

Crafting communities: A haven for escapism and well-being

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Structured Abstract

Background scientific research: The democratisation of fashion has led to the homogenisation of high street styles as fashion retailers compete on speed to market and low pricing (Ritch, 2015). It could be argued that most young people conform to a uniformed appearance, which does not reflect their personality or personal interests. While the limitations of machines replacing cottage industries have been debated since the Industrial Revolution (mid-1800s), when William Morris initiated the Arts and Crafts Movement in response to manufactured aesthetics (Gibson, 2019), globalised industrialisation is now embedded into the world's economy. Consequently, global trends are infiltrating cultural nuances, with multi-national organisations (MNOs) dominating the global economy. Along with dictating style, underpinned by cost cutting measures that impact on sustainability, there is a loss of the sense of place (Ritzer, 2003) as well as craftsmanship and humanity (Gibson, 2019). Ritzer (2003) refers to this imposition of Westernisation or Americanisation on other countries and cultures, as globalisation - a means to exert power, influence and to grow profits. He argues that globalisation profiteers from selling 'nothing', commodities devoid of any sense of place or humanity; in contrast glocalisation has a sense of origin, it is 'something' fashioned in a certain place using specific techniques and materials that provide value and meaning. These contrasting positions can be characterised as the production of commodities for the sake of consumption (and profit) versus the organic creation of commodities through the manipulation of materials through skill and experimentation (Gibson, 2019). As workplaces move towards automation and many occupations inhibit monotonous processes, this research explores how consumers engage with crafting as a means to experiment with creativity and find a sense of community.

Research issue to be addressed: Crafting, and in particular knitting, are increasingly becoming more popular, often as a form of escapism from busy lifeworlds (Mintel, 2018). Crafting communities can provide solace along with a sense of belonging and purpose (Fournier and Lee, 2009), underpinned by a system of values that include techniques and traditions (Hofstede, 1980). This was evident in the Arts and Crafts movement, where art, poetry and literature contributed to expressions of nature, creativity and society, offering a sense of place within a distinctive period; indeed, this was a fertile time for the development of art, design and literature with many noteworthy works. However, with the growth of MNOs, inexpensive commodities and mass production, there has been a shift away from the arts and crafts movement. As the literature has reported the loss of crafting skills over the last few decades (Ritch, 2020; Gibson, 2019), the resurgence of new crafting movements requires further exploration. This includes the social and emotional impact of belonging to a crafting community, and the positive purposeful effects it can provide (Gibson, 2019). Additionally, it would be interesting to explore how is crafting made meaningful, as well as how creativity can provide pleasure and enable shared emotional connections. Moreover, the research will contribute to understanding how crafting informs notions of 'something' and how this translated into value. Kozinet's (2014) developed a framework to examine how brands can foster a sense of community with consumers. He postulated that there are four cornerstones to involving consumers: Create; Care; Communicate; and Commune. Although this derived from the purpose of creating online communities to encourage brand engagement to form a relationship, our data exhibited similar aspects of emotion, empathy along with the sharing of stories and experiences that led to a sense of belonging captured within Kozinet's (2014) Social Brand Engagement theory.

Methodology used: Gibson (2019) argues that crafting exists within a social constructivist epistemology, as it is informed by environmental stimuli and tacit learning, of experimentation and seeking inspiration. The sociality of this philosophy implicates seeking others with similar worldviews for interactivity and developing crafting skills. Therefore, this research adopted convenience sampling to connect with a knitting group organised by an independent craft shop in Glasgow. Although one of the researcher's frequented this group, individual interviews were selected rather than ethnography, due preferences to explore the experience of belonging to a community of crafters rather than how the group interacts (Moraes, Carrigan and Szmigin, 2012). Beginning with the owner, 13 semi-structured interviews were conducted, audio recorded and transcribed before applying thematic analysis.

Results achieved (conclusions) or expected as well as their relevance for theory and practice: As stated, four themes were developed that aligned with Kozinet's (2014) Social Brand Engagement theory: Create; Care; Communicate; Commune. In belonging to the group, it could be argued that the main purpose was to create; this became a shared activity as projects were discussed and new ideas were generated from group interactions, who all had different levels of experience and knowledge. As knitting is a niche skill, the group offered a bespoke synergy with interested others. Caring was also experienced, moving beyond knitting projects to the welfare of the group, creating a sense of purpose and belonging. As the group moved beyond family, friends and work colleagues, feelings of obligation were reduced, along with a sense of escapism. Communication enabled sociability, responding to different needs within the group. For example, some members were retired or widowed and belonging to the group offered contact with others, for others it was an opportunity to have indulgent self-focused time away from demanding families. Collectively, communing bolstered the members sense of self, and this was of particular importance to the members who struggled with their mental health – the focus on being creative, and the rhythm of the activity, helped manage anxieties in the outside world.

This research will advance theory on the building of consumer communities, through the lens of crafting, to examine how consumers engage, share and contribute to communities and what values are gained from participation. The research will also be of interest to marketing managers, as an illustration of how brand community can be fostered. This is especially pertinent given the rise in crafting over the global pandemic and this may provide opportunities for brands to consider advancing co-creation activities, where consumers can share crafting experiences; this is a phenomenon already evident on social media platforms as consumers make protective face masks and share images of their handiwork, illustrating the desire to contribute to protecting society through helping to minimise the spread of coronavirus.

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Keywords: crafting; communities; engagement; authenticity; creativity

ISBN: 978-989-54263-1-7