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Feeling lonely, feeling connected : amateur knit and crochet makers online

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Feeling Lonely, Feeling Connected: Amateur knit and crochet makers online

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Abstract
This paper investigates the feelings of both social isolation (Cacioppo et al., 2014; Lancet, 2014) and connection (Gauntlett, 2012; Armstrong et al., 2014) in female amateur crafters in knit and crochet who post images of their work and comments on their making to a Facebook group - and asks whether this impacts on their sense of wellbeing.

The project-in-progress involves thematic analysis of data purposively collected from women invited through Twitter and other online textile crafting pages to join a closed Facebook group set up exclusively for PhD. study. In research operating online and with the researcher employed as a participant-observer, the accepted ethnographic parameters of time, location and fixed cultural group are challenged.

Initial findings suggest that crafters seek belonging, positive strokes of accomplishment and celebrate the soothing qualities of the tactile to assuage loneliness (Turney, 2012); others feel that their creativity is devalued through depictions of isolation (Hemmings, 2014). Additional themes emerge, including the ways that sharing tangible making in knit and crochet online can support an improved sense of agency and self-esteem. The study highlights how both the acts of making and of sharing making online contribute to participants' sense of positive wellbeing. Further research appears necessary into the role of tactile making shared in a virtual environment and reframing solitary creative activities as meaningful - including how these may contribute to feelings of personal and social wellbeing.

Introduction

That women's crafting with yarn in knit and crochet - making for selfless purpose, or as a quiet form of activism - is somehow 'good for you' has long been both assumed and devalued or discounted (Hackney, 2013). There is increasing awareness of the impact of such activities on wellbeing, in the work of organisations such as *Stitchlinks* (Riley et al., 2013; Corkhill et al., 2014) and a number of 'arts for health' projects across the UK. Nevertheless, research in this area is still somewhat limited, especially in the investigation of wellbeing supported through group social identity. The aspect of amateur makers creating tactile objects and sharing their experiences in order to weave social connections through online media is significantly under-researched. This is despite the fact that yarn-based digital communities such as *Ravelry* have membership in the millions (Orton-Johnson, 2014) and participants involved in Facebook knit and crochet groups number in hundreds of thousands (Mayne, in press).

This article will reflect one aspect of a larger PhD study exploring perceptions of wellbeing in female amateur makers engaged in knit and crochet, focusing specifically on the ways that participants comment on and share their experiences of making in a virtual social community on Facebook. Firstly, current anxieties regarding social isolation (Cacioppo et al., 2014; Lancet, 2014) are examined, along with the potential for arts participation to 'knit' communities back together (Armstrong et al., 2014) before a consideration of the complexities of ethical virtual ethnography (Beninger et al., 2014; Hine, 2015). This case study finds women assuaging their feelings of isolation and loneliness through sharing tactile making online, seeking or offering pride in accomplishment and a sense of agency and empowerment in personal activism. The article raises queries in reframing female amateur makers as a valuable focus of study as they weave the connections necessary for personal and social wellbeing. It also highlights the ways that participants are experiencing wellbeing benefits from both knit and crochet practice and sharing their making in a digital space.

Methodological and ethical considerations

This paper reflects the initial progress in a wider qualitative study, seeking to interpret amateur craft makers' opinions and experiences of wellbeing, isolation and connectedness. It has been facilitated through the creation of a closed Facebook community – the *Woolly Wellbeing Research Group* which was designed to engage participants in sharing their views. Data has been gathered from a pragmatic and purposive sample of women initially invited through Twitter and Facebook crafting groups and which has expanded through word-of-mouth, retweets and sharing through craft bloggers and other Facebook pages. That the Facebook research group has grown so swiftly to over 400 members suggests that there is a strong desire to engage with such ideas. Participation spans the globe, with membership led by the UK and USA, followed by Australasia, Canada, South Africa and growing representation from the Middle East - notably Egypt and the United Arab Emirates. 59% of research participants are in the 35-55 age group, with 27% aged 55 and older and 14% aged under 35. Using social media to engage and communicate with participants is also a deliberate response to calls from the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council to explore the 'ethics and ontologies of participation and collaboration… via digital networks' (Armstrong et al., 2014, p.58) and consider where an online creative arts community has a contribution to make in building meaningful social relationships (Johnston et al., 2013) which can support and empower (Jetten et al., 2014).

Academics in the field of digital media have long championed the validity of exploring social connections in online spaces, from its earliest proponents such as Rheingold, (1993) to Hine (2000),

Burrell, (2009) and Baym, (2010). However, designing an ethnographic study online can be perceived as fraught with complexities: Clemens (2014) reminds us that the ethnographic tropes of time, place and cultural group operate differently in a digital world, with asynchronous exchanges, settings separated by geography or time zones and where membership is fluid. Nevertheless, Hine (2015) reassures us that the uncertainty in analysing what is being represented through virtual and mediated communication remains as much as part of the ethnographer's role as it ever was.

Social media research ethics, particularly regarding the principles of informed consent, are still much debated. The Facebook 'emotional contagion' experiment (Kramer et al., 2014) – where data was covertly gathered on the mood manipulation of Facebook user responses - still casts a discrediting shadow over this area of study. The Association of Internet Researchers provides guidance but admits tensions and ambiguities in suggesting that ethical principles related to human subjects only 'may' be a requirement in using online data (Markham and Buchanan, 2012: 4). This study seeks to address the need for greater transparency and rigorous good practice in this area (Beninger et al., 2014) through explicit discussions about ethical considerations on the Facebook group threads – such as the need to understand that posts may be confidential within the group, but not anonymous, that members are traceable and in seeking iterative permissions for use of images used for publication or presentation.

It is also noted that the impact of the researcher here is, as always, problematic. Operating as a participant–observer - 'perceived … to be an in-group rather than an out-group member (i.e., understood to be 'one of us,' and hence 'like me')' (Cruwys et al., 2014a: 231) is crucial in developing the ethnographic focus of the Facebook research community group. However, the work is clearly identified as being for PhD study; it is the identified researcher who (usually) posts research questions and responds to comments; contributors are iteratively reminded of ethical research process. Therefore, that the response of participants may be reactive or adjusted to create a particular representation (Webb, 1981) is accepted.

Figure 1: Miriam, 2015, *V-Stitch blanket*, © Miriam

An exploration of terms

Defining "wellbeing" is a challenging process where often intangible descriptions of social and emotional efficacy are proffered as ingredients for a successful existence (Dodge et al., 2012). It is interpreted by the World Health Organisation as 'a state […] in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community' (World Health Organisation, 2014, online). UK Governmental studies echo the importance of contribution to wellbeing though work, in addition to fulfilling potential (Foresight, 2008) and being resilient (Berry, 2014). However, it is particularly the definitions offered by the New Economics Foundation which appear to be valuable to this study, where vitality through engagement in meaningful activity and relatedness to others (Michaelson et al., 2009; Thompson et al., 2008; Aked and Thompson, 2011) are seen as significant factors in participants' notion of wellbeing.

It is also key that the terms 'loneliness', 'social isolation' and 'social connectedness' are placed in context for this study. The idea that social connection is essential for health and happiness is well established (Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Cohen and Wills, 1985), although the majority of studies focus on correlating rather than causal links (Jetten et al., 2014). Whilst research into why social connectedness is so critical for wellbeing– particularly in mental health - remains relatively limited (Cruwys et al., 2014a), there is increasing evidence that being a member of a range of groups identified as important to the individual can play a role in accumulating health-related social capital (Campbell and Jovchelovitch, 1997) and preventing or resolving depression (Cruwys et al.,2014b; Cruwys et al., 2013; Cacioppo et al. 2010) thereby improving personal and social wellbeing. Cruwys et al. (2014b), postulate that engaging with group social identity shifts attentional focus away from the self as an individual and toward positive group membership (Hogg and Williams, 2000; Turner and Onorato, 1999). This is not merely part of an assumption of 'social connectedness good, social isolation bad', but that social identity promotes wellbeing because it 'restructures the way people understand the world' (Cruwys et al., 2014b: 67). These ideas echo work undertaken in exploring how relational structures and a shared perception of social identity can contribute to our sense of self, purpose and belonging (Haslam et al., 2009; Jetten et al., 2014), imbuing 'our lives with meaning. They make us feel distinctive and special, efficacious and successful. They enhance our self-esteem and sense of worth' (Haslam et al., 2009: 3). Clearly, there is a widespread acknowledgement that engaging with social groups is enriching and provides an opportunity to exercise agency in ways which would be impossible without the stimulus of the group.

An absence of such social integration or limited identification with others in a group setting (Jetten et al., 2014) is what we might term 'social isolation'. Infrequent contact with family or friends or lack of participation in neighbourhood and voluntary groups (Cacioppo et al., 2010) may be influenced by factors from geography and poor transport links (Hagan et al., 2014) to choiceful, positive experiences and agency in elected solitude. However, just as ties with co-workers, marriage, comfortable socio-economic status and a medium to high level of education may support wellbeing through engagement with others (Pinquart and Sorenson, 2003), employment insecurity, marital discord, financial strain and biographical disruption through illness and aging may be significant in contributing to a sense of loss – an absence of bonding and companionship with others. Loneliness, then, becomes a matter of perception (Hawkley et al., 2008). The Lancet (2014), in launching the Health Challenges 2040 research project, identified perceptions of isolation and loneliness as one of the most significant elements facing the NHS in the next decades. It has been identified as 'a unique and underappreciated psychosocial risk factor of clear relevance for those concerned about age-related health problems' (Hawkley et al., 2008: 375) including blood pressure, cardiovascular disease and rapid physiological aging (Hawkley and Cacioppo, 2007). If a greater focus on loneliness is necessary to 'maximize the likelihood people remain healthy and functional across their lifespan' (Cacioppo et al., 2010: 460) what can crafting – and knit or crochet in particular - offer?

Wellbeing and textile arts
Nearly a decade on from the UK Conservative Party rhetoric of the 'big society' and the priority of wellbeing over Gross Domestic Product (Foresight, 2008; Berry, 2014), it remains a concern exercising those seeking to influence policy-making that greater investment in strategies to promote collaborative arts participation is necessary to improve social cohesion and physical and mental health (Armstrong et al., 2014; Lancet, 2014). This has resonance with Mulgan et al. (2007) – that society has the inherent intelligence and skills to meet its own needs and can open up the social world through increased engagement and participation. The value placed by the Arts and Humanities Research Council in the role that the creative arts can play in contributing to economic,

social and personal wellbeing (Armstrong et al., 2014) is echoed by a growing range of charity and research organisations (Royal Society for Public Health, 2013; National Alliance for Arts, Health and Wellbeing, 2014). Increasingly, the confidence, social connection and sense of individual agency provided by collaborative acts of co-production (Community Links Trust, 2014) is acknowledged.

Figure 2: Mayne, 2014, *#wellMAKING*, © Mayne

Such agency and collaboration can be seen in the results of the Stitchlinks project, which has focused on what it terms 'therapeutic knitting' (Riley et al., 2013; Corkhill et al., 2014), online; as an effective tool for promoting wellbeing in weaving social connections. The project reports group members' improved 'social confidence and feelings of belonging… feeling happier and better about themselves' (Corkhill et al., 2014: 38). Some of this is proposed as the effect of reducing social isolation and perceptions of loneliness, whilst other benefits are aligned to the concept that 'meditative and rhythmic stitching is an effective ward for both physical pain and anxiety' (ibid.: 40). Such findings echo the work of Myzelev (2009), where knitting is celebrated as an opportunity for socialisation but also personal contemplation – on slow, repetitious actions which challenge the frantic nature of the modern world, a nostalgic link to the past and a mindful 'process of using one's mind and body together' (ibid.: 153). This can also be seen as promoting a sense of empowerment and agency in the physical creation of a tactile object which takes 'shape when before there was nothing but formless… thread… It is a statement that we live in a body rich in potential' (Metcalf, 2007: 7). Sharing such objects – 'given as gifts, as tokens of friendship, respect or love… as acts of philanthropy… as a sign of personal identity' (Turney, 2012: 304-5) can also be perceived as a contribution to society – one of the key elements of wellbeing as defined by the World Health Organisation (2014).

Findings
   Weaving connections
The most dominant theme emerging from data collected to date is a transparent exploration of how being in contact with other knit and crochet crafting women online has a positive impact on wellbeing, most particularly in the area of making social and personal connections:

> I also love that I feel a sense of community online that I don't get in my neighborhood [sic]. …Online I can post things and even if I don't know someone, I feel connected to them when they 'like' or comment on my posts - *Megan*

> I suppose over all, having thought about what I have written, it is the sharing of ideas and projects with like-minded people that I enjoy most. Feeling connected in that we have a common interest – *Paula*

Participants articulate that – regardless of geographical distance, or never having met other members in the physical world, the ties they develop become significant as they share their interest in knit or crochet, their images of finished items or frustrations at problems to solve. Such comments also reflect the findings of Corkhill et al. (2014) in the benefits of feeling socially connected, despite the

fact that this is in a virtual setting. In fact, a key benefit of such virtual connection appears to be the positive transactional strokes of praise and admiration from women who understand the time and skills development needed to craft the objects posted and which may be less forthcoming 'in real life'.

> None of my friends or family knit or sew so although they admire and appreciate what I make they don't understand the work involved so a like or nice comment from a fellow maker who understands means a lot - *Lisa*

Participants are clear in the appeal of including themselves in a community based on a craft which connects them together - where they gain a sense of belonging and support, shared knowledge and appreciation of skill.

> You get a real sense of achievement from posting your work. If you are proud of what you have made then you want to share it with others - it puts me on a real high when I get lovely comments and likes - *Jenny*

> 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*

For many participants, the online setting appears to be the only context available where they feel they can share their creative making and receive understanding or appreciation in return. Such responses echo the work of Haslam et al., (2009) and Cruwys et al., (2014b) in clarifying that it is the interaction with others who share occupational interests which can have the most beneficial impact on personal, subjective wellbeing.

Figure 3: Gay, 2015, *Hats for the homeless*, © Gay

Self-efficacy and the self-effacing

Amongst the thousands of comments on the *Woolly Wellbeing Research Group*, expressions of personal pride and accomplishment often accompany images posted by the maker:

> Happy relaxed proud xx ooooh and creative - *Cat*

> It feels really special when wrapped round my shoulders and I can't wait to make another! – *Leanna*

Participants use the digital space as an opportunity to celebrate their creativity or to express their sense of achievement. Such comments reflect the view of yarn-based crafting as a valuable outlet for imagination and accomplishment or agency, as expressed in Corkhill et al., (2014) or where the maker can take joy in their unique choices in colour or texture, as suggested by Myzelev (2009).

The digital location of the Facebook group is seen as a receptive space where amateur makers can boost self-esteem through the presentation of completed craft items and gain positive comments in return as they fix in time a moment where something has been completed.

However, some responses also indicate that personal commentaries are more likely to be self-effacing than proud, as in this case where celebration of accomplishment is discounted as simple or easy:

> I made a sock! Pretty basic but still exciting to me! – *Sonia*

Participants frequently reveal uncertainties about their creativity or skill, balancing justifiable pride in their accomplishment with an anxiety about how this would be received by others. Some posts typically indicate a sense of doubt – here, a participant is responding to another's request for updated images of her project:

> Thank you so much. I would love to! As long as everyone doesn't get sick of seeing it in the process... Lol – *Jennifer*

The use of the acronym 'LOL' - used frequently to represent 'Laugh/ing Out Loud' as a digital communication of an invisible paralinguistic feature (Tagliamonte and Denis, 2008; Varnhagen et al., 2010) is being employed by participants to convey uncertainty or anxiety - a device which attempts to undercut the emotive implications of their postings, or the courage involved in posting at all. This may suggest that, whilst aware of its contribution to wellbeing, some participants are not yet comfortable or practised in celebrating their successes in knit and crochet making.

Emotional and therapeutic significance
There is greater consistency in participants' views on the intimacy and connectedness created though making by hand (Myzelev, 2009):

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

> It's a unique item and made just for them with love – *Ruth*

> We love them, and the thought and effort put in to a handmade item, means so much more than something bought – *Kay*

Turney (2012) describes this as the romance of 'the mark of the maker's hand touching the object and in turn the object's consumer' (ibid.: 305), suggesting that the tactile knit or crochet gift is imbued with the essence 'of closeness… of an embrace' (ibid.: 307). Hand-crafted objects would appear to become loaded with emotional significance for the maker, for example in this touching post which gives an account of creating a simple crochet scarf that will never be worn outside:

> I did it because he has terminal cancer and feels the cold a lot, so I love knowing that I'm helping to keep him warm - *Danielle J*

The participant here is sharing much more than an image of a scarf, but also her family situation, concern for a parent and her simple actions to attempt to demonstrate care through making. Other

participants often reflected on the nostalgia of replicating stitches and patterns in order to evoke intimate memories of earlier generations of crafters within the family, as in this description of a shawl from childhood:

> I love old shell, was the first lace stitch I learned as a child. Every time I knit it, I recall sitting beside my mam and her speaking the pattern as I knitted it - *Jen*

In these circumstances, participants are using the digital space to share not only their making, but the personal stories, respect and love for family members as they knit and crochet.

The contributions of knit and crochet to wellbeing identified by Stitchlinks (Corkhill et al., 2014), such as relief from anxiety or depression are also clear in this study: Meditative stitching appears to provide relaxation and an escape from psychological distress or feelings of loneliness:

> Crochet is my only release - *Jennifer*

> If it wasn't for my love of crafts I'd be completely lost… a life saver - *Raewyne*

> It gives me a feeling of accomplishment when so much else in my life is out of control - *Danielle S*

Such comments resonate with the *Stitchlinks* findings that participants 'feel productive at times when they were engaged in passive activities'(Corkhill et al., 2014: 37) or experiencing social isolation. For example, one participant shared images of a detailed crochet shawl crafted following a family bereavement :

> Made this for my sister who has been going through the ringer [sic] lately. It brightened her day and hearing the smile in her voice warmed my heart and helped with my own healing – *Cheryl*

This illustrates an attempt to focus on creativity rather than "being a passive recipient of a destructive force" (Corkhill et al., 2014: 41) which had caused such biographical disruption.

Figure 4: Cheryl, 2015, *Crochet shawl*, © Cheryl

Loneliness and elected solitude

Some members of the Facebook group posted about feeling lonely as they make, because they are geographically or socially isolated. Some of the posts reflecting this involved participants seeking contact through the group membership online:

> I don't have 'hooky' friends living nearby… I am isolated as such, I think - *Hannah*

> I'm very lonely! Ha ha! – *Chelsea*

There is added poignancy, perhaps, in the juxtaposition of exclamatory wording against the admission of isolation. A further common thread was expressed where the quiet act of stitching alone or in a family unit where interest in craft was not shared could both help provide an escape from feelings of isolation, but also remind the maker that they felt disconnected in their lives:

> It can help to push loneliness away but conversely it can also bring the loneliness into focus – *Giulia*

Here, the perception of loneliness is greater because participants do not have people close to them who share their interests.

However, a greater number of participants were vocal in celebrating the opportunities that knit or crochet gave them to be alone and that solitude in knit and crochet work was valuable.

> I welcome my solitude - *Gay*

> I also like sitting alone at night and touching a natural fibre as opposed to electronics given that I do that all day at my job - *Anjana*

> In my profession I work with people all day so when I am at home and crocheting that is "me time" where I don't have to interact with anyone or anything except my yarn and hook – *Paula*

This mirrors Hemmings (2014) in questioning whether the depiction of the isolated maker, using craft to assuage loneliness in fact devalues women's creativity. She explores how the current ideology – popularised in studies into wellbeing by governmental and charitable organisations (Armstrong et al., 2014; Berry, 2014) - promotes the idea that only socially connected activity is beneficial. Rather, knit or crochet as a 'meaningful solitary activity' (Hemmings, 2014: 49) is proposed as a useful, elected individual activity with the potential to support wellbeing.

Conclusions

Figure 5: Hayley, 2015, *Tunisian crochet*, © Hayley

Arts participation through yarn-craft has enormous potential for knitting together community members through a shared social group identity. The perceptions of belonging and affinity 'and the notions of "us-ness" that they both embody and help create—are central to health and well-being' (Jetten et al., 2009). In this case study, participants reflect that their amateur crafting is related to empowerment and pleasure (Parkins, 2004; Myzelev, 2009), where their engagement in an online knit and crochet group has provided an outlet for a sense of agency and a vehicle through which to enhance their perceptions of self-esteem and self-worth.

Research with the group is ongoing and increasing in engagement – the participants are vocal and generous in their considerations of questions proposed by the researcher and one another, from shared reflections on making to the experiences of contributing to research online. There is little doubt that the therapeutic impact of yarn-based craft (Corkhill et al., 2014) and its potential to promote both meaningful social connections (Cruwys et al., 2013) and positive experiences in elected solitude (Hemmings, 2014) has implications for effective care practice in promoting wellbeing (Haslam et al., 2014; Cruwys et al., 2014a). In addition, it is proposed that the impact on wellbeing of engaging in creative making and sharing through online platforms merits further research.

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