014: 42) and enabling 'personal control over the level of their participation in the group' (ibid.). Such an image of making in groups, where the background task of mindful knitting opened an intimate space for deep conversation and reflection can also be found in the work of Leckey (2011) and Hackney (2013). An element of the wider PhD study seeks to investigate whether, in sharing making online, participants use the screen as a similar 'buffer' which enables them to engage through posting or comment or remain detached and observant.

METHODS

With the researcher engaged as participant-observer, the ethics and tropes of feminist (Skeggs 1995; 2001) and visual (Pink 2013) ethnography are also being explored. The study focuses on female voices with 'conscious partiality' (Mies 1993: 68) in order to document participants' views. Skeggs (2001: 430) has posited that ethnography and participant observation may lend itself to feminist approaches, 'with its emphasis on experiences, and the words, voice and lives of the participants'. The research seeks to transparently acknowledge the values and biases of a deliberate focus on feminist research, identifying with participants and engaging with women through reciprocal support in digital and physical communications. Hogan and Pink (2010) have likewise suggested that exploring the visual in ethnographies related to art therapy can be perceived as a feminist approach. Here, the ontological status of emotion and experience is respected, particularly through the act of making, as it offers a glimpse of the self in process:

...interiority might be considered not simply as something that comes to the surface and is recorded as a static event, or crystallized and made static, but rather, and importantly, it offers ways of understanding interiority through an anthropological paradigm that views inner states as being in progress, rather than ever static.

(Hogan & Pink 2010: 160)

Pink et al. (2011: 16) have also posited that such an ethnographic focus on participants' experiences reflect 'a "sensory turn" stretching across the social sciences, humanities and arts practice' where memory, imagination and emotion have a key

PARTICIPANTS ARE BEGINNING TO CONTRIBUTE TOWARDS A CLEARER UNDERSTANDING OF THE WAYS IN WHICH KNIT AND CROCHET MAY IMPACT ON WELLBEING.

role in unpacking the ways that the arts may influence subjective wellbeing.

In addition, aspects of the study have located the ethnography in a digital space, where ethics and practices are still emerging (Henderson et al. 2013, Hine 2015). Issues here have included the management not of the established ethnographic parameters of time, location and group, but data from exchanges which were asynchronous, settings which did not share either geographical location or time zone and fluid participant membership (Clemens 2014). However, Capurro and Pingel (2002) and Hine (2015) both posit that the analysis of the implications of participant contributions in ethnography has always been challenging, whether in a physical anthropological study or in the virtual world.

Findings presented in this paper have been largely drawn together from a closed Facebook group, 'Woolly Wellbeing Research' set up at the beginning of February, 2015. Currently, the group has 374 members, with an additional 29 participants who engaged but withdrew. 34 countries are represented within the group, with the majority based in the UK, USA, South Africa, Australia and Canada. 329 participants are actively involved in liking and commenting or creating their own posts to express opinions, ask for advice or present images. The remaining members are silent, or 'lurkers' (Preece & Maloney-Krichmar 2005, Hine 2015). The majority of data is collated from responses to

a weekly research question posted by the researcher. Additional data has been gathered from 23 survey responses taken over 3 early workshop sessions in Sheffield, UK, in June and July 2015.

FINDINGS

Early findings gathered from the data collected during the online / offline activities indicate that many participants engage in knit and crochet groups in order to find connection and belonging, seeking to assuage loneliness (Turney 2004) through queries, positive strokes of accomplishment and emotive responses to the soothing qualities of the tactile. A large number of participants shared stories of mental health issues and the ways that the gentle, rhythmic movement of stitching was soothing, as well as providing a sense of achieving a concrete, positive product:

It gives me something to do with my hands, relaxes me, gives me something to focus on, allows me to be creative and I just love the sense of accomplishment seeing a project coming along. No matter what is going on that is out of my control I can control the crochet.

(Danielle S)

The online craft community as a whole has definitely been a source of support for me, especially during tough times. Getting feedback on what I am making or thinking about definitely helps to keep me steady, stable, connected.

(Kathryn)

The following section presents participants' views and experiences of sharing making online, skills exchange across the generations, offering patterns in order to develop social connection and engaging in public or private activism through knit and crochet.

PRESENTING MAKING ONLINE

In publishing comments on and images of textile making to Facebook, participants are blurring the boundaries between public and private spheres (Habermas 1989). Posts typically share what is being made alone in the home and are often accompanied by images illustrating domestic interiors, pyjama legs, slippers feet, cups of tea and glasses of wine. The key reason members cross such boundaries is to seek connection with others who share their interest, provide praise for their work and an opportunity to be perceived as skilful:

Because of the nature of my job, self-employed, I am alone most of the time. It is only through the groups that I belong to on Facebook that I gain some sense of "belonging"... One of the other advantages of belonging to these online groups is the sense of accomplishment. The other members spur me on to create nicer things than I would have done before, they teach and guide me, they seek my advice, and there is an overall sense of "well-being" when one is connected.

(Michelle)

In addition, some participants explained that their involvement in sharing making in a digital space was based on distance from physical crafting groups, geographical isolation or isolation stemming from illness. One member explained that participation was tied closely to her context as a busy single mother recovering from cancer; she lacked the energy to commit to a regular group some distance away, but sought comradeship and support online. Here, she had the ability to opt into the community when appropriate and celebrated a rarely experienced sense of agency which defied the biographical disruption her condition had wrought:

I also find that I am not defined by my illness in [Facebook group]. I am not even defined by my sock because I am still knitting it. I am define[d] by my desire to knit socks.

(Wendy L)

SKILLS EXCHANGE ACROSS GENERATIONAL BOUNDARIES

Many participants shared how the act of stitching enabled them to feel closer to family members. For many, this did not include the physical practice of making together, where skills were explicitly passed down from an older generation, but in making alone and experiencing nostalgia through memories of the family:

Both my mother & maternal grandmother were creative my mum was good at knitting, her mother had worked as a milliner... I inherited lots of bits & pieces - a lovely dolly for 'bobbin knitting', weavers' needles, crochet hooks etc. so I was always surrounded by the stuff of textiles. When my mum died in 2011 I took possession of her bits & bobs, yarn, needles, buttons & lots of other paraphernalia... so now I am the keeper of the family collection.

(Jill)

I started knitting because I had the desire - THEN I found myself remembering my Mom (who died over 25 years ago) teaching me to knit when I was little. I found myself wishing I had her knitting needles. I learned to crochet because I wanted - I NEEDED to feel more connected to my Mom and to my Grandmother after I was diagnosed with cancer.

(Wendy A)

At the time I didn't realize how important that time together was. I remember them by crocheting & knitting and very much miss the time I had with them. It brings a sense of nostalgia that I can remember them and will be forever grateful for passing their skills & knowledge to me as well as encouraging my creativity.

(Anna Marie)

For some, posts revealed that knit and crochet was enabling a stronger connection to the older women who had originally taught them as children, exchanging making skills back towards older relatives:

My mum taught me to knit but she always treated dressmaking and knitting as a necessity (we didn't have much money so she made our clothes) and so I didn't keep it up, and was overjoyed to get out of homemade and into shop-bought clothes. When I went back to it a few years ago I was able to open her eyes to all the patterns and yarns that were now available so she's taken it up again and often comes to me for help with pattern instructions.

(Anna)

My bond is with my Mum, in that we share a love of crafting... as she gets older, I now find she turns to me for help as the more complicated patterns get the

better of her, and we spend many a happy time together ... so the bond continues.

(Kay)

However, a number of participants expressed more complex views about the sharing of craft skill across generational boundaries. They shared the ways in which they felt an absence of connection across past generations, but were using knit and crochet to heal this in their own lives:

My relationship with my family is contentious... But I know that the handiwork that they taught me is "in the blood" and it gives me some comfort that if not this previous generation, I am connected thru craft to many who came before in my family's history... I don't know if you can have muscle memory or learned skills passed down genetically but it feels that way

(Sandra)

My mother and my Grandmother both were expert needlewomen (sewing/crochet/ lacemaking) but neither cared to teach or encourage my sister and I. I am growing a strong bond with my 23yr old daughter as we learn from each other... I feel there is an 'estranged' link here with the female side of my family, if that makes any sense.

(Jacqui)

This concept of creating stronger bonds with younger generations through textile making together was a commonly shared thread, with participants deliberately and actively creating new traditions:

No one in my family, immediate or extended, is crafty or creative so I often feel even more separated from them because I'm the only one. I plan on teaching my kids how to crochet, knit ... and anything else I pick up until then. I want them

to have something to help reduce anxiety, express themselves, and share with each other and me to strengthen our family. I really want to be able to pass on what I know with everyone actually.

(Megan)

SHARING PATTERNS FOR SOCIAL CONNECTION

Lippard (1978) suggested that that women sought to combat isolation through sharing craft patterns and thereby make emotional connections with one another. The development of the digital world means that the neighbourhood in which women may make such exchanges is now vast, yet the communities which connect through interest rather than geography (Wellman & Gulia 1999) may also feel close and intimate. Passing on free designs and online links to designers where patterns can be purchased, is perceived as sharing inspiration:

I guess I feel like I have a friendship with these people and as such would want them to have access to anything that can bring them joy, either from the wearing or the learning.

(Lesley)

In particular, sharing through digital means expands participants' sense of widening connections, feeling empowered through guiding other makers and generous in giving support to amateur crafters:

I love the feeling of helping someone find something that they are looking for. It is also nice when they share what they found with you. The difference with sharing on fb compared to in person is on fb others can see and the person can share with others who may be interested. In person it is usually more a one on one interaction.

(Erin)

After collecting so many I started a FB page to share only FREE patterns AND Free patterns that I altered, always giving the original link along with a .doc or .pdf showing my changes and/or modifications... I feel it's my way of paying it forward to all those who love to knit and crochet.

(Gay)

A few participants shared concern – even resentment – about the expectation that an amateur maker should share patterns with others in response to their praise or queries. The hard work and creativity of the individual maker is being protected here:

Sometimes I think it is just laziness on some people's part to not have to search for a pattern themselves and that gets annoying after a while ... I don't personally feel that is being selfish, but more that the creative process has made it my own ... maybe I just get annoyed easily that people find it easier to be spoonfed rather than develop their own style. To me an art should reflect the maker, not just replicas of someone else's work or brainchild.

(Sandra)

In contrast, most participants celebrated each other's' creativity and perceived sharing patterns as an essential part of belonging to a community. For one member, who had set up a Facebook group dedicated to sharing her own free patterns in sock knitting, posting online was a deliberate act of giving and a springboard for the creativity of others:

I enjoy watching the process of someone making the adaptations because I know that the process and the resulting socks will give the other knitter so much pleasure. I think the pleasure of sharing a pattern is knowing that you are

giving someone a gift which will make them or somebody else happy.

(Christine)

ENGAGING IN SOCIAL ACTIVISM

Participants discussed activism through knit and crochet through involvement in a range of socially-motivated projects. These included 'yarn-bombing', where local areas are decorated with textiles to celebrate or promote civic events, such as the cycle race 'Tour de Yorkshire' or wool festival 'Yarndale' in the UK, historical commemorations such as the poppy covered Gallipoli memorial in 2015, or simply to bring attention to the beauty of the immediate environment, as in many groups from the Ojai Yarn Bombers in California to the guerrilla knitters of Saltburn in the UK.

I think yarnbombing and craftivism are wonderful for those who participate one can explore and express creativity, social engagement, civic responsibility, and much more.

(Pamela)

I think it can lighten a mood, or brighten a day. Imagine if a yarn bombed bridge actually lightened someone's mood so much that they decided that not to end their life today.

(Maria)

Although the public doesn't know my contribution, I still get a great feeling of satisfaction and appreciation seeing my handiwork used to make the people smile.

(Gay)

Women are also collaborating in real and virtual communities to promote social agency through making for charity, from the local neo-natal intensive care unit to national organisations such as the Salvation Army or SANDS, which supports

families who have lost an infant. Some participants saw this as empowering, as they could use their skills to offer anonymous comfort to the recipient and encourage others to contribute:

I make the occasional item for charity and do tend to share a picture of it on social media with a link to the charity or the pattern as a way of trying to inspire others to do the same. I think that the making of the item sends an important message to the person who receives it i.e. that someone has put a lot of effort into that item and cares enough to make it and then give it away.

(Sharon)

I have given away many of pieces too, to people I know as gifts and to others who I perhaps know less well, but I know they need a particular item. I enjoy doing this as it gives my making a purpose.

(Paula)

Such quiet, smaller scale activism (Hackney 2013) which involved giving locally, was popular with participants, including one, who referred to herself as a 'stealth charity knitter'. Others combined existing voluntary work with yarn-making, such as this participant who works at a halfway house for recovering addicts, teaching them to create crochet garments which are then donated to the local Veteran's Hospital:

It also provided them with something to do when they needed to focus on something that was different than their previous lifestyle. It was probably one of my favorite contributions to that house.

(Karen)

Narratives of making with yarn reinforced the concept that perhaps participants felt guilty or 'deviant' (Stalp 2006) in engaging with knit or crochet and that to make for others in some way provided a permission to craft as a leisure activity. Making was couched as an altruistic activity, tied closely to reciprocal emotion (Turney 2004) and generosity:

All those hours creating for someone else is a true act of selflessness. What better way to show you care.

(Cherry)

I never knit for myself, I have every intention of it but usually end up giving it away... I like other people to feel like I love them and they matter to me.

(Dulcie)

However, a few participants have begun to challenge such notions. One, Joan, posted about making for charitable ministry at her church because it was the only outlet for her creativity, having been made to feel that her 'artsyness and craftiness wasn't worth anything' after being prevented from taking an art degree. Another member has taken this further, querying whether the idea of contributing to society, often so tied up in definitions of wellbeing, is a challenge to feminist notions of having the freedom to choose an activity for its own sake or for simple pleasure:

I have a concern that the adage "do something!" drilled into female children is the beginning. Are "we" taught it is best to do something (useful) as opposed to nothing. When "we" knit/crochet/craft in the name of charity is that "something"? O/wise would/do we feel we make no contribution when sans a career... I was told over and over

"fin[d] something to do, do something.

(Linda)

A significant number of participants celebrated a sense of agency and a feeling of empowerment through accomplishments in making in solitude. This was frequently achieved through quiet, reflective creativity demonstrated in 'choicefully' making alone (Hemmings 2014), especially where the soothing qualities of working with tactile yarn or rhythms of instinctive knitting provide comfort:

When I knit I am working with my hands and that's an antidote to the modern world of electronic media and stuff you can't touch.

(Jo)

It's the hand movement for me. I do find the most comfort thinking about who I'm making the item for... It makes me happy and thinking about the person and remembering fun times with them.

(Kelly)

Nevertheless, participants were still sharing their making alone using digital means, thereby engaging with a wider, sometimes perceived as global, group social identity (Haslam et al. 2009, Cruwys et al. 2015) where women felt feel enriched through the experience of collaborating and sharing with others in the crafting community (Orton-Johnson 2014):

I do enjoy working alone, audio book, cup of coffee and knitting in hand but I also love the thought that I don't have to be alone as there is always someone online in the groups whether its 3 am or 11pm in the UK, someone in the international community will be there.

(Lesley)

CONCLUSIONS

The aspects of study presented here confirm a number of assumptions about the ways amateur crafters in knit and crochet make for others and share their making in order to connect to and feel inspired by others. These include: sharing textile making in order to feel a sense of connection or belonging; knit and crochet to meditate and soothe; nostalgic crafting to respect or remember relationships with the older generation; and sharing patterns and creativity as part of social agency through public or quiet, personal activism. However, participant responses are also beginning to challenge existing literature regarding making in solitude, not in isolation, but for mindfulness and pleasure, in exchanging skills across generational boundaries in a variety of directions or motivations and in gendered assumptions about women's' altruistic making for social and personal agency. Such areas are the focus of future study, as is the significantly under-researched aspect of the method involved in studying the ways amateur yarn-crafters share in digital space on Facebook.

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