

From Sewing Circles to Linky Parties:
Women's Sewing Practices in the Digital Age

by

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A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

Approved January 2016 by the
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ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2016

ABSTRACT

For the past few decades, feminist researchers have worked tirelessly to recover the history of American women's sewing – both the artifacts made and the processes, practices, and identities linked to the objects produced. With the transition to the digital age, women are still sewing, but they are inventing, making, and distributing sewn objects using platforms and pathways online to share knowledge, showcase their handicrafts, and sell their wares. This dissertation examines contemporary sewing and asks how digital practices are extending and transforming the history of women's sewing in America. I place my findings against the backdrop of women's history by recounting how and why women sewed in previous eras. This dissertation demonstrates how past sewing practices are being repeated, remixed, and reimagined as women meet to sew, socialize, and collaborate on the web.

The overall approach to this project is ethnographic in nature, in that I collected data by participating alongside my female subjects in the online settings they frequent to read about, write about, and discuss sewing, including blogs, email, and various social media sites. From these interactions, I provide case studies that illuminate my findings on how women share sewing knowledge and products in digital spaces. Specifically, I look at how women are using digital tools to learn and teach sewing, to sew for activist purposes, and to pursue entrepreneurship. My findings show that sewing continues to be a highly social activity for women, although collaboration and socializing often happen from geographically distanced locations and are enabled by online communication. Seamstresses wanting to provide sewing instruction are able to archive their knowledge

electronically and disperse it widely, and those learning to sew can access this knowledge by navigating paths through a plethora of digital resources. Activists are able to recruit more widely when seeking participants for their causes and can send handmade goods to people in need around the globe. Although gender biases continue to plague working women, the internet provides new opportunities for female entrepreneurship and allows women to profit from their sewing skills.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you, a hundredfold, to my husband Micah, who always believed I could get this project done and encouraged me to press on when the task felt overwhelming. Thank you, also, for walking along this academic journey with me. I am excited to see what marriage looks like beyond grad school.

To my daughters, Zianne and Talitha, your presence fills me with joy each day. I'm sure many people thought I was crazy to have *two* children during graduate school, but I wouldn't change it for the world. I look forward to more play time and dance parties now that this endeavor is finished. Just like many of the women in the following chapters, I know the challenges of blending motherhood with a professional career. Although my days sometimes feel chaotic as I juggle a diaper bag and a lap top, I hope you will look at me and know you can pursue any dream and reach any goal.

To my own mom, who read with me every night as a child and inspired my goal to be a “doctor of books,” I hope to pass on my love for reading to my own children.

To Kristin, the only friend I have who could proofread my dissertation in a single day, you are truly a genius. I hope there is a “sewing” category during your first Jeopardy appearance to make up for all your hard work.

Sarah and Kerri, thank you for coffee dates in the kitchen, clothing swaps, and for bringing a sense of normalcy to grad school life. Cheers to many more years of being academics with flourishing and happy personal lives. If anyone can do it, we can.

To my “blog friends” – the beautiful women whom I first met online... My friendships with you are the biggest blessing to come from my research. Heather, Jessi,

Jordan, and Vanessa, thank you for sending emails and meeting a random internet girl for dinner or coffee. I am so thankful we became “real life” friends. Your wisdom, encouragement, and love have changed who I am.

And to my committee, thank you from the bottom of my heart. Betty, your oversight on this project was invaluable. You gave me space to do my own thing as a scholar, as well as guidance and expertise to point me in the right direction. Maureen, you knew my dissertation would be about sewing long before I did. Thank you for showing me that women’s material practices are rhetorically meaningful, and for teaching me about empirical research methods when I was literature student voyaging into the rhet/comp world. And, Trish, thank you for taking on my project in the final hour. I will never forget walking into your office (a slightly frazzled mom with hair still wet from my morning shower) and asking for your help. You were gracious, kind, and supportive, and I will be forever grateful. And Alice, thank you for encouraging me to pursue the study of digital spaces. Your class not only caused me to change my discipline, but it also convinced me to finally join Twitter. Both were life changing choices if you ask me.

Lord, thank you for calling me to graduate school. The past six years have held so many trials and so much goodness. You have sustained me through it all – through the newlywed years, through hundreds of hours in class and thousands of pages of reading, through two pregnancies and the hard yet meaningful work of motherhood, through taking my exams and writing my dissertation. You are a good Father. Please use my work, my degree, and my knowledge for your glory. Thank you, Jesus, that your grace covers me. You hold the universe in your hand, yet you love me enough to write this story for my life. You are forever worthy of my devotion.

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INTRODUCTION

The needle tells the tale of American women perhaps far better than any diary or documentary ever will. From the cabins of Early America to instructional sewing videos on YouTube, needles are stitching together a story of U.S. women and the identities they have adopted throughout history as homemakers, wives and mothers, teachers and students, employers, and entrepreneurs. Sewing is one example of why feminist researchers have worked tirelessly over the past few decades to recover the material culture of American women, in order to more fully understand the artifacts made and the processes, practices, and identities linked to the objects produced (Beaudry, 2006; Parker, 1984; Ulrich, 2001). As we transition to the digital age, women are still making material goods (sewing projects, crafts, furniture repurposing, etc.), but they are inventing, making, and distributing these objects in new ways using pathways and platforms online to share knowledge and showcase their handicrafts. This dissertation will look at the practices behind the material rhetorics being created online, specifically on sewing blogs and related video channels and social media accounts, and show how these digitized practices build upon the rich history of women's material culture in America. Specifically, I will work to show how the social practices, knowledge sharing, and economic activities common in nineteenth and twentieth century sewing groups have been reimagined by the ways sewing is taking place collaboratively online.

I must briefly clarify what I mean by material culture and why material practices are important within this project, within women's history, and within a digital world where physicality is not always readily apparent when messages are passed back and

forth online. As Maureen Daly Goggin (2002) states, “All discursive practices may be best understood as material practices” (p. 310) whether words are etched in ink or images are stitched upon a sampler. This is no less true in the digital world, where fingers tap a keyboard or lips speak next to a microphone. Even information that seemingly floats across the web requires physical cables, fibers, and huge storage tanks to enable its transportation. Therefore, my research looks at material culture in two ways. First, I am looking at women who make sewn goods, and the tools they use to create, share, give, and sell material objects. Secondly, I am looking at the digital (yet material) practices of women as they write on their computers, tweet from their mobile devices, and watch videos and glean information from their screens. Both the products these women make and the devices they use to create and showcase these items are significant parts of contemporary sewing culture. When studying material culture, I am not just studying objects themselves (in fact, this study includes very little detail about the specific items these women are creating), but more importantly, I am seeking to understand the discursive practices in how sewn objects are created and circulated. This is important to women’s history, because many objects (and the practices of those who made or used them) have been labeled as “feminine” throughout history and then ignored as culturally irrelevant, for example: needlework, cooking, or scrapbooking. In their book, *Women and Things 1750-1950: Gendered Material Strategies* (2009), editors Beth Tobin and Maureen Daly Goggin argue when these material objects are ignored, the ways they are tied to female meaning-making, identity formation, and commemoration are overlooked as well. This project follows the shift in material cultures studies to focus on the practices underlying how objects are “conceptualized, produced, circulated, used, and exchanged”

(Tobin & Goggin, 2009, p. 2) rather than the objects themselves. My hope is to illuminate the discursive and literacy practices of women participating in online sewing spaces.

In this project, I hope to stay ahead of the curve, in a sense. So much of women's rhetoric has been "recovered" by scholars because many important social and material practices of women have historically been diminished or ignored while they are actually taking place (Biesecker, 1992; Bizzell, 2000; Goggin, 2002; Schell, 2010). My goal with this research is to observe, describe, and analyze women's sewing practices as they are emerging in digital spaces. This project brings together two current and important scholarly conversations. The first is the feminist objective to shed light on women's lived experiences and to show the value and knowledge behind females' everyday social practices, (Brah & Phoenix, 2013; Greene & Kahn, 2012; McNay, 2013; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002; Zinn & Dill, 1996). The second conversation is that of internet researchers who seek to reveal the everyday practices of internet users and the environments they inhabit and create online (Baym, 2010; boyd, 2010; Ellison & boyd, 2013; Haythornwaite, 2005, Hine, 2008; Leander & McKim, 2003; Markham & Baym, 2009). This project aims to bring these two branches of research into dialogue with each other as I document the everyday practices of women who sew in 21st century America and examine the ways these women use modern web technology to learn, teach, and socialize around their craft. In a 2007 volume of *Feminist Media Studies*, editors Usha Zacharias and Jane Arthur made a call for feminist research that looks at gender within digital ecologies and pays attention "to the emergence of new digital selves" (p.203). This project is my effort to merge feminist methodology with a digital field site. This project will show how the craft and do-it-yourself (DIY) culture of the internet extends

the legacy of sewing for American women by reconstructing and extending the values and practices that have been evident since the sewing circles of Early America.

Though much of the historical data for this project will focus on the sewing practices of nineteenth century women, a time when sewing circles and quilting bees were common practices amongst the middle class, I will also shed light on the sewing events of the twentieth century, especially as they relate to industrialization, the war effort on the home front, and the feminist movement. Although the changing American demographics of the twentieth century revealed a marked decrease in home sewing (Elias, 2008; Marthers, 2011; Matthews, 1987; McLean, 2009), it remained an important skill and social practice throughout the century, one exercised for various motives by many different types of women. Since the start of the 21st century, there has been a sudden resurgence in sewing (as well as knitting and crocheting) as a trade or hobby (Myzelev, 2009). The reasons behind the “crafting boom” of the early 2000s are not entirely clear. Some credit the recession, as people who found themselves unemployed turned to long-forgotten hobbies to pass the time and sometimes turn a profit (Jakob, 2013). Others see the slow pace of crafting as a revolt against a “fast” economy, where products are mass-produced remotely using machines and exploited labor forces (Walker, 2007). Whatever the reason, crafting has experienced a renaissance since the turn of the century, as evidenced by modern sewing circles, the explosion of knitting stores, and the casual use of the term “DIY” as a verb, an adjective, and the label for a social movement.

The growth of the internet over the past two decades has only helped the craft movement spread and expand, as creatives are able to showcase their work and interact with other artists across time and space with more ease than ever before. Between blogs,

social media, forums, and online shopping sites, the internet beckons crafters to communicate and collaborate with one another. The growth of “handmade” e-commerce empire, Etsy, over the past decade, provides one clear example of the intersection between handcrafts and digital technology. Etsy follows the model of open craft fairs, where each seller is given a personal storefront, except this craft fair is a digital one. Sellers run their own shops and give Etsy a cut of the profits when they make a sale in addition to paying a nominal fee for listing each item (“Fees for Selling on Etsy”). At the same time, the greater Etsy website functions as a social media space where sellers and consumers socialize, share items, promote shops, and even collaborate on forums. This partnership between Etsy, merchants, and customers has been wildly successful since Etsy first started in 2005. In 2015, Etsy became a publicly traded company, reporting that it closed out 2014 with 54 million members, 1.4 million active sellers, and \$1.93 billion in gross merchandise sales (Weber, 2015). And Etsy is not the only place women are selling sewn items online. The sale of handmade goods is also widespread in the blogging world where women link their online shops to their blogs, using social shopping forums such as bigcartel.com and storeenvy.com to sell their merchandise. Other women sew for leisure or even teach sewing to others at no charge. Some seamstresses use their sewing knowledge for activist purposes, donating items to people in need or rallying groups to sew for philanthropic purposes. The internet summons many women to the craft and trade of sewing, as they share patterns, knowledge, and products across digital mediums whether for profit or for pleasure.

Research Questions

With this outbreak of digitized sewing practices we must ask ourselves if women are regressing in a world that does not require them to pick up the thread and the needle or whether the internet has provided a new means for female autonomy by allowing them to express their creativity through sewing and sometimes benefit financially by doing so. As this dissertation will show, sewing has always been and continues to be a complex practice for American women as it is tied to ideas of femininity, cultural expectations, subversion, activism, and commerce. Countless benefits, opportunities, costs, risks, and questions accompany sewing as it moves into digital spaces and gains visibility over the web. The overarching question I wish to address in this study is: How do women's digital sewing practices repeat, remix, and reimagine the sewing practices that have taken place throughout American history? In other words, what has changed and what has stayed the same as sewing moves online? A survey of literature about eighteenth and nineteenth century sewing in America reveals scholarship about how women learned to sew (Miller, 2006; Swan, 1977), why they sewed for charitable purposes (Gelber, 1999; White Nelson, 2004), and how sewing became intertwined with economics and female entrepreneurship, especially for middle class women (Ulrich, 2001; White Nelson, 2004). Therefore, I have chosen to focus my chapters on these three areas as well, looking at how the learning and teaching of sewing happens on the web, examining sewing as philanthropy, and finally looking at sewing entrepreneurship in digital spaces. The chapters of this dissertation will endeavor to answer the following:

- What digital tools are women using to learn and teach sewing?
- How are women using digital channels to recruit participation and support for philanthropic and activist sewing projects?

- How are women selling sewn material goods online and how do social media spaces afford opportunities for female entrepreneurship?

There has been a significant influx in feminist material studies research in the past few decades (Goggin & Tobin, 2009; Hicks & Beaudry, 2010; Tilley et al., 2006), and this study hopes to contribute to the ongoing conversation. A number of scholars have done important work to understand women's lived histories through their material labors and created objects, specifically in the realm of sewing, embroidery, and knitting (Beaudry, 2006; Gelber, 2013; Goggin & Tobbin, 2009; Kortsch, 2009, Parker, 2010; Ulrich, 2001). However, there is still a lack of research examining how women's history is being impacted by the internet and how sewing as a social practice is shifting in light of rapidly expanding digital technologies (Garber, 2013; Minahan & Cox, 2007). Through my research, I hope to fill a gap in feminist studies, as current scholars have only just begun to understand how online craft sharing promotes, questions, and complicates the identities of women in the home and the workplace. By examining the juncture between women, sewing blogs, social media, and handmade e-commerce sites, this study contributes to this dearth in scholarship by providing an overview of the many ways female seamstresses are leveraging the internet to hone their craft, build relationships, and sell their handmade merchandise.

Messy Methods and the Nature of Interdisciplinary Research

Many scholars have undertaken the study of women's material culture and, likewise, many scholars have studied people's internet practices. However, this dissertation seeks to do something new, by embarking on a research project that is

informed by feminist methods, ethics, and values while studying online spaces in a highly participatory fashion. My overarching goal is to produce data and analysis that is noteworthy both to feminist material culture scholars as well as internet researchers.

This merging of scholarship might not seem novel, but I have come to find these two areas of study are not informed by the work of the other. Material culture scholars and rhetoricians are not familiar with studies of digital literacies, online ethnography, and other forms of web participation and data collection. Likewise, digital scholars are not often actively relating their work back to rhetorical scholarship that examines the textual practices that inform most internet activity. As I was revising the chapters of a project, I strategically signed up for dissertation mentoring at two different conferences, just a week apart. One conference was a meeting of internet researchers, a conglomerate of scholars studying media, communication, and technology. The following conference was a meeting of feminist scholars in rhetoric. It was in these settings I fully realized the importance of my work. When speaking to an incredibly intelligent and widely-published internet researcher about my dissertation, she suggested I remove the historical information about women's sewing from my chapters and make them interludes between the chapters, as if the history of women's sewing is not important enough to warrant a place in the actual text of my project. A week later, at the feminist conference, I presented interactive research about how women forge paths online when learning to sew, and the audience looked a bit wide-eyed to see the bright colors and images of Pinterest and Etsy in the midst of other presentations filled with black and white photos of quilts. I am not suggesting that black and white photos of quilts are unimportant, only that feminist scholars fought hard to find, preserve, and access archives of women's

material practices of old, and I am trying to archive present practices to make them accessible for future study, even though the data collection might seem unorthodox to many feminist researchers. Regardless of which camp you are in, I invite you to observe and consider my data which was collected through conscious online participation *while* encouraging and celebrating the practices and work of women on the web. I invite you to a conversation where the methods are messy, the findings are fascinating, and the subjects are incredibly important. The women presented as case studies in this project are not so different than you and me. They are thinkers and makers, just trying to figure out how to live life in a world where online and offline spaces constantly merge, overlap, and sometimes compete.

Methodological Framework

Feminist scholars often credit serendipity with the trails that lead to significant research questions (Kirsch & Rohan, 2008; Ramsey et al., 2009). The foundations of this project are no different. As a blogger and avid blog reader, I found the blogs for this study quite organically by reading friends' blogs and clicking on blogroll links and other social media accounts that perked my interest. Sometimes friends would email me blog URLs they thought would interest me. Although I read a variety of blogs written by females, the practices I saw taking place on sewing blogs particularly fascinated me and seemed worthy of further research.

In this project, I analyze multimodal data emerging from six sewing blogs and their corresponding social media accounts. Although much of the data is traditional text, I also examine blog design, photographs, videos, and material objects as part of this

research, as all these components reveal the knowledge, literacies, and social practices of the women authoring these blogs (Jewitt, C. & Kress, G., 2003). I collected the data I present in these chapters through a hybrid ethnographic-archival method. On one hand, this project is ethnographic in nature, since I maintained a personal blog as I studied bloggers. I gathered data through reading blogs, writing comments, following links, emailing bloggers, and interacting with these women on various social media, as well as writing on my own personal blog throughout the course of the project. I engaged with seamstresses over social media such as Facebook and Twitter. I conducted informal interviews over email, as this was the most appropriate forum for follow-up questions and answers to be exchanged.

I participated alongside these women in their online practices, but I also considered the work and writing they were doing offline - the stitching happening in their homes and notes scratched on a piece of paper rather than typed onto the screen. Many researchers have suggested rethinking the overlap of the online and offline when conducting ethnography (Lammers et al., 2012; Leander & Kim, 2003) as these two realms are not distinct. Other researchers advocate for methods such as “netwalking” (Leander & Kim, 2003) or “media multiplexity” (Hythornwaite, 2005) in which researchers follow subjects to various spaces around the web, as they collect data and search for significance in online activities. I followed Hine’s (2008) directive to gain insight through immersion “by engaging in relevant practices wherever they might be found” online (p.12) by following these women in my case studies across online spaces. Just as women in the past sometimes sewed at home, sometimes sewed in churches or schools, or sometimes sewed at public events, women are engaging in sewing

communities in various places online and offline, such as conferences and sewing groups, as well as on blogs, e-commerce sites, and social networking sites such as Twitter and Instagram. In today's highly digital, vastly networked world, ethnographers should rarely limit their field site to a single space online, and often should look online and offline for data. My work examines the practices of women on many spaces around the web and also illuminates many of their practices away from the computer screen.

At the same time, I view these women's blogs, social media accounts, and online shops as a kind of real-time archive where women are collecting writing, images, and conversations. Amy Morrison (2010) has studied the "mommy blog" genre as a real-time autobiography of women's lives and I regard sewing blogs through a similar lens. I delve into the visual and written texts of these spaces much as an historian might examine a long-lost diary, but I recognize my impact on these spaces as I research them. My presence on these women's blogs may be counted statistically by analytic software. My presence becomes visible if I leave comments on a blog post. And I affect my subjects and the greater online environment when I contact women and converse over Facebook and Twitter. Even a "like" on an Instagram photo imprints the archive that is constantly evolving due to people's online activities, my own included. In short, this project combines methods of ethnography such as observation, participation, and interviews with methods of archival work including the deep reading and analysis of texts and images stored digitally on blogs and other websites.

I will briefly describe how I found the five blogs I use as case studies for this project. I first found the blog "The Pleated Poppy" while studying mommy blogs, as she is a blogger who writes both about her children, her home, and, formerly, her handmade

shop. By following links from her blog, I stumbled upon the blogs “Maggie Whitley,” “Sew Caroline,” and “Better Life Bags.” I’ve been following these three blogs as well as these women’s Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter accounts for approximately three years. Once I started examining sewing blogs specifically, I discovered the “Craft Hope” blog from reading an academic article on sewing and activism (Garber, 2013). Although other blogs will be mentioned in the following chapters, these five were chosen as the main blogs for this study because they each provide very vivid examples of sewing practices I’ve seen taking place across the blogosphere.

I would like to comment briefly on the demographic information of the subjects presented on these pages. The main bloggers I present in my research are all white women ranging between the ages of 20-40. They come from various economic demographics and live in a variety of urban, suburban, and rural areas across the U.S. I recognize the lack of ethnic diversity in this sample, but must note that the majority of female “DIY,” “handmade,” and “sewing” bloggers in the U.S. are white women. I do follow some African-American and Asian bloggers, but their creative activities are not focused enough on sewing to include in this project. While there are many different women who blog about sewing and sell handmade goods online, and this dissertation by no means represents *all* the people who interact in this online niche, I am concerned by the lack of diversity in the self-dubbed “handmade community” online, and believe an inquiry regarding these “missing voices” is worthy of further study. However, I do not want to disregard the craft and online practices of women simply because the majority of those participating are white. In her study on knitting, Elizabeth Groeneveld (2010) states she does not want to “dismiss the political possibilities of crafting on the basis of who

seems to be crafting and on the basis of its appeal to middle-class women” (p.265). If we dismiss the writing of sewing bloggers as insignificant because most of the authors are white, middle-class women, our exclusion of their practices is “informed by a certain amount of misogyny and intellectual vanguardism” (Radway, 1991). The writing of white, middle-class women has always been an important and illuminating (and often missing) part of American history, and that is no less true when writing moves online. In the same vein, we should search diligently for the writing of minority women in online spaces, and we should seek to discover why some voices remain silent in regard to sewing and the greater online craft conversation, as women’s voices have been silenced for many reasons and in many contexts from antiquity until the present day.

As data manifests from these blogs, I am using Royster and Kirsch’s (2012) “terministic screens” from *Feminist Rhetorical Practices: New Horizons for Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy Studies* to guide my rhetorical analysis. I chose to do a grounded analysis to enter into these texts without assumptions or preconceived judgments. This follows Royster and Kirsch’s directive to use *strategic contemplation* (p.84) and *critical imagination* (p.71) when encountering new data. Strategic contemplation describes the directive to suspend judgment of evidence by lingering in the analysis process (p. 84). To aid my grounded approach, I read and engaged with most of these blogs for a period of one to three years before I began my formal analysis of them. Once I began collecting and organizing data from these blogs, I practiced critical imagination to hypothesize “between, above, around, and beyond the evidence” to determine new possibilities for what is likely or possible, given the facts at hand (p. 71). Furthermore, critical imagination helps scholars make methodical links between the past

and the present (p. 72), which I try to do here by connecting the sewing practices documented in historical archives with those being recorded in the digital archives of today's sewing blogs.

The third terministic screen, *social circulation*, is a term of engagement to describe tracking language and ideas to “see how traditions are carried on, changed, reinvented, and reused” (Royster & Kirsch, 2012, p. 101) as they pass between people, generations, spaces, genres, and media. This framework informs my desire to watch sewing practices and corresponding texts as they unfold online and traverse between blogs, videos, and social media spaces, as well as my rationale in comparing sewing practices from the nineteenth century to today's digital activities. The fourth and final screen, *globalizing the point of view*, describes feminist efforts to shift rhetorical studies from a traditional Western perspective to a transnational perspective that seeks to fit local knowledge within global knowledge (Royster & Kirsch, 2012, p. 111). While I am studying the blogs of American women, simply to limit the scope of my project, I hope my research will shed light on both the sewing practices and digital literacy practices of women around the globe. Blogs, perhaps better than research articles, have the ability to reach a global audience and connect women on an international scale. Though I am publishing my work in traditional academic venues, I also share my research sans academic jargon on my personal blog. I constantly receive feedback, ideas, and support from other female bloggers, as well as women offering to participate in interviews or suggesting other sites or women to include in my study. This organic interaction with women through blogging and social media exemplifies the types of social networks Royster and Kirsch advocate, where “women connect and interact with others and use

language with intention” (101). Furthermore, as I post my research on my blog, I break down the barrier between the academy and my research subjects by making my data accessible to various audiences and inviting dialogue from the very women whose rhetorical practices I have deemed worthy of analysis.

Overview of Chapters

This dissertation is divided into four chapters in which I examine how digital sewing practices extend the legacy of women’s sewing in America. Specifically, I am most interested in sewing as a social practice, both then and now. When I refer to “community” or “collaborative” sewing, I mean the ways women have sewed together throughout history, whether gathering casually in a neighbor’s parlor to chat as each woman worked on individual sewing projects or formally organizing groups and events centered on sewing, such as sewing circles, craft clubs, quilting bees, and fancy fairs. The first chapter gives an overview of women’s social sewing practices throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries to better understand the legacy behind the sewing visible online today. The second chapter looks at how knowledge sharing takes place as women teach skills to one another and examines the resources available online for women wanting to learn to sew. The third chapter looks at ways in which sewing has been used philanthropically throughout history, and how women are using the internet to organize sewing projects for charitable causes. The fourth chapter examines how women have engaged in the marketplace with their handmade sewn items, both then and now, and women are using digital resources for entrepreneurial activities. I begin each chapter with an historical overview of each topic, discussing how American women interacted

and practiced sewing collaboratively during the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, and I then look at how these same practices are being repeated, reimagined and extended by the sewing communities that exist online, through blogs, online shopping sites, and social media.

This manuscript is a meeting space for internet researchers and feminist material culture scholars to join together in conversation and intellectual inquiry, just as women have always gathered together in communal places to sew and socialize. For internet scholars desiring to more deeply study gender in online spaces and for feminist researchers wanting to examine the online practices of women, this dissertation is a catalyst for further interdisciplinary engagement that examines how women use digital tools in their everyday lives and how online experiences shape women's identities.

Chapter 1

CIRCLES, BEES, AND BAZAARS: THE HISTORY OF SOCIAL SEWING IN AMERICA

Throughout American history, women have routinely sewed in their homes and in community spaces for a variety of reasons, both practical and leisurely. Although the history of women's sewing is important, vibrant, and complex on a worldwide scale, I am limiting the scope of this project to look at sewing in America, and specifically in the lives of middle-class women for whom sewing is a juncture of sorts – a meeting place of leisure and labor, art and function, socialization and economics. This chapter will provide an overview of the history of women's sewing, looking specifically at how sewing has commonly been a collaborative and social event. Past research shows that sewing has always been a multifaceted part of women's history, a practice where skill, knowledge, labor, freedom, and oppression merge together like the pieces of a quilt. I argue that sewing continues to be a complex social practice as it moves to online forums, and the goal of this project is to ask how women are using digital tools and channels for their sewing activities and how these online activities replicate, extend, and remix the practices of American women throughout history.

In Early America, women were often responsible for mending clothing for their families and sewing common household items such as blankets and rugs. Additionally, as public history scholar Marla R. Miller (2006) points out, many women used their sewing skills to make an income, either sewing for other families or creating artisan crafts that could be sold in the marketplace. And, of course, there were social and moral reasons to

sew as well – not only did sewing circles allow women in the neighborhood to socialize with one another, but it allowed them to practice a craft that deemed them good and godly housewives. Cynthia Culver Prescott (2009) explains that “true” middle-class women were “pious and submissive, maintaining the home as a haven from public lives” through their dedication to domestic tasks such as sewing and quilting (p. 111). Women’s motivations for sewing have always been complexly tied to a broad array of social, political, economic, and religious discourses.

Sewing has continued to play a vibrant and complex role in the lives of American women throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. Although mass produced, ready-made clothes were abundantly available by the start of the 1900s (Gordon, 1998), the turbulent decades that followed ensured that many women still sewed their family’s clothes out of financial necessity. By the mid-twentieth century, a woman’s “thriftiness” was one of her most esteemed qualities, as a generation that experienced the Great Depression and two world wars had learned firsthand the value of making clothing and home items with limited resources (McLean, 2009). In the latter half of the century attitudes toward sewing began to change as the practice was seen as a hobby or a creative expression rather than a necessary skill to mark one’s femininity. As a precursor to second wave feminism, home economics classes began flagging in the 1950s and 1960s as women moved into the workforce in a changing political landscape (Elias, 2008; Marthers, 2011). Nonetheless, the art of sewing lived on as mothers taught daughters to stitch out of tradition more than necessity (McLean, 2009), as the hippies of the 70s embraced a do-it-yourself (DIY) spirit (Welters, 2008), and as knitting and sewing were discovered as useful modes of protest (Pentney, 2008). As we move into the

21st century all these motives for sewing – usefulness, aesthetics, community, legacy, political protest, and entrepreneurship – still exist, but sewers are no longer confined to the living room or the church basement. The social practice of sewing has moved online and the relationships, knowledge, and products women are making today transfer quickly and broadly both online and offline due to a plethora of digital tools that are changing the practice of sewing forever.

A History of Women's Sewing

In order to understand how the history of sewing intersects with today's digital sewing practices it is essential to understand the wide scope of research that has already been done regarding women and sewing. This chapter provides a brief overview of past research regarding sewing in America and provides a rationale for the topics in the following chapters. My review of literature revealed a wide array of topics examining American women and their sewing practices, including: religion (Parker, 2010; Prescott, 2009), politics (Formby, 2007; Perkin, 2002); economics (Cunningham, 1998; Nelson, 2004), and femininity (Crane, 2000), Fernandez, 1994), to name a few. While my project is by no means comprehensive, I have identified three substantial topics in the history of women's sewing, and I pursue them in the following chapters. The first topic is knowledge-sharing (Swan, 1977; Ulrich, 2001) and I ask how women have learned and taught sewing in the past and how they are doing so today. The second topic is activism (Gelber, 1999; Halbert, 2009), and I look at how women have sewed for charitable purposes in the past and how they sew philanthropically now. The third topic is entrepreneurship (Miller, 2006; Nelson, 2004), and I survey the history of women

running their own sewing businesses and examine how contemporary women are starting and managing their own handmade companies. While the following chapters will delve into these topics in more detail, what follows here is a brief survey of history to show how sewing has always been a highly social activity, and how it is tied to social roles, and how women's stitches have always constructed identities such as mother, maker, teacher, philanthropist, and business owner. Most importantly, this section shows how sewing is innately social (one cannot learn it alone) and has been enacted socially throughout history. The following chapters will take up this same theme of sewing as a social practice, and reveal how women share their sewing knowledge with one another, collaborate to sew for charitable purposes, and buy and sell sewn goods on the web.

Sewing and the "Domestic Sphere"

After years of neglecting the study of activities branded as "female" or "domestic" in preference for researching male dominated realms and practices, scholars have finally turned in the past few decades to examine the creative and domestic products of women, as these objects are tied to meaningful social practices, meaning-making, and female identities (Goggin, 2002). Beginning with Rozsika Parker's (1984) now classic work on needlework and femininity, *The Subversive Stich: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, the study of women's domestic practices and material culture has become more widespread in the past thirty years. Although needlework has not always been a skill reserved only for women, as men have historically wielded the needle, Parker traces the way that sewing became feminized under modernity. Since Parker's publication, scholars have looked at many other feminized domestic practices to

understand how women have shaped lived history and to insert women into the historical record where their work had previously been ignored or, worse, demeaned, for many decades. Material culture provides a starting point to help us observe and understand the experiences of women throughout history by analyzing the stitches, paint strokes, and paper crafts women used to express themselves. This new scholarship on material culture includes research on quilting (Atkins, 1994; Cooper & Allen, 1989; Elsley, 1996; Prescott, 2010), needlework (Beaudry, 2006; Goggin, 2002; Goggin & Tobin, 2009; Vincent, 1998;), weaving (Fowler 2009, Turbayne, 1991; Ulrich, 2002;), knitting (Myzelev, 2010; Strawn 2010) and clothing production (Burman & Turbin, 2003; Crane, 2000; Fernandez, 1994; Küchler & Miller, 2005). These scholars' contributions are essential for rewriting American history, as they mark the ways women have shaped America socially, economically, and politically with the prick of their needles over the centuries.

Although women often sewed within the confines of their own homes, sewing was also a public event. On a small scale, women would often gather in each other's parlors to socialize while carrying on the necessary chore of family mending (Gelber, 1999). On a larger scale, formal groups were established around sewing. Sewing circles would gather on a regular basis, and women would often work on philanthropic sewing projects at these gatherings. Women also hosted community events such as quilting bees or fancy fairs, and often men and children were invited. At quilting bees, women from the community would gather to work on a quilt design together (Halbert, 2009). At "fancy fairs" or "charity bazaars" women would sell their sewn goods and other fancy work to raise money for a philanthropic cause (Gelber, 1999; Hoffert, 2008). These events not

only included both sexes and all ages, but often brought the middle class in contact with the upper classes, as women from both social strata joined together to sell their art in the name of charity.

Historically, women have engaged in two types of sewing. The first was functional in nature, and involved the sewing of clothes and blankets, and the ongoing chore of “white work,” a label for utilitarian sewing such as mending, hemming, and patching garments and house linens. Before the sewing machine became widespread in the 1850s, “there was a constant supply of ‘white work’ to keep middle class women busy” (Gelber, 1999, p. 161-62), and they would keep their stash of mending in a workbasket in the parlor, where it could be attended to whenever a spare moment would arise. Young girls were trained in this type of sewing, and it was a fairly ubiquitous activity for all housewives in the middle and lower classes. A second type of sewing, dubbed “fancywork,” became increasingly popular throughout the nineteenth century. As Beverly Gordon explains, “there was scarcely a middle class housewife who did not indulge in some of this activity” during the nineteenth century (48). However, the exact meaning of the term “fancywork” is hard to define. The *Oxford English Dictionary* describes it as “ornamental, as opposed to plain, work, esp. in needlework, crochet, knitting.” Archival evidence suggests that there were various types of fancywork in nineteenth century America ranging from decorative needlework and lace to sculptural forms of wax, shell, pinecones, and other objects to adorn the home (Bercaw, 1971; Swan, 1977). One clear category of fancywork was that of personal accessories and embellishments such as bags, purses, glove cases, aprons, and ornamented hair combs (Gordon, 1988), often decorated with embroidery stitches. Notwithstanding its

popularity, fancywork was sometimes regarded with derision, often referred to as “trifles” and “frivolities” in *Godey’s Lady’s Book* and other women’s magazines. Fancywork has since been viewed despairingly by scholars as “useless” and “desperate” artifacts (Green, 1983; Warren, 1976), despite its prominence throughout American history.

However, since feminist scholars began striving for a clearer understanding of past domestic material culture, researchers have returned to examine fancywork as objects worthy of study. Elizabeth White Nelson (2004) has exposed the problematic nature of fancywork for the middle class women who created the objects. There is a clear dichotomy in the word “fancywork” that hints at the anxiety surrounding the term. As a craft, *fancywork* was supposed to indicate the leisure afforded to middle class women, and yet the very practice of *needlework* was, of course, a form of labor. If middle class women had too much time to devote to fancywork then they began to impinge on upper-class lifestyles, causing anxiety for the rich; however, if these same women did not have any time to create fancywork their genteel, middle class status would come into question. Further complicating the role of fancywork in early American life, at times these artifacts were simply trinkets created to adorn oneself or one’s home, or given as gifts, but on the other hand, these objects were sometimes sold to supplement the household income, further blurring the line between pleasure and profit.

Sewing continued to be a complex practice fraught with tension as American women moved into the twentieth century. As technological advancements resulted in a booming industry of ready-made clothes, it was cheaper and easier for women to clothe themselves and their families than ever before (McLean, 2009). For middle class women

who were fighting for the right to vote or joining women's clubs to rally around social causes such as prohibition, education, or other social issues, there was little time to spend hunched over the hemlines of a family garment. Of course, many women still sewed prolifically in the early 1900s, but not as many women were the sole seamstress for the household, as had been the case just a few decades earlier. Instead thriving garment factories could provide many items that women used to sew by hand. However, the garment factory took a major hit with the arrival of the Great Depression, followed by two World Wars. During this time, Americans learned to live on limited resources and rations. Women quickly adopted a spirit of thrift and prided themselves on their ability to make things by hand and reuse household items for new purposes (McLean, 2009). During this time, it was not uncommon for women to make family clothing out of old curtains or even sugar or potato sacks.

It was not until the 1950s, as memories of war and scarcity faded into the past, that women began to think about sewing differently than ever before. Mothers who were quite skilled seamstresses refrained from teaching their daughters, because sewing was linked to memories of poverty that the Baby Boomers would, hopefully, never have to face, and it seemed highly unnecessary in a world of modern conveniences such as affordable suburban housing, highways, and shopping centers full of inexpensive clothing (Matthews, 1987). Additionally, the rapidly changing political and socioeconomic landscape in post-war America reduced the expectation for women to sew. Since many women tasted the workforce on the home front during WWII, many desired to continue working. Domestic work was scorned by many on the dawn of second-wave feminism, especially as homemaking became increasingly deskilled and more unsatisfying

(Matthews, 1987). This corresponds with the rapid deterioration of public school home economics programs during the same time period. Home economics became an important part of school curriculums in the early twentieth century, in part as a response to the fear that industrialization would prevent young females from learning the skills that would deem them good, productive housewives and members of society (Elias, 2008; Marthers, 2011). However, by the 1950s, these programs to teach appropriate domesticity to female students began to shut down. Many women who did learn to sew in the latter half of the 1900s did so out of a desire to be creative or to buck consumerism (Welters, 2008). Although there were no cultural expectations to learn the skill, and the cost of clothing did not necessitate it, these women chose to sew as an artistic or personal endeavor.

A recent renewal in the popularity of arts and crafts among women may be due in part to the publication of the 1993 book *Stich 'n Bitch: The Knitter's Handbook* by feminist writer and magazine editor, Debbie Stroller. Stroller is noted for being one of the first advocates for “girlie feminism” after she found knitting to be a liberating activity that made her feel connected to her mother and grandmothers (Minahan & Cox, 2007). Since the publication of her first book, Stroller has gone on to publish a whole series about knitting and crochet, and she encourages women to meet locally and virtually for “Stitch’n Bitch” sessions where they socialize and share their craft at the same time (Minahan & Cox, 2007). As women return to knitting, sewing, and other arts, for both personal and professional reasons, more attention is being given to handcrafts as a feminist movement.

The 21st century has seen a resurgence of handcrafts, including sewing, as a part of the greater DIY social movement. Although the value of “doing it yourself” predates

recordings of the DIY culture, do-it-yourself activities have been consistently documented since the early 1900s when attempts at self-made, handmade items became more notable when industrialized options for craftsmanship were available. Radio hobbyists, an unofficial group of amateurs skilled at building their own radios in the 1920s, are one of the first examples of modern era DIYers (Kuznetsov & Paulos, 2010). The DIY movement transitioned to be largely (but not exclusively) linked to females in part due to feminist influences such as the Riot Grrrl movement of the 1990s. Although Riot Grrrl was mainly a music and political movement within the punk rock scene to raise awareness for women's issues such as sexual abuse and eating disorders, one strand of the movement specifically encouraged female creativity and the development of artistic skills (Pentney, 2008). It's not surprising then that breakthroughs with Web 2.0 technology in the early 21st century brought women's artistic endeavors into the light. The internet suddenly provided forums for women to share their artistic skills and handcrafts with a global audience (Kuznetsov & Paulos, 2010). As women began posting pictures of their handmade items online, the DIY culture became a greater social movement than ever before, since women were able to collaborate and socialize around their crafts regardless of their geographic locations.

Today, the DIY movement online is vast and varied, including artistic items such as paintings and sewn dolls, health and household items such as natural medicines and non-toxic sunscreens, and of course larger home décor and design projects such as kitchen remodels or furniture upholstery. Most of these projects are completed by women, sometimes with the help of a spouse or friends, but rarely with the assistance of paid professionals. Although exact statistics are hard to ascertain, most studies and

surveys indicate that the majority (near or above 90%) of the artists behind Etsy shops are women (Norton, 2014; Pace et al., 2013), and similar demographics seem to carry over to DIY and sewing blogs. It is less clear how these women would classify their social class or occupation, but some evidence suggests that almost half the women selling on Etsy consider themselves stay-at-home moms or full-time artists (Pace et al., 2013). This means over half the women selling on the site work part-time or full-time in addition to their Etsy businesses. On one hand, the visibility of a mostly white, middle class DIY culture online should cause one to take note of who is missing from this population – namely working class women who might lack the spare time and resources to sew or participate in other crafts. However, the motive to DIY often comes from a spirit of thrift. Much like the women who returned to home sewing to save money and resources during WWII (McLean, 2009), DIY culture has been steadily on the rise since the economic crash of 2008 (Jakob, 2013). Although most people visible within DIY forums online may be considered comfortably middle class, many of them began their DIY journey when trying to save money and use resources wisely during tough economic times.

The opportunity to learn sewing and other fiber arts through online forums and to create and sell handmade objects online has provided many women with unprecedented opportunities for knowledge-building, collaboration, and even financial gain. As sewing becomes more visible on the internet, the beauty, knowledge, labor, and social and political meanings behind the skill collide once again. Sewing has always been an important, often hidden, part of women's history, but now that the story has moved online it can no longer be ignored as the invisible domestic work of women as it has been in the past.

Social Sewing

The visibility of the DIY movement on the web has led to increased socialization and collaboration amongst women around sewing and other fiber arts, both online and offline. In fact, the early 2000s were known as the “knitting boom” as women took up the craft in greater numbers than in decades past. Independent yarn and sewing shops opened up rapidly across the U.S., and despite taking a hit during the recession, since 2011 the offline sewing and craft industry has seen an increase in yearly profits (“Market Research Report on Sewing, Needlework & Craft Stores Industry,” 2014; Zwahlen, 2011). These shops often host in-person events where women can take formal sewing lessons or meet informally to sew with other women. But women don’t necessarily need a storefront to meet up; sewing groups on Facebook abound to provide online spaces for women to share tricks, tips, patterns, and other sewing knowledge. One Facebook group, The Sewing Room, is one such example. The page boasts over 729,000 “likes” and states the group is “dedicated to bringing sewing fans around the world helpful tips, techniques, facts and, above all, friendship” (The Sewing Room, n.d.). Women are socializing around sewing all over the web – through blogs, YouTube, social media such as Twitter and Instagram, as well as craft-specific websites such as Craftsy and Etsy.

But sewing has always been a highly social event for women, even when it was a central household chore. While sewing was often done in the solitude of the home in Early America, it was just as often turned into a social event. Sometimes women would simply visit each other’s parlors, where they would sew as a group, gossip about neighbors and chat about current community events, their busy hands keeping their conversation from being dubbed as idle. Sewing was a chore “that allowed women to sit

and chat with friends, family, or evens suitors, while not wasting any time” (Gelber, 1999, p. 162). Historical archives reveal how sewing was valued for keeping ladies busy while they socialized. One account shares a story about a group of houseguests confined indoors because of snow. As this group of women sat in parlor sewing, one young lady asked the others to excuse her for a moment, so she could fetch a hemming job from her room to keep her hands busy, since the “sight of eight other pairs of busy hands” was making her feel anxious (qtd. in Gelber, 1999, p. 163). As younger ladies would sit with their elders, they not only learned new sewing techniques, but they also absorbed the attitudes and social expectations that would shape them into genteel middle class women.

During the nineteenth century, the social aspect of sewing became more formalized with an influx of sewing circles, quilting bees, and craft clubs. These groups of middle and upper class women would meet on a regular basis, at times making clothes to give directly to the poor and sometimes creating objects to sell in order to raise funds for a worthy charity. Quilting parties were formal community events, and often the entire family, including men, would be invited as women sewed together trendy patchwork quilts (Halbert, 2009). As the nineteenth century drew to a close, and machines had taken over much of the plain sewing for which women used to be responsible, craft clubs started where women would meet to embroider, paint, and do other crafts labeled as “fancywork.” Progressive era women saw arts and crafts as a way to acknowledge female artisans and celebrate women’s changing roles in society (Gelber, 1999). Eventually these clubs began selling their goods at Women’s Work Exchanges, which evolved into contemporary craft fairs. Whether a formal gathering or an informal group in a parlor,

sewing has always been a way to draw women together, to help them socialize, and to sustain friendships over the needle and thread.

Social sewing continued in the twentieth century in new ways. Much of this socialization was formalized as colleges began offering programs in home economics (Matthews, 1987). For the first time, more women had the opportunity to leave their homes and gain professional training in sewing and other domestic arts. This provided a college experience to many young females. They were able to take classes with peers, meet friends outside of their hometowns, and even seek gainful employment instead of making marriage and child-rearing their sole endeavor during their young adult years (Strasser, 1982, p. 207). As home economics programs began shutting down in the post-war era, the hippie movement provided new ways for women to socialize around the needle. Many hippies were simply about rebelling against mainstream culture, using their fashion as one means of protest by avoiding the plastic, acrylic, and neon clothing popularized in the first half of the 1960s, and instead wearing denim and neutral colored clothing (Welters, 2008). Eventually, the most extreme members of this movement went so far as to join communes where they surrendered many modern conveniences and learned to live off the land where they gardened, sewed, and even made their own fabrics and dyes (Welters, 2008, p. 497). Even as the hippie era tapered off, the commitment to dressing naturally and sustainably left a permanent mark on popular culture. The trend of handmade ‘natural’ clothing grew in the 1970s including new features such as patchwork designs, where vintage quilt patterns were remade into clothing. This led to a larger craft and DIY culture where women would meet to create items by hand. Remarkably, although many of the women behind the natural and DIY movements of the 1960s and

70s claimed to resist cultural norms and Western values, they could never fully shake the suggestion that creating was linked to true womanhood or that crafting made them virtuous. A 1972 edition of *Harper's Bazaar* published an article on the craft movement called, "Idle hands are out, crafts are in" (Shorr, 1972, p. 6), a title reminiscent of a nineteenth century woman's manual. Although women have socialized around sewing during different eras, with different personal, social, and political motivations, the prevailing values associated with women and crafting have somehow remained the same.

Women have found new ways to socialize over sewing in the digital age, and they no longer need to meet in the neighbor's parlor or join a commune to do so. A sewing blogger might see her closest blogging friends in person once or twice a year, but she often has many other friends she never meets offline at all. The majority of women's socialization happens online, and just as women in their sewing circles would talk of many different topics beyond their handicraft, so do these women, who typically first meet through their common interest over the needle, talk of many issues as they socialize on the web. Here is one example of such a friendship, as described on the blog, "Sew Caroline" (www.sewcaroline.com). Caroline shares about meeting her friend Alissa online when both women ran sewing blogs and sold similar products. Alissa has since given up her sewing shop and now runs her own online marketing company, and Caroline has moved toward textile design and pattern making, but the friendship they established through their common bond of sewing iPad cases and other accessories continues. On an Instagram picture of the two women together at a conference, Caroline adds the caption "Met this girl (@ragstostitches) via blogging about two years ago and she's become one of my BFFs. The internet is cool, y'all" (<http://instagram.com/sewcaroline>). Sewing

brings these women together, and their circles of friendship weave and connect all over the internet.

Like the women who would sew and sip tea in each other's parlors, women meet virtually all over the web, in the sitting rooms of social media and the parlors of Pinterest, to bond over their sewing skills and to share their life experiences with one another. What starts as a search for a sewing pattern or admiration of another blogger's handmade dress may evolve, through comments, emails, and tweets, into legitimate and lifelong friendship, even if these women rarely or never see each other offline.

Women and the Marketplace

This study not only looks at sewing as a domestic and social activity, but also examines the roles women have historically played in the marketplace as producers and sellers of sewing labor and sewn products. While most products nineteenth century women sewed were for their own homes and to clothe their own families, it was also very common for middle-class women to take in sewing projects for other families as well (Miller, 2006; Ulrich, 2001). What was a necessary household chore also became a supplementary income for many women, and what was often regarded as a hobby was, in all reality, "eye-straining, back-aching labor" (Miller, 2006, p. 4). Nancy Cott (1997) problematizes the notion of a clear home/world divide in her book *The Bonds of Womanhood: Woman's "Sphere" in New England 1780-1835* where she shows gender notions to be continually mutable and always changing, as evidenced by women working in the household and beyond at the turn of the nineteenth century. Patricia Cunningham (1988) studies the record book of Elmeý Sammis Trimmer, a woman who worked as a

tailor and seamstress from 1836 to 1876 in both New York and Ohio. In this book, Trimmer would record various notes about her clients, outstanding balances owed, and how much she charged per item. Mixed in with these notes were recipes for dyes and family information about illnesses, births, and deaths, causing this book to function as a business ledger and a diary in one, showing how the lines between personal life and economic activity were very fluid for many women (Hoffert, 2008). Miller (2006) examines these types of business archives to better understand the interplay between the work that women did and the ways they thought about themselves as workers. She argues that women should be remembered as “artisans and entrepreneurs in early America” (p. 3). In her work, *Findings: The Material Culture of Needlework and Sewing*, Mary C. Beaudry (2006) also looks at the complicated role of needlework in women’s lives as a necessity and pastime, an important social marker but also a means to an income. White Nelson (2004) studies the ways sentimental products such as fancywork, valentines, and domestic manuals played an important role in allowing women to enter the U.S. market culture in the nineteenth century.

Even with the introduction of the foot-powered sewing machine, often a family’s sole appliance, women spent much of their time sewing after the turn of the century. Although middle class families were able to buy most of their clothing at this point, mending, hemming, and maintaining household linens still made up a substantial weekly chore. In addition, many women continued to take on commissioned sewing jobs, some to the extent of running small businesses from their homes (Rosenberg, 2008). During The Great Depression, Eleanor Roosevelt advocated for increased jobs for women as part of a larger work relief program. Although her efforts were only mildly successful, she did

find employment for about 10,000 women, most hired in sewing rooms or nursery schools (Rosenberg, 2008, p. 114). Even after World War II, a time when many women sewed prolifically, if not to make money then to save money, sewing jobs continued for American women. Especially in the Appalachian region of the U.S., an area historically known for its garment production before most of the industry moved overseas, women continued to work in sewing rooms, making clothing on sewing machines for many hours each day. Successful seamstresses were sometimes promoted to managers (Chesky, 2010). Social and political movements of the latter twentieth century also influenced females to sell their sewn goods. The hippie movement of the 1960s motivated a return to crafting which indirectly prompted the outdoor craft fairs full of middle class women selling their arts during the 1980s and 1990s (Jakob, 2013). Twentieth century craft fairs both echoed the fancy fairs of the previous century and foreshadowed the online craft marketplaces to come.

Today sewing is a large component of the thriving craft industry. Despite a nationwide economic recession that started in 2008, Etsy reported consistent sales increases each year from 2008-2011 (Jakob, 2012). At the same time, the Craft Organization Development Association (CODA) reported that about five million Americans earned part of their income from crafts in 2010; an increase of about 4000% from its 1999 survey (as cited in Jakob, 2012). Of course, not all creative entrepreneurs make a full-time income from selling handmade items. Many women turned to crafting during the recession as a way to supplement their household income during a financially unstable time, a trend that can be traced back to farm life in early America. Regardless of the amount of money being made, it is obvious that women play a large part in this multi-

billion dollar industry each year (Norton, 2014; Pace et al., 2013). Whether supplementing their household budget or operating a full-time handmade business online, today's female sewers continue to walk the obscure path set before them where creativity, entrepreneurship, economic need, and home obligations overlap and twist as they march their way into new marketplaces.

Going Forward

As this historical overview shows, sewing plays a complex part in American women's history, and continues to do so today. Sewing has always been tied to opportunities, relationships, and knowledge, thereby offering many benefits to women who are proficient in the skill. However, sewing also reflects the many challenges women face in meeting societal expectations for femininity and balancing multiple roles that often compete for time and resources, such as seamstresses who are also wives, mothers, activists, or business owners. The goal of this project is to describe how women are learning to sew in the digital age, how they are participating in sewing activism online, and how female entrepreneurs are using digital forums to launch and sustain handmade businesses. The outcomes of these practices may be both positive and negative, depending on the context. I do believe that the activities happening in digital sewing communities are generally progressive, as they allow women new relationships, new forms of expressions, new knowledge, and new financial opportunities, but I do not disregard that all social practices hold the potential for negative outcomes as well, including the sewing activities described in the following chapters. Although most of the women in the following case studies view their sewing and digital activities in a positive

light, some of the data will show challenges they have faced as they mastered a skill and shared their sewing online.

And the women highlighted in the following chapters are only part of the whole story. I have not begun to share the archives that document sewing amongst the lower class, from the unregulated factories of the nineteenth century to racial divisions of labor in the twentieth century. I am silent on these stories here, not because they are unimportant, but because they are beyond the scope of this project, which examines the practice of sewing for middle class American women. There are many other stories of sewing waiting to be told that will shed light on the lives of women from different backgrounds and it is my hope that these histories will continue to be uncovered, even if they do not fit within the pages of this project. Here I can only thread together the history of middle class women and their needles, and look at how women are continuing that history today on the pages of Etsy, in the endless scroll of Twitter, and on countless spaces all over the web, as women pursue digital channels to socialize over the craft, trade, and skill of sewing.

Chapter 2

THE CYBER SCHOOL OF STITCHERY: EXAMINING THE MEDIA ECOLOGY OF ONLINE SEWING EDUCATION

Pinterest is covered with links to knitting and stitching projects, the blogosphere abounds with sewing focused blogs, and the Etsy marketplace grows steadily each year, recently becoming a publicly traded company (Picker & Sherman, 2014). While many note a resurgence in fiber arts in the 21st century, often called a “sewing boom” or “knitting boom” (Holson, 2012), little research shows how novice sewers are engaging with and navigating online resources as they learn to sew. Since contemporary seamstresses rarely learn their sewing skills at home in their youth, this chapter examines the practices of women who are learning to sew using a mix of offline and online resources and seeks to discover how women are leveraging various digital tools and spaces to gain sewing knowledge.

Throughout most of American history, women have learned to sew during childhood, usually from the modeling and training of their mothers or older sisters at home, or sometimes in formal school classes. Only in recent decades have the majority of women entered adulthood with virtually no sewing skills. Yet over the past decade sewing has become wildly popular as a hobby and trade among a young adult population that never learned how to sew during childhood. As adults flock to in-person sewing classes (Holson, 2012) and turn to YouTube videos for sewing instruction, a number of questions arise about how one learns to sew in the digital age. This chapter will address the following questions:

- How do novices navigate offline and online resources when learning to sew?

- What literacies must be learned to traverse these online sewing resources? How do they differ from ways women learned to sew before the internet existed?
- How do the ways women learn to sew using digital resources add to the broader conversation about how learning takes place online?

In the first part of this chapter, I will give an overview of research that examines how knowledge is stored and exchanged online, and how the sharing of information is a highly social activity in digital spaces. Furthermore, I will argue that online social participation leads users to adopt various identities and enter into different discourse communities, depending on the spaces they inhabit online and the ties they build through their mediated networks (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Gee, 2004; Granovetter, 1982, Lave & Wenger, 1991; New London Group, 1996). In the second part of this chapter, I will summarize and illustrate the ways women learned to sew from Colonial America through the twentieth century, to see how today's sewing practices replicate and enrich past sewing history. In the last section of this chapter, I will describe the most prevalent online resources available for learning to sew today by mapping these spaces as a digital ecology. I will then show how two different sewing bloggers navigated this ecology in various way when learning to sew as adult women. Finally, I will show how these bloggers took up different identities based on their practices and their informal group memberships online, and how these identities led to different learning paths and opportunities for each woman.

Learning, Discourse Communities, and Identity

Before examining how learning is taking place in sewing spaces across the web, it is important to give my framework for what “counts” as literacy online, and why learning

and literacy are perpetually linked together. Literacy does not relate merely to reading and writing but to learning a myriad of textual practices and social values any time someone undertakes a new skill and joins a new social group, such as the women learning to sew in online environments. As Brian Street (2003) puts it, literacy “is about knowledge: the ways in which people address reading and writing are themselves rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity, and being” (p.77). As a woman learns to sew online, she also gains other knowledge such as how to start a blog or how to tag her Instagram posts appropriately to credit pattern or fabric designers. Her overall process of “learning how to sew” is made up of interwoven literacy practices that include reading blog posts, writing down steps and measurements, watching videos, and navigating social media spaces. The compilation of these literacy practices results in social connections that lead to new identities such as seamstress, blogger, or designer. This is why learning and literacies cannot really be parted into separate categories.

Therefore, I adhere to the sociocultural perspective that literacy is a matter of social practices (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; New London Group, 1996). In their fundamental study of situated learning (1991), Jean Lave, anthropologist, and Etienne Wenger, a computer scientist, explore the concept of “communities of practice,” when an aggregate of people come together in a common endeavor and deep learning takes place amongst group members. Since Lave and Wenger’s study, a wide scope of scholarship has examined the ways literacy is situated and intricately tied to social practices (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Gee, 2007; Gee & Hayes, 2011; Lankshear & Knobel, 2008; Lankshear & Knobel, 2011; Wenger, 1999). Because people often join specific online spaces based on a common interest or hobby (or “passionate affinity,” as cited in Gee &

Hayes, 2011), and because these sites are highly social in nature, many websites and social media networks easily facilitate the exchange of knowledge and information between members relating to their shared topic of interest, such as fly-fishing, gluten-free cooking, or horseback riding, to name a few examples. These spaces allow for members to bring their individual expertise to a group setting. Ideally, the information shared between group members can be stored and distributed easily within the site itself (Gee & Hayes, 2011, p. 70), so each member does not have to personally learn and retain mass quantities of information on the subject at hand. Instead individuals can visit the site at any time and look up pertinent information as needed, whether on a forum, by searching blog posts, or visiting an archive page. The second half of this chapter will show how women have learned to navigate the vast digital ecology of online sewing resources in various, individualized ways to learn and teach new skills but here is a brief example. In a sewing community, one person might have significant experience in pattern making for clothing, while another person might have knowledge in fabric pattern design. When both these women share their personal knowledge online in a way that can be digitally archived (via a blog, forum thread, hashtag, etc.), other users can look up needed information on either topic, perhaps if working on a specific project, without having to invest the time in becoming an expert in either pattern making or fabric design.

Additionally, learning is often non-hierarchical in nature, meaning the roles of teacher and student are fluid (Gee & Hayes, 2011, p.70), especially when learning happens in online spaces. Mentorship can shift depending on which members of a group have the specific skills, knowledge and experiences to pass to others in a specific context. If I know how to sew, I might teach some simple stitches to my friend, but she would be

my tutor in crocheting or knitting, as needlecrafts have always baffled me. The roles of teacher and student can change at any time, depending on what needs to be learned. If learning and literacy are understood as sets of social practices, the opportunities for new literacy experiences only increase with the availability of new connections, spaces, and contexts provided by the internet. In the digital age, there are simply more people with whom to form connections, broader social networks, and new spaces and mediums where sharing knowledge and experiences can take place.

Furthermore, meaning is made in ways that are increasingly multimodal in nature, so we must look beyond traditional texts and reading and writing practices in order to understand what counts as literacy (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, p. 5). In their introduction to *Digital Literacies: Concepts, Policies, and Practices* (2008), Colin Lankshear and Michele Knobel argue for expanding our understanding of literacy to include *literacies*, as there is not one set way to read, write, or exchange knowledge, especially in a digital world filled with new and ever-changing modes of communication, including tweets, GIFs, videos, and so many more. In short, Lankshear and Knobel argue that “digital literacies” is the proper term for the “myriad social practices... that are produced, received, distributed, exchanged, etc. via digital codification” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2008, p.5). Even a single genre of digital text, such as a blog, can vary greatly depending on the social practices of those writing and reading it. For example, a political blog is vastly different from a fashion blog. Even within the realm of sewing blogs, the websites take many forms. Later in this chapter, I will describe the blogging practices of two women, Caroline and Maggie. Both women maintain sewing blogs, but their purposes, their content, their writing and design styles, and their audiences differ greatly. Caroline

specializes in pattern making and fabric design and writes primarily for an audience of other makers, women who sew daily and are passionate about fabric and garments. Maggie, on the other hand, has run several businesses in the past where she made and sold handmade accessories. However, she does not share many details of her sewing processes. Instead, she writes more about the business side of her sewing experiences, including which forums are available for selling products online and how to engage customers through social media. These two blogs, although they might be lumped into a single category with the label “sewing” or “DIY” blog, are created and maintained for diverse purposes and reach different audiences (Lankshear & Knobel, 2008, p.5). The key to navigating these spaces is learning to consume, and often produce, the appropriate texts. For example, if I am learning to sew using online resources, I might read a blog post full of instruction, consult a tutorial with step-by-step photo directions, or watch a YouTube video. The skills needed to understand these different texts will vary. I might decide to become literate in all three genres, or I might find that I prefer audio instruction over written instruction and solely spend my time learning how to search, watch, and then apply information from YouTube videos as I learn to sew. Eventually, as I develop expertise in certain sewing skills, I may choose to produce texts, such as a blog or YouTube channel, to pass my knowledge to others.

The sociocultural view of literacy not only values a wide variety of texts (gestures, memes, photos, videos, etc.) as important modes of communication and sees learning as inherently tied to social practices, but also sees the outcomes of literacy as linked to power and identity (Barton & Lee, 2013; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Gee, Hull & Lankshear, 1996; Lankshear & Knobel, 2008; New London Group, 1996). New literacies

scholars argue that people inhabit various and overlapping “lifeworlds” (Husserl, 1970) which are the domains of everyday life. No person is a member of a singular community (New London Group, 1996). Instead, they are members of various groups that have distinct expectations for discourse, different values, and inexplicit expectations for membership. As we learn the discourses of our various social groups, we gain memberships into those groups to varying degrees. For example, it is not just my medical degree that gives me comradery with fellow physicians, but also the years of jargon picked up in medical school, along with the understanding of when to make jokes, when to be serious, when to consult research, and when to improvise. My degree of understanding in each of these areas and my ability to exercise the appropriate words and actions will relate directly to my acceptance within a group of doctors. Depending on my literacies, I might be labeled as “highly respected” or “unorthodox.” Of course, if I leave the hospital or clinic where I work and meet up with childhood friends for dinner, my doctor discourse will do little to help me engage socially with a mixed group of lifelong friends. At dinner, other discourses related to youth, humor, and my hometown will make me literate in the conversation.

One does not know these various discourses automatically. Instead, they must be learned by reading, writing, speaking, observing, and interacting with those who already know the language and conventions of the social group at hand. Newcomers must learn the appropriate knowledge and skills “to move toward full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community,” a learning process which Lave and Wenger call “legitimate peripheral participation” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p.29). Both online and offline, we are constantly becoming embedded in social practices where people not only

read and write in certain ways, “but also talk about such texts in certain ways, hold certain beliefs about them, and socially interact over them in certain ways” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2008, p.7). Texts are part of lived, talked, enacted, value-and-belief-laden practices carried out in specific places at specific times (Gee, Hull & Lankshear, 1996, p. 3). We are constantly engaging in situated practices and are apprenticed into doing and being a certain way in order to gain membership into a group of people. As one learns the discourses of their various social groups, he or she gains entrance or membership into those groups to varying degrees. Sewing bloggers are one such example. As the examples later in this chapter will show, sewing bloggers have specific ways of writing, taking photos, tweeting, and posting to Instagram that mark them as “sewers” or “makers” and give them entrance into what some have dubbed the “handmade community.” And, of course, within the vast handmade community or even within smaller groupings of sewers, there are various identities available, such as Caroline, “the pattern designer,” or Maggie, “the accessories shop owner with online business savvy.” Although many internet researchers (Haythornwaite, 2002; Lave & Wenger, 1998; Wenger, 2011) question the validity of viewing online spaces as “communities” if formal membership is not required, the women who serve as the case studies for this project do refer to themselves as a part of a “community” and so I use the term here, noting that its meaning is contested and that terms such as *community of practice* (Lave & Wenger, 1998), *discourse community* (Gee, 2014) or *social network* (Haythornwaite, 2005) might apply more aptly.

Whether we call it a community or a network, these women’s activities reveal that identities are formed by one’s literacies with various types of texts (Adobe Illustrator or

Instagram), the social ties and relationship one maintains, and the resulting opportunities and experiences one is afforded as a result of gaining membership to different groups online and offline. As one builds a network online, opportunities to exchange social capital will abound (Resnick, 2001). Online social capital, put simply, “is the empirically validated value of paying it forward: doing favors for strangers in a network with no direct compensation” (Rheingold, 2012, p.216). Later, I will show how Caroline’s interactions on Instagram led to her first fabric design opportunity, while Maggie was able to build friendships with fellow moms upon moving to a new state because of the vast network of women she had interacted with online. Both these women have taken on various roles and identities as they have learned digital literacies related to sewing. These identities are always shifting, and are even sometimes at odds with each other, depending on whether social ties are built, broken, or maintained, and which new literacy practices are learned or ignored as they emerge online.

Knowledge Sharing Online

One specific and widely applied theory on knowledge sharing is called “collective intelligence,” which, in short, is “the ability to pool knowledge and compare notes with others toward a common goal” (Jenkins et al., 2006, p.4). While there are many definitions of collective intelligence in existence, most who study the concept from a media studies perspective see collective intelligence as an aggregate of skills, understanding and knowledge created by a group of people, which individuals can access and curate at any time (Rheingold, 2012, p.160). Other related theories include “the wisdom of the crowd” (Surowiecki, 2004) or “crowdsourcing” (Howe, 2006), which also

offer explanations for how groups exchange and build knowledge. The study of collective intelligence and related concepts, such as distributed knowledge, is interdisciplinary in nature, and has been studied in fields such as computer science (Wolpert & Tumer, 1999), business (O'Reilly, 2007), medicine (Brownstein, Freifeld, & Madoff, 2009), and video game studies (McGonigal, 2007). Among digital scholars, Pierre Lévy's groundbreaking book *Collective Intelligence Mankind's Emerging World in Cyberspace* (1994/1997) has influenced much of the research that has taken place over the past two decades. Lévy looks at humans' intellectual development through four "anthropological spaces:" earth, territory, commodity, and knowledge. The last space, knowledge, is of particular interest to those studying internet cultures, as "it is about collective imagination, the production of knowledge, and the construction of intelligent communities" (Poore, 2011). Lévy posits that the growth of the knowledge space, due to the increasing computerization of society, has the potential to "promote the construction of intelligent communities in which our social and cognitive potential can be mutually developed and enhanced" (Lévy, 1999, p. 17). Collective intelligence occurs when "everyone knows something, nobody knows everything, and what any one person knows can be tapped by the group as a whole" (Jenkins et al., 2006, p.39). Many examples of collective intelligence are happening within sewing communities online, from the exchange of patterns and templates for projects to the literal teaching of basic sewing stitches via books and video tutorials. But long before the advent of the internet, sewing was an incredibly social practice for women and one where knowledge and skills were passed from one person to another through verbal explanation, modeling, and even

formally written instructions. The expansion of sewing on the internet only allows this knowledge to be shared farther and faster than in previous eras.

Learning to Sew Without the Internet

For most young girls in Colonial America, reading and sewing lessons went hand in hand. As a young girl learned to read, her sewing activities also increased. One she mastered reading the Bible, knitting skills might be added to her daily lessons. A report from a local Philadelphia school in 1774 gives a record of a group of female students and their progress with spelling, reading, sewing, and knitting. It shares that: “In the year of the report, two girls were spelling and sewing. Another girl was sewing and reading the Testament. A fourth was knitting and sewing as well as reading the Testament, and a fifth girl, in addition to reading the Testament, was embroidering a sampler,” which was clearly the apex of the sewing curriculum (Monaghan, 2007). It is clear from this report and others like it, that while boys of the same age were given writing lessons in conjunction with their reading exercises, girls were instead expected to take on sewing as an advanced skill (Monaghan, 1988). For most girls, a well-made embroidery sampler was the pinnacle of their learning, which leads Monaghan to note, “If girls were to form letters, it would be through the medium of thread, not ink” (Monaghan, 1988, p. 29). Although the above examples share the experiences of girls who attended local classes, these instances are rare as most young females were taught to sew by their own mothers at home (Marten, 2007). However, the curriculum for young girls, whether at school or home, was very similar, filled with sewing, knitting, and reading Scripture, as they were

being trained as successful homemakers and not jobholders (Monaghan, 2007) like their male counterparts.

Even as the sewing machine permeated American society in the late 1800s (Matthews, 1987), sewing by hand was still a necessary skill for lower and middle class women who could not afford the newest technology. Additionally, the influx of fancywork and embroidery projects within the middle class stemmed from fear that a new generation of women, born in the sewing machine age, would neglect to learn the skill of stitching if mending and hemming was no longer a necessary household chore (Parker, 2010; Ulrich, 2001; White Nelson, 2004). The middle class believed idle hands verged on sinful, so young women needed sewing, whether as work or a hobby, to keep them busy (Gelber, 1999). Therefore, sewing remained a necessary skill to learn throughout the nineteenth and into the early twentieth century. Unlike male artisans of the time, women rarely had formal apprenticeships in sewing. Typically mothers taught their daughters how to sew, and it was common for young girls to help with household mending and knitting as young as age six (Swan, 1977). In some instances, girls would attend formal schools called ladies' academies to hone their sewing skills and perfect their needlework (Ulrich, 2001), but this was not the norm for most middle class families. Instead, mothers would teach daughters, older sisters would help the younger, and almost every young woman knew how to sew fairly well, whether for labor or leisure or both.

Once the basic stitches were mastered, many women continued to enhance their sewing skills and knowledge through various means. Patterns, especially for fancywork, became widespread in the second half of the nineteenth century. The popular magazine, *Godey's Lady Book*, would often publish fancywork patterns or tutorials (White Nelson,

2004), and women would copy them, sometimes modifying the patterns to create new designs. Some women made a business of teaching young girls how to improve their stitching by way of private needlework lessons. Needlework books became an enterprise of their own right, as women made money by publishing books to teach new fancywork techniques (White Nelson, 2004). Women had a desire to ensure their female peers and daughters knew how to sew well, in order to uphold a skill and a legacy that had been interwoven with female identity and virtue since America's beginning.

On a more local level, women would often gather together to share sewing tasks, and often taught each other tricks and tips to make their sewing labors more efficient or to improve their final product. Collaborating with family and neighbors to take on these tasks actually predates sewing circles, as women in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries would gather together to weave fabric when the job was too much for one loom and one woman. They would "join works" for a week or two, in order to finish a job and socialize in the process (Ulrich, 2001, p. 16). Women traded these favors often, and would teach each other in the process, the more experienced sewers (or weavers) guiding the less experienced.

Perhaps the most creative collaboration and knowledge sharing occurred in the practice of quilting. Friends would often trade quilting patterns and build their own designs based on others' sample blocks (Halbert, 2009). Eventually these patterns would make their way across the country as women traveled and moved, and the designs were often influenced by contact with African, Asian, and Native American traditions along the way (Halbert, 2009). Quilting bees, where a community of women would create a blanket together, are a key example of how women collaborated to create a single

material product with multiple authors, each quilter adding her own expertise and design ideas throughout the invention and creation process. Since quilts bridged the gap between a utilitarian blanket and a form of décor, the practice of quilting continued to complicate the already hazy lines between home and market and chore versus craft, just as online sewing practices blur that same line today.

The teaching of sewing skills became more formalized in the twentieth century with the widespread emergence of home economics classes at high schools and colleges nationwide. Pleas for domestic education for women began in the mid-nineteenth century, when Catherine Beecher, among others, began advocating for schools “where women will be trained to be scientific, healthful, and economical” cooks, nurses, and seamstresses (qtd. in Strasser, 1982, p. 191), and home economics slowly became a formal school discipline over the next fifty years. Although more than thirty home economics programs had opened at U.S. universities in previous decades (Strasser, 1982), the aims of the home economics movement were not publicly stated until the first of the Lake Placid Conferences in September 1899. At this meeting, a small group of people, including MIT Instructor of Sanitary Chemistry Ellen Richards and other women with home economics backgrounds such as pioneer cooking teacher Maria Parloa, joined to define the objectives of the home economics as a discipline. Although the conference resulted in many goals and the need for subsequent yearly meetings, the central mission of the home economics curriculum was made clear: to teach domestic tasks with scientific methods in a formal education setting, aiming for increased efficiency and productivity in the home (Weigley, 1974). The label *home economics* was chosen in hopes of giving this new discipline a place within economics departments at the

university level, although many home economics programs were housed in schools of agriculture instead (College of Home Economics Records, 2002). Formal classes at all grade levels (primary, secondary, and college) began taking over the teaching of sewing, which “daughters once learned at their mothers’ knees” (Strasser, 1982, p. 144), as well as training for other domestic tasks.

Even as home economics programs waned in the second half of the twentieth century, it was still very likely that students, both male and female, would take at least one home economics class in middle school or high school. In 1993, most home economics programs officially changed their title to Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) (Graham, 2013), and curriculum began to focus on topics deemed more modern and practical, such as nutrition and personal budgeting principles. Even so, many who were students in the 1990s are able to reminisce about sewing projects they completed at school, such as pillows or aprons, including my husband boasts about the basketball shaped pillow he sewed in eighth grade. Today, many FCS curriculums (Boyden, n.d.; Hart & Shaw, 2006) include units on sewing basics geared toward students who aspire to go into textile design or the fashion industry.

Media Ecology Theory

Before I examine the ways women (and some men) are learning to sew in the 21st century, I want to give an overview of “media ecology” as a theoretical framework for understanding online spaces. I will use an ecology metaphor to show some of the various offline and online resources available for learning to sew in the digital age, and I will then trace how two different sewing bloggers navigated this ecology as novice

seamstresses. Although the term “media ecology” predates the internet (West & Turner, 2010), the study of media theory and design has only expanded in recent years with the development of Web 2.0 technology, where web users are able to easily consume and create online content. At its most basic level, media ecology is “concerned with understanding how technologies and techniques of communication control the form, quantity, speed, distribution, and direction of information; and how, in turn, such informational configurations or biases affect people's perceptions, values, and attitudes” (Postman, 1979). A number of studies look at internet environments and networks within the framework of an ecology metaphor (Barron, 2006; Leander & McKim, 2003; Jenkins & Dueze, 2008; Scolari, 2012; Strate, 2006). The expansion of new media in the past two decades has led to what Yochai Benkler (2006) describes as a “hybrid media ecology” within which commercial, amateur, governmental, nonprofit, educational, activist, and other players interact with each other in ever more complex ways. Henry Jenkins and Mark Deuze (2008, p. 5) expand on this idea by explaining:

Each of these (players) has the power to produce and distribute content and each of these groups is being transformed by their new power and responsibilities in this emerging media ecology. And in the process, the focus on individual consumers is giving way to a new emphasis on the social networks through which production and consumption occurs. In this context, it may no longer be of value to talk about personalized media; perhaps, we might better discuss socialized media. We might see YouTube, Second Life, Wikipedia, Flickr, and MySpace, to cite just a few examples, as meeting spaces between a range of grassroots creative

communities, each pursuing their own goals, but each helping to shape the total media environment.

Below I will show how bloggers Caroline and Maggie learned to sew by navigating the digital sewing ecology. Their paths through the constellation of online sewing resources sometimes overlap but are also very distinct as they choose different tools and build different relationships to gain sewing knowledge and, in turn, disperse that knowledge to others. In accord with Jenkins and Dueze's argument, Caroline and Maggie are pursuing individual goals online, but in doing so they help shape the overall media landscape both in sewing circles and beyond.

Case studies

Although I have introduced them above briefly, here I will give some background information about two women whose blogs and online practices serve as the examples for the remainder of this chapter:

Caroline Hulse (www.sewcaroline.com) - At the time of this study, Caroline Hulse is a twenty-six year old clothing pattern designer and seamstress. She learned to sew in 2010 after receiving a sewing machine for Christmas. For a few years, she worked in a quilting shop, selling fabric and teaching group classes, while she was building her blog, sewing skills, and personal brand on the side. In 2013, she quit her job at the quilt shop and transitioned to running her own business from home. She has designed a fabric line, regularly releases new garment patterns, and also travels for sewing conferences and TV appearances.

She also engages with a wide audience via her blog and other social media outlets.

Maggie Whitley (www.maggiwhitley.com) - At the time of this study, Maggie is a thirty year old living in Los Angeles, California. She learned to sew in 2008 and started an online handmade shop called Gussy Sews (<http://www.shopgussy.com>) a year later in 2009. Over the past six years, she and her husband have moved from Michigan to Minnesota to California, and she now has two young children. She opened up a second online shop called Caroline Made upon moving to California, but she now restocks both her shops only intermittently as child-raising has become her main priority. Although she now devotes less time to her online shops, she still blogs consistently and uses other social media to discuss handmade business, sewing, and motherhood with a wide audience.

The majority of data describing Caroline and Maggie's experiences comes directly from their blog archives and was collected from blog posts, photos, and captions. Additional information was taken from their social media accounts, specifically Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Both women answered some follow-up questions regarding their learning experiences with sewing via an email interview, which can be found in the appendices. The tone of these electronic interviews was intentionally friendly and informal and, although I shared my research project with both women, I approached them more as a peer and fellow blogger because "misalignments (can) occur when researchers enter a space only for research purposes" (Buchanan, 2009). My hope was to garner more authentic answers by asking informal questions over email, which is

fairly common practice amongst female bloggers. Since bloggers are used to conversing in electronic formats, an email interview retained “contextual naturalness” (Kazmer & Xie, 2008) for my subjects (see also East et al., 2008 and Mann & Stewart, 2000 on the uses of computer mediated interview methods). The interview process is an issue in which the goals and ethics of digital ethnographers and feminist researchers overlap considerably. Feminist ethical practices call for interviews that are reflexive in nature, where questions, format, tone, or setting are adaptable in order to build rapport and trust between the subjects and the researcher (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Elmir et al., 2011). Furthermore, one goal of participatory feminist researchers is the ability to reduce “the hierarchy between informants and researchers” (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006), when the researcher and interviewees share knowledge based around a common experience. Maggie, Caroline, and I are all bloggers who use many of the same social networking sites, and even follow and interact with many of the same people online. However, as someone who is not very experienced in sewing, I am able to approach them on the common ground of our blogging and social media practices and ask them to illuminate me on the ways they leveraged the internet when learning to sew, a subject in which they are experts and I am the novice.

Learning to Sew in the Digital Age

Since the 21st century began, there seems to be a new desire to learn to sew that goes beyond any rudimentary stitching skills learned in a home economics course. Societal trends encouraging people, especially young adults to “do it yourself” or “shop handmade” or “buy local” (Jakob, 2012; Johnson, 2008) have prompted many, females in

particular, to master the art and skill of sewing. For some women, simply seeing the growing visibility of the sewing community online prompted them to want to learn the skill of sewing. Maggie explains:

When I taught myself how to sew we were living in Detroit, MI. Zack and I were newlyweds and I had recently discovered Etsy. And ohhhhhh my, I was infatuated with the idea that women my age not only knew how to sew, but they were making a living from this amazing trade. I suddenly became determined to do the same thing; the Gussy Sews shop was created (spring 2009). (Whitley, n.d.)

Caroline, shares a similar story of how a small interest in learning to sew led to a career as a pattern designer:

About six years ago I was gifted a sewing machine for Christmas without any knowledge of how to use it. I learned as much as I could from Googling, and more specifically YouTube. In the span of just a few years my sewing machine has become my best companion and I hardly go a day without using it. (Hulse, 2014)

And Caroline is not the only one to receive a sewing machine lately. Sewing machine sales have increased drastically over the past decade. In 2012, there were 3 million sewing machines sold, double the rate from a decade earlier (Holson, 2012). There are many suggested reasons for this emerging interest: the popularity of clothing design show, *Project Runway*, a desire for clothing that fits a variety of body shapes, or a desire for self-expression not met with mass-produced clothes from big box retailers (Holson, 2012). Whatever the reason, sewing is a coveted skill by today's young adult generation,

but these young adults must learn to sew since very few of them were taught by their mothers as in past eras. In this section, I will map the ecology of the resources available, both online and offline, for adults learning to sew in the 21st century.

To begin with, public group sewing classes have grown wildly popular. 3rd Ward, a craft education space in Brooklyn, is one such example. It has doubled its number of monthly beginner sewing classes (from two to four) since 2012 (Holson, 2012). These classes are not cheap. Full day group classes often cost about \$150 per day, while specialty classes, such as a course on moccasin-making, might cost \$300. Private instruction in New York City ranges from \$80 - \$150 an hour (Holson, 2012). Another Brooklyn seamstress, Sarah Kate Beaumont, teaches group and private classes from a studio in her brownstone apartment. She charges anywhere from \$65 to \$500, depending on the length of the course (Robbins, 2011). But trendy New York is not the only place where attendance in sewing classes is surging. One reporter, Maja Beckstrom, who considers herself “one generation removed from serious sewing,” took a class with her eleven year old son in the Twin Cities area of Minnesota (Beckstrom, 2014). When the group lesson she was hoping to attend was already filled up, she paid for a private lesson instead, in which she and her son learned basic sewing skills by creating a pair of pajama pants. The stories are the same across the country; sewing classes are filling quickly from the coast of California (De Jesus, 2014) to the shores of Florida (Mosher, 2012). Gone are the cost effective days of learning stitches with one’s mother in the parlor.

However, not all sewing instruction is this costly due to the growing availability of free or low-cost education online. BurdaStyle, called a “sort of Facebook for sewers” (Reagan, 2011), is an online DIY and sewing community geared to help novice

seamstresses. The site is filled with “downloadable PDF sewing patterns, tutorials, project ideas and a community passionate about fashion” (“About BurdaStyle,” n.d.). While most of BurdaStyle’s courses do cost money, they are much more affordable than face to face group classes or private lessons. For example, BurdaStyle’s “Introduction to Sewing” course is only \$29.99. This fully online, self-paced course runs for a two month window. It teaches students with no prior sewing experience the basic tools of sewing, how to use a machine, various stitches and seams, and an introduction to working with garment patterns (BurdaStyle, n.d.). Once the fundamentals are mastered, BurdaStyle offers a variety of courses that range in price, length, and difficulty. “Pattern Design with Illustrator and Photoshop” is a more advanced class with a price tag of \$129.99, while a quick, affordable webinar called “Pattern Grading” teaches sewers how to change the size on patterns for a low price of \$19.99. While BurdaStyle classes cost money, the site is also filled with free step by step photo tutorials uploaded both by BurdaStyle staff and community members. These tutorials range from practical or skills based lessons, such as “Beginner’s Serger Tips” or “How to shorten pants with a hand sewn hem” to fun and creative projects such as “Neckband embroidery” or “Add a lining to a tote bag” (“Add a lining,” 2015). The tote bag tutorial was uploaded by a member in North Carolina on January 19, 2015 and within four days it had already received 10,000 views on BurdaStyle.



Figure 1. A photo from the “How to sew a lining into a tote bag” tutorial on BurdaStyle

For those looking for sewing resources that do not cost anything, YouTube videos provide in-depth instruction for free. Both Maggie and Caroline credit YouTube with teaching them the majority of their sewing skills. The assortment of sewing videos on YouTube is a “collection” of intelligence (not synonymous with collective intelligence, but rather a gene or building block of collective intelligence, see Malone, Laubacher, & Dellarocas, 2009), where “items contributed by members are created independently of each other” (p. 29), but are grouped together for easy accessibility. An important component of a collection of intelligence is that knowledge is archived for future viewing. That is not to say that knowledge cannot be shared in more ephemeral online settings, such as a Twitter conversation, but ideally communities will have ways to share information uploaded by users so other members can access the information at a later

date. For example, as a novice and infrequent seamstress, I always forget how to thread my sewing machine when I dust it off every year or so for an impromptu project. If I go to YouTube and search “How to thread a Singer Simple 2263,” I am greeted with 474 video results. Of course, not all of them apply to my actual query and some of them go beyond threading to “basic stitches,” but the majority of the videos will teach me how to thread my machine. Twenty videos pop up on the first page of results and nine of them are English videos directly related to threading my model of sewing machine. Four of the results are in other languages (three in Spanish and one in Hebrew), but from what I can tell from the text and video they also provide threading instructions. One of the videos gives an overview of the whole sewing machine and was produced by Singer Sewing Company. One video was uploaded by a new sewer who invites viewers to learn her machine as she does. And the remaining videos relate to problems with jammed bobbins. The videos have between 696 and 478,040 views at the time of the search (January 14, 2015), with sixteen of the videos boasting over 10,000 views. Because YouTube clearly archives its public videos, I am able to learn how to thread my machine with one search and a few minutes devoted to watching one of the many applicable videos that search provides.

Women have learned how to share their knowledge of sewing with others through online mediums in varied and fascinating ways beyond the plethora of instructional videos found on YouTube. Pinterest has become a crucial space where women collaborate and share knowledge about sewing projects, knitting, and other handicrafts. A search for “learn to sew” on Pinterest yields countless results of tips, instructions, and easy projects meant for novice seamstresses. From making curtains to clothing to sewing

projects for kids, the internet abounds with women wanting to share their needle knowledge with others, and Pinterest has become a library of these digital resources.

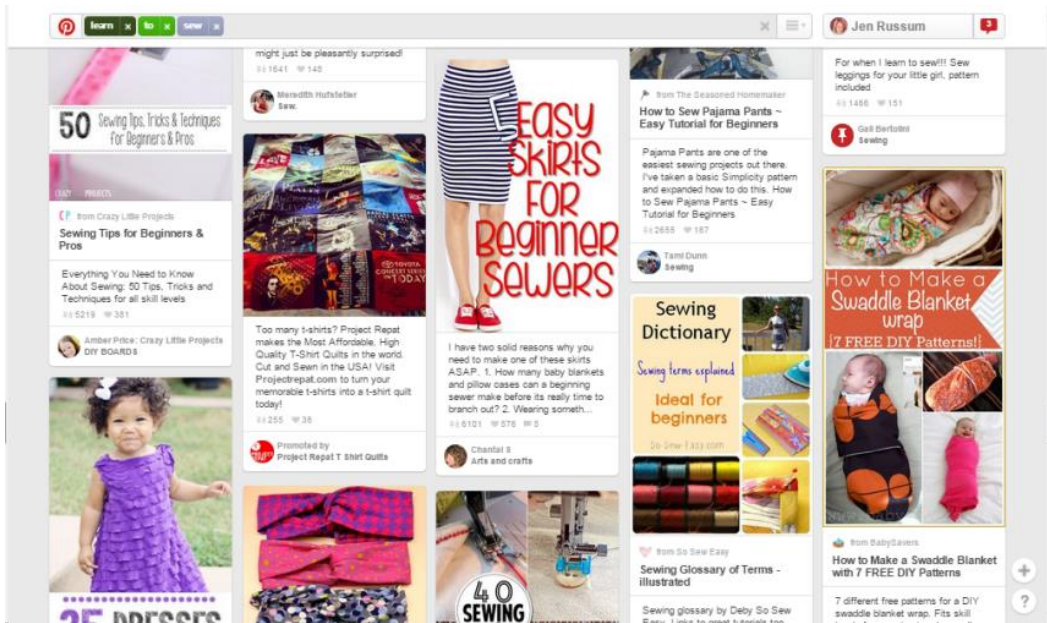


Figure 2. Results for the Pinterest search “how to sew”

But Pinterest is just a place where hyperlinks with accompanying pictures are collected and curated. If one clicks on one of these “learn to sew” pins, where might it lead on the web? How are women actually sharing their sewing knowledge in practical ways if they cannot actually hunch over the same piece of fabric together, with the more experienced seamstress correcting her pupil’s stitches? EBooks are one way women are sharing their knowledge through digital forums. *Mama Don’t Sew: Go To Guide for the Newbie and Wannabe Seamstress* (2012) is one such book. The author, Jennifer Ellis, markets her book as a “wonderful alternative to pricey sewing courses” and sells the 55 page sewing guide for \$3.00 on Etsy and Amazon. Once purchased, the buyer downloads a digital PDF copy of the book, which covers basics such as threading one’s machine,

simple stitches, and instructions for sewing an invisible seam. Jennifer's book is one of many. A search for "sewing eBook" on the Etsy website produces almost 3,000 results of eBooks and PDF patterns for various projects. And Etsy is only one location where these items are sold. Caroline sells her own clothing patterns directly from her blog and markets her handmade dresses by modeling them on Instagram. Whether selling digital tutorials online or marketing patterns on social media, today's seamstresses are eager to share their knowledge and designs with others.

Although these women often sell their knowledge for a fee, there are also countless free resources in which women simply give away their knowledge and share their expertise with others. One way this occurs is through blog tutorials where women share step by step directions on how to complete a DIY or craft project. Kim is a seamstress who blogs at *Oh, Sweet Joy* (<http://www.ohsweetjoy.com>). Although she sells headbands and other accessories in her shop, she often shares simple to follow, easy to sew handmade tutorials on her blog for free. In one of these projects, she teaches her readers how to sew a turban headband with six assembly steps, such as "Cut out two rectangles 5 inches by 26 inches" (Davis, 2013), and then six sewing steps. For the sewing steps, she directs both those sewing with a machine and those sewing by hand with instructions such as, "Set your machine to a zig zag stitch. (If hand sewing, ignore this step & use a blanket stitch)" (Davis, 2013). Each of these steps is accompanied by a photograph, so someone could easily repeat the project at home.



Figure 3. Photo instructions for an online tutorial to make a sewn headband

Some of Kim’s other sewing tutorials include a handmade car seat cover, a fabric iPhone case, and a ruffled throw pillow. Each tutorial offers clear instructions and photographs to teach other women through the blogging medium. In fact, many of the tutorials uploaded to BurdaStyle (mentioned previously) are simply links to member’s personal blogs where they publish tutorials for various sewing projects, such as Kim’s tutorial described here.

Often these blogging tutorials turn into group events called “linky parties” or “blog hops” where one woman will host a party on her blog and invite other women to link the URLs to their own sewing tutorials on the host’s page, so many different sewing projects or crafts can be found in one place. Often these parties happen on a weekly or monthly schedule, and sometimes dictate a theme, such as “Mother’s Day Gifts” or “Valentine’s Day Projects.” On the given day, women will click over to the hosts’ blog,

copy and paste the URL for a project they have previously published on their own blog, and a thumbnail picture of their project will show up on the host's page. People who attend the "party" can click on these thumbnails and hop around from blog to blog to discover new sewing projects. One blogger, Justine at *Sew, Country Chick* (<http://www.sewcountrychick.com/>), recently resumed her weekly party, "Sew and Tell Saturday," after a year-long sabbatical from hosting. She says:

I miss the sense of community doing [the blog hop] engendered. I made lots of blog friends when I was doing it. I'd try to stop by each poster's blog during the week, and it was really fun discovering new blogs and new talent. So I've decided to start doing it again. And I hope you stop by and post your projects over here! (Abbitt, 2014).

During her first week reinstating the blog hop, sixteen women linked up their handmade projects, ranging from kids' swimsuits to maternity tops to dresses, and participation is bound to increase as her 3,000 blog followers learn that she is hosting the party again. A similar linky party called "Sew Darn Crafty" (<http://sewmanyways.blogspot.com/>) has nearly 200 participants who share their projects and knowledge with one another each week. The linky party is a public space where anyone is welcome; novices can share their handiwork while also getting to view the projects of veteran sewers.



Figure 4. Example of thumbnails from a sewing linky party

In a world where sewing, though popular, is no longer an essential skill, it can be difficult for women to find personal sewing instruction. Therefore, women are creating ways to teach others across distance and time, in the form of online tutorials or PDF instructions that can be downloaded, played, or referenced by novice sewers again and again. Many of these educational tools are free or inexpensive, as the sewing community values being able to learn or expand one’s sewing skills without paying for costly classes, and this exchange of knowledge makes the online handmade community more vast and diverse.

How Caroline Learned to Sew

Many novices combine face to face classes with online resources when learning to sew. When blogger Caroline received her sewing machine as a gift, she took one class in

person and then turned to the internet to learn her craft. She explains, “I took one class on how to make a pillowcase and thought— OK, now I can do that!” There were still many skills she had to learn to become the garment designer she is today, but she was able to use the internet for the majority of her training. Caroline shared in her interview that she used blog and video tutorials, combined with “a LOT of trial and error” as she physically manipulated her machine and her fabric. She also took a few more classes at a local sewing store throughout the learning process. In addition to online resources, Caroline “used the book *One Yard Wonders* for lots of simple, beginner projects.” (C. Hulse, personal communication, February 26, 2015).

Another helpful online resource that Caroline still uses today is the Creative Live website (www.creativelive.com), which offers live video classes from creatives in various fields. Topics range from using Adobe software to learning a foreign language to learning lighting tricks for photography. On any given weekday, Creative Live offers one or more classes in each of its main categories: photo & video, art & design, music & audio, craft & maker, money & life. Caroline explains, “They play their classes live for FREE the first time – which is definitely a plus!” (C. Hulse, personal communication, February 26, 2015), and users can later buy access to archived classes for a fee.

As Caroline developed her sewing skills, she also became more deeply embedded in the sewing community online, building friendships with other seamstresses and often traveling to attend sewing conferences and markets where she could interact with her sewing peers and mentors face to face. Here is one illustration of how Caroline’s social experience on Instagram and at a quilt market opened up a new business venture for her and led her to learn the skill of fabric design. It all started when Caroline began following

a textile designer, Pat Bravo, on Instagram. Pat reciprocated by following her back, commenting on Caroline's posts, and eventually sent Caroline some fabric to sew with and feature on her blog. A few months later, Pat and Caroline were able to meet face to face at a sewing conference called Sewing Summit and later met a second time at a large quilt market in Austin, Texas. Caroline was excited to have time to sit and chat with Pat at the market, deepening a friendship she originally established on Instagram. Caroline shared on her blog later that talking with Pat at the market left her "feeling inspired and just happy to know her. Little did I know that only a week later she would be calling me and letting me in on her little idea" (Hulse, 2014). Pat's phone call led to a collaboration in which Caroline was invited to design her first fabric line. Over the next year, Caroline designed the fabric and the collection launched. After that she began producing more garment patterns and eventually quit her job at the quilt shop in order to work for herself at home and online.

However, Caroline had zero experience in the technical side of fabric design when Pat first approached her about the opportunity. Pat helped her learn some of the fundamentals of Adobe Illustrator, the program used for design, but Caroline admits, "Mostly I taught myself through YouTube and Creative Live classes. I literally knew NOTHING before I began, so I had a lot to learn in a really short amount of time." In her announcement post about the fabric line, Caroline shares: "Let's talk about the fact that prior to October, I had never even USED Adobe Illustrator. Nope. In fact, the thought of it terrified me." Not only did Caroline leverage online resources to learn the program, but she also asked a friend for face to face help during the process. Caroline says, "Luckily, I have a dear friend (who happens to live right behind me! Hi Lauren!) who helped me

tremendously during this project (and continues to do so!). Having someone close by to help me with my random middle of the night questions was invaluable!” (Hulse, 2014). Just like when Caroline was beginning to sew, she used a mix of online and offline resources to learn the skills needed to design her first fabric line.

How Maggie Learned to Sew

Another blogger, Maggie, took a different path through the ecology of resources available when learning to sew. Although she also combined online and offline resources during her learning process, she has *never* taken a face-to-face sewing class. When Maggie became fascinated with the sewing industry after discovering the Etsy marketplace back in 2008, she “checked out 30 — seriously, 30! — books from the local library and started to learn the trade” (Whitley, n.d.). When she found the instructions in the books confusing, she turned to YouTube videos for clarification. In fact, she suggests YouTube is just as helpful as a formal class when learning to sew. On her FAQ page, she tells readers, “Many recommend taking a local sewing class, but YouTube can be a great teacher, too” (Whitley, n.d.). Maggie continues to share, “When I started sewing {almost four years ago, goodness!} I had no clue what I was doing as the Handmade Maker. YouTube taught me how to thread my machine and my mother-in-law, an oh-so talented + knowledgeable seamstress, would answer questions I had about my machine over the phone” (Whitley, 2012). Like Caroline did with her Adobe Illustrator experience, Maggie found a person to mentor her in addition to the instruction she was receiving online. However, Maggie never once took a formal sewing class before launching her handmade shop, “Gussy Sews,” on Etsy in 2009.

Maggie's shop was quite successful and within a few years she moved her company from Etsy to an independent site in order to customize the shopping experience for her customers and save the fees Etsy charges its sellers. She eventually hired additional seamstresses and other employees to help with productions, shipping, and customer service, and in 2014 she launched a second line called "Caroline Made." She says she learned a variety of skills during this time, including how to accurately price her products and how to develop her storytelling voice to market her brand. Part of the way she learned these skills was through the mentorship of other online shop owners, with whom she communicated over the phone, in person, via email, or simply by watching "from afar." She credits two other blogger-entrepreneurs in particular with teaching her valuable lessons such as how to balance her family responsibilities with creative time and for encouraging her to hire her first assistant.

As Maggie's business grew, her family also grew. Now that she has two young children at home, she has taken a step back from sewing, and only restocks her shops occasionally, running "pop-up" or "flash sales" throughout the year. She advertises new, limited edition products over her blog and Instagram account, and each collection sells out very rapidly. However, she continues to learn new skills even as the entrepreneurial side of her sewing has slowed down. For example, she shares in an interview:

A little over a month ago I decided it was time to finally sew my son a quilt, something I've never done before. I read a few sewing tutorials on Pinterest, read a few inspiring blog posts on mixing prints and colors, and then literally jumped in. I grabbed my cutting mat, ironing board, and began with music playing in the background. I'm super close to finishing,

and while the quilt isn't textbook perfect, it's perfect in my eyes. Sewing this quilt for Maxwell reminds me of the beginning of my journey into handmade. I wasn't sure what I was doing, but I had the passion and patience to learn. (M. Whitley, personal communication, October 14, 2015).

Although Maggie's sewing has taken on a different pace, she continues to learn new skills and plans to take on new creative and entrepreneurial projects in the future, as time allows.

The map below shows Caroline and Maggie's unique paths through the ecology of resources available to people learning to sew. Their paths cross heavily at YouTube tutorial videos, but the outcomes of their learning journeys are very different. Caroline specializes in pattern making and fabric design. Maggie sews less frequently now, but continues to use her handmade knowledge and business skills to encourage and coach other female entrepreneurs.

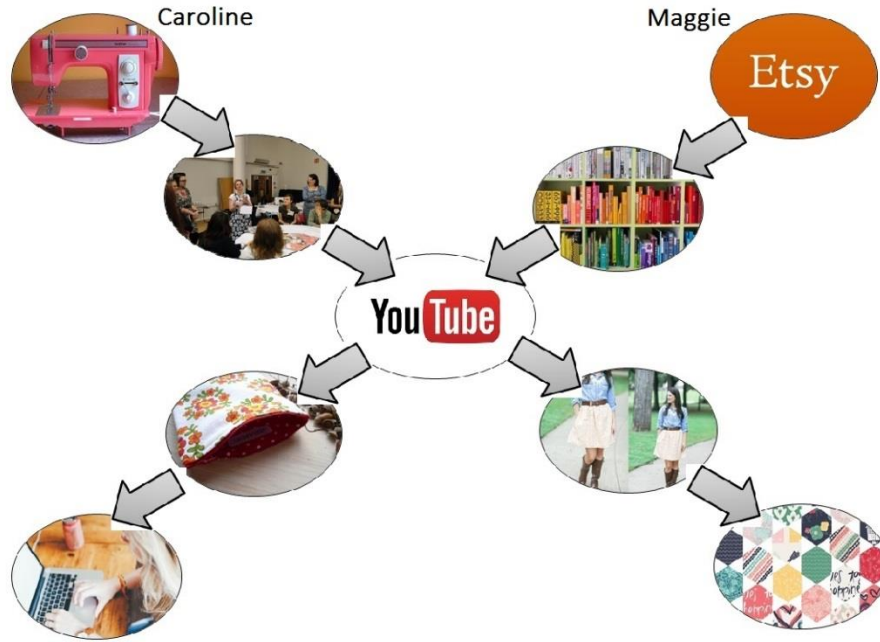


Figure 5. A map of Caroline and Maggie’s paths through the sewing media ecology

I left other bubbles off the map for readability, but if one were to add other resources such as BurdaStyle, eBooks, and the many individual blogs that teach sewing, this picture of the online landscape would become littered with resources and spaces that teach sewing skills. Caroline and Maggie’s routes finish in different places on the map, but they don’t actually end in theory, since both women are now producing new knowledge in the form of patterns, blog posts, and eBooks, and dispersing it into the ecology for novice seamstresses to read, watch, replicate, and remix.

Beyond the Needle to the Net

Another realm of knowledge sharing and learning takes place within the sewing community that is not necessarily related to the exchange of sewing skills. In previous centuries, women would exchange social knowledge as they gathered around their

hemming, mending, and quilt making. From teaching etiquette to younger ladies (Gelber, 1999) to giving homemaking and sexual advice to betrothed women (Smith-Rosenberg, 1975), the knowledge passed in sewing groups went beyond learning new stitches or sharing patterns. Women who are active in online sewing communities share similar social knowledge today. Because of the rich friendships that develop within the handmade community, women are also able to give and receive other bits of social or cultural information that might not be directly related to sewing. Some of this knowledge might be related to business opportunities or expanding one's social media platform, but some of this knowledge might come from sharing personal information about one's marriage, family, work background, education, or other life experiences when chatting with and collaborating with women online, similarly to when women would gather in each other's parlors to gossip and sew at the same time.

Though Maggie has significantly cut back on her sewing since having children, she is still heavily involved in the exchange of social and business knowledge online. She recently published an e-book with a fellow female entrepreneur called "Building a Business: How to dream, plan, make, sell and share your online shop" which goes into detail about the two authors' "handmade journeys" and "everything we have learned about running an online shop" (Whitley, 2015). Maggie also passes on her own knowledge through her mentorship program for other bloggers and business owners through emails and phone calls, "which allows me to help them create a road map for their goals" (M. Whitley, personal communication, October 14, 2015). She still writes daily on her blog, often about the handmade industry, finding time to create, or online business strategies. Some of her recent posts include "how to be creative in a small

space” which reflects on her transition from living in a huge house in Minneapolis to a one bedroom apartment in L.A., an update on her new hobby of making embroidery hoops, or a large Valentine’s Day giveaway, in which she featured and gave away products from other handmade shops.

Maggie sees her blog as “a tight-knit community of handmade makers, wives, mamas and encouragers” (Whitley, 2015). While researchers might not label blogs such as Maggie’s as a “community,” the fact that she views her website as one is important. While no formal membership is required to read Maggie’s blog or converse with her on social media sites, she sees her online network as a community of friends and customers that provides support and encouragement to one another. She claims one of the main reasons she loves handmade business so much is because she thrives “on community and the personal encouragement that swells from it” (Whitley, 2014). The affordances of belonging to this online network became very apparent when Maggie moved across the country from Minneapolis to Los Angeles. Within weeks of moving, Maggie posted pictures of attending friends’ birthday parties in the city and meeting up with a group of three other moms weekly. All of these women were people she met through blogging and running her shop online. Although out-of-state moves can be very isolating, especially for moms who are often home-bound with young children, Maggie was able to quickly build a network of friends in California due to the relationships and social capital she had acquired in her online endeavors.

Even when separated geographically, women form friendships via their sewing and DIY blogs and communicate often through blog comments, emails, and social media such as Twitter and Instagram. Even if women do not meet up at formal sewing events,

they may often visit each other casually as they travel around the country. When Caroline traveled to Seattle to compete in a sewing reality television show, she met up with fellow blogger and seamstress, Erika, a local Seattleite who was eager to show Caroline around the city. Before the trip, one could follow Erika and Caroline's tweets to see that they were planning to see each other in Seattle in a few weeks. While they were together in the city, they posted pictures to Instagram as they visited sites and restaurants around the city. As they posted these pictures, mutual blog friends, especially those from the DIY community, would leave comments such as, "How fun!!! Jealous you girls are hanging out!" (Riggs, 2013), to express their envy of this face-to-face meeting. Because Caroline and Erika established a social connection online before the trip, Caroline was able to get a tour of Seattle from a local resident and gain a new understanding of a geographic region she had never visited before.

However, face-to-face meetings like Caroline and Erica's are actually quite rare. Sewing bloggers more frequently connect on social media, often just to socialize, but also to ask for help and problem-solve. Often, these conversations revolve around technology and changes being made by blog programs or social networking sites. For example, in the fall of 2012 Google's RSS program FeedBurner, which allows bloggers to offer email subscriptions to their readers for free, stopped working one day. This interruption in service happened not long after Google had announced that it would be downsizing the FeedBurner program and limiting some of the ways it could be used. When it suddenly stopped working, bloggers were concerned that the program had shut down permanently and they would need to quickly find another service to manage their email subscription lists. A conversation between multiple bloggers, including Maggie, ensued on Twitter

when one blogger asked “Anyone know what’s wrong with FeedBurner right now?” (Wiegand, 2013). Although she only tagged a few bloggers in her question, many women answered with rumors they had heard about if and when FeedBurner was shutting down. However, the Twitter conversation actually turned into a collaborative problem-solving session, when another blogger suggested, “It is probably a good time to start researching how to migrate your subscriptions” (Morgan, 2013). Many bloggers began sharing alternative programs they use, such as MailChimp or FeedBlitz, and also circulated links to various blog posts about email management options throughout the conversation. Within minutes a large number of bloggers had collected and exchanged information about alternate programs to use, if indeed, Google did shut down its FeedBurner service.



Figure 6. Twitter conversation between many bloggers about RSS fee options

In another example, three bloggers asked a general question to their Twitter followers to strike up a conversation: “Do you think Instagram interaction is to blame for the decline in blog commenting?” These three women had noticed an overall decline in the number of comments they were receiving on their blog posts and began to contemplate how blog interactions might be impacted by social media activity. By the end of the conversation, ten different bloggers had joined in a lengthy discussion of how they use their smart phones and social media to interact with other bloggers. One blogger admitted, “I’ve been toying with the idea of a blog without comments, encouraging talk on IG/Twitter instead” (Sunde, 2014). Although bloggers will often write formal blog posts about social media and online business techniques, they often move beyond their blogs and use networks such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram for casual conversations about technology since the dialogue that happens between bloggers is rich and lengthy when it happens on social media networks. These conversations are visible to more people and invite many voices and perspectives into the conversation at hand. In this way, knowledge is shared and gained more rapidly than on the blogs themselves, but directly impacts the way the blogs function. Women often take the information they learn from these social media discussions and return to their blogs to write formal, informational posts, which archives the knowledge exchanged in ephemeral forums such as Twitter in a way that makes it accessible to readers in the future. The actions of these women build the media ecology for sewing by providing spaces for real-time conversation about issues and questions and also allowing women to formally write out and archive knowledge in blog form to share with inquirers presently and in the future.

These are just a few examples of the various ways knowledge is shared between sewing bloggers online. As with sewing circles and craft clubs throughout women's history, online spaces provide another venue for women to exchange knowledge that expands beyond topics of sewing skills and projects. While digital environments are crucial spaces where women are teaching and mentoring other women in their sewing endeavors, the scope of knowledge shared online expands to include general social knowledge. Sewing bloggers are able to advise each other and share their unique experiences in topics such as travel, entrepreneurship, marriage, and motherhood, just as seamstresses have done throughout history.

A “Pattern Designer” and a “Mama-Maker:” How Knowledge Effects Identity

In closing, I will argue that the experiences Caroline and Maggie have had in learning to sew and starting handmade businesses online have led them each to adopt specific identities and build unique networks with other women. Their distinctive identities as handmade artists have resulted in various affordances and opportunities for them as sewers, entrepreneurs, and women in general. Learning always impacts identity (Gee, 2004; Gee & Hayes, 2011; Lankshear & Knobel, 2008; Lave & Wenger, 1991), and when learning takes place online, the possibilities for relationships, social capital, and opportunities within a vast social network only increase as time and geographic restraints are lifted to some degree.

Caroline's online knowledge-building process has led her to take on labels such as “blogger,” “seamstress,” and most recently “clothing pattern and fabric designer,” which is how she describes her profession since she quit her job at the quilt shop and is pursuing

sewing and selling patterns online full-time. As she built relationships with other sewers, she gained specific types of knowledge and was exposed to various opportunities.

Caroline befriended April Rhodes, a well-known pattern designer from Columbus, Ohio, and Caroline claims April was instrumental in teaching her about running an online business. And, as mentioned earlier, Caroline never would have designed a fabric line, if she had not connected with textile designer Pat Bravo over Instagram. Caroline's trip to Seattle occurred because she saw a fellow seamstress tweet about a casting call for a PBS sewing show called *Sew It All*. On a whim, Caroline entered the contest and was selected as a top five finalist which required a trip to Washington State for taping (Hulse, 2013). Even though Caroline didn't win the contest, she was later asked to appear on an episode of *Sew It All* to share a tutorial on how to make a chevron tote bag. Caroline traveled to Denver for the taping where she was able to meet in person with a friend who was helping redesign her blog at the time. Additionally, she was able to visit two fabric shops of women she had met online, and finally she had dinner with another "online" sewing friend, Erin (Hulse, 2013). Since that trip, Caroline and Erin have become such good friends that Caroline stays with Erin anytime she visits Denver, and the two women talk on the phone and text frequently when they are in their different home states. Caroline says "I feel like I belong to the online sewing blogger community," and her current goals line up with that affiliation she feels. Caroline shares, "In 2014 I released five patterns, and I plan to release four in 2015." Even though sewing has now become her profession, Caroline does not plan to stop learning anytime soon. She says, "I am constantly trying to learn more about SEO, Pinterest, and other social platforms," and she continues to take classes on the Creative Live website to expand her sewing and design skills as well.

While Caroline's involvement in sewing professionally and networking online have accelerated over the past two years, Maggie's involvement in the sewing community has slowed since the birth of her two children. However, she still sells handmade items online and considers her blog a space where "makers" and "mamas" can come together. Her involvement in the handmade community and the relationships she's formed online have allowed her to juggle her sewing endeavors and her parenting responsibilities in a way that is comfortable for her during this season.

Five years ago, Maggie's pursuits and training looked much like Caroline's do today. She learned to sew in about a year's time with a goal to open her own Etsy shop. Once her shop was open, she worked toward specific production and sales goals that would allow her to quit her job and pursue sewing as an online endeavor. Maggie claims that "building friendships" with other women in the handmade industry "helped me to quit my day job and focus on handmade full-time." Since opening her Etsy shop, she eventually transitioned to her own self-hosted shop called Gussy Sews, turned Gussy Sews into a subscription club where monthly packages are mailed to subscribers for set two or three month periods, and opened a second online shop called Caroline Made, which sells accessories just like Gussy Sews, but features different styles and materials, more subtle color themes, and completely different branding. As she learned to sew and run a business online, Maggie says she "was constantly learning new techniques, sewing new items, and sharing all of this on my blog." She even started a mentoring program, where she conducted video coaching with aspiring seamstresses, bloggers, and business owners.

Now that she has moved to California and is busy raising two young children, Maggie only restocks her shops occasionally, although the online storefronts are always open. However, she still blogs almost daily, and continues to write about handmade business, as well as motherhood. She is open about how she often misses working full-time for her shops, but she pursues creativity (such as her new hobby of embroidery) in other ways and shares her endeavors on her blog. Maggie credits her blog as a space where she can share the both the easy and difficult parts of life:

Zack and I have battled 7 months of unemployment in Detroit; moved to Minneapolis in a single day; braved me quitting my day job to focus on a newly-discovered handmade dream; adopted a puppy; traveled to Tanzania, Africa; hired a team of Gussy Sews assistants (shipping, business assistant, production); prayed over & celebrated his career advancements (visual effects/production within the media industry); moved to Los Angeles to focus on Zack's career; and the births of our children, Maxwell and Natalie (Whitley, n.d.).

Now Maggie shares the labels “mama” and “maker” and her online pursuits have allowed her to build relationships in both realms. She quickly established a group of friends who are also moms of young children upon moving to California. She met these women online and they now meet up almost weekly, and take their young children to restaurants and beaches around the Los Angeles area they call home. However, she has not neglected her network of fellow handmade artists. She collaborates with other makers often by featuring their handmade shops on her blog and continues to post on business and sewing-related topics. Maggie recently shared a video by another seamstress on the

process of sewing a handbag. She explains in a post that follows the video, “I’m super drawn to any how-to sewing video, probably because it’s how I learned to sew (along with many, many library books). I love watching other people work, especially when I learn a new technique along the way. It makes my brain go into creative overdrive, which is amazing” (Whitley, 2015). During the same week, she also shared her newest embroidery hoop project and announced that the Gussy Sews shop had been updated with limited inventory. These posts were scattered throughout other posts on motherhood and marriage, showing how Maggie balances her various identities and reflects on her roles through writing online.

A Conclusion about Connected Learning

As this chapter shows, the unique learning paths Caroline and Maggie took when learning to sew resulted in varied opportunities, experiences, and relationships for each woman. As they built their networks online, they each took on different identities professionally and socially on the web. While Caroline and Maggie sought to increase their own knowledge and pursue personal goals they have also contributed their knowledge, products, and experiences to a vast network of seamstresses online. As they received knowledge and friendship from others when learning to sew and run online businesses, they, in turn, have passed on knowledge through their blogs and other social media networks to other women seeking to gain knowledge in digital sewing spaces.

Recent research has examined how young people take part in “connected learning” by forming peer groups to bond over shared interests and expertise (Ito et al., 2013). Although this model of learning can happen online and offline, students often

engage digital media when expanding their knowledge around a particular interest. For example, a girl interested in screenwriting might join an online fanfiction writing community or a boy who wants to be a chef might start participating on cooking forums or blogs. This type of learning is “socially embedded, interest-driven, and oriented toward educational, economic, or political opportunity” (Ito et al., 2013). Most importantly, connected learning is realized when students are able to connect their personal pursuits back to what they are learning in school and use their knowledge for academic achievement or civic engagement.

Thus far most research on connected learning has focused on school age children and young adults, as the window of 12-18 years of age is a crucial time for connecting interests to learning (Ito et al., 2013). However, my study shows how connected learning is occurring in adult populations – in this example, female adults in the 20-30 age range who desire to learn sewing. Future research should examine the activities of other groups (men, the elderly, disabled persons, ethnic minorities) to see how adults are engaging in connected learning around various interests and by using a variety of digital media. While children “connect” their personal learning back to the public and formal space of the classroom, women like Caroline and Maggie are able to use their learning to enter into new public spaces, such as quilt markets, play groups, or blogging conferences. The ways connected learning affords the opportunity to forge social relationships and opportunities for people who are isolated due to personal, economic, or physical restraints, such as women who are home-bound due to child-rearing or people who are bedridden with a chronic illness, is worthy of further study. Moreover, the more deeply adults understand their own learning paths and become more acutely aware of the ways their personal

pursuits are linked to knowledge-sharing and community endeavors the more aptly they can model connected learning to the next generation. Because as one wanders within a media ecology, the learning eventually leads to teaching, and though the path may be winding, it can always come full circle.

Chapter 3

QUILTS FOR A CAUSE (AND SOCK MONKEYS, TOO): WOMEN'S SEWING ACTIVISM MOVES ONLINE

Titles and catchphrases such as “the modern seamstress” or “the knitting revolution” suggest that women within the 21st century craft movement are doing something radical and progressive with their DIY activism. In some ways this is true. With a plethora of new technologies and digital tools at their disposal, today’s sewers, knitters, and other crafters are able to build vast networks and spread political messages farther and faster than ever before. However, as artist and activist Wendy Somerson (2007) points out, “Our grannies and their mothers were probably not just knitting alone at home; they too were building community with other women, and perhaps were even involved in political activism” (40). Attempts to portray modern day crafting as evolved or enlightened in comparison to domestic activities in past eras “betrays a kind of ignorance about older generations of women and the ways in which crafting may have served a similar purpose in their lives” (Groeneveld, 2010, p. 272) This chapter examines the ways sewing has been a tool for activism in past history and connects it to the ways women are practicing sewing for philanthropic and activist purposes in today’s digital world.

In some ways, digital craft activism is a fresh way women are enacting change in their own lives, their communities, and the world at large, but in many respects these women are carrying on and modifying activist efforts that have been practiced for generations. If one traces the history of American seamstresses, as I do in a later section, it is apparent women’s needles have been involved in social issues including war,

poverty, immigration, health care, and civil rights throughout the centuries. Today, women continue to use their sewing knowledge and handmade products to raise awareness for causes, support women and children and other underprivileged people groups, or to enact social justice.

Notably, the rapidly expanding internet provides new spaces and tools for women to collaborate in sewing for the common good. Feminist researchers in the past have looked at links between geographic embeddedness and women's abilities to enact small social changes that sometimes lead to larger political movements or social organizations (Martin, Hanson & Fontaine, 2007, p. 78). The internet creates new geographic spaces for activist efforts that are not constrained by physical proximity or time. Women embarking on humanitarian projects may seek collaborators across the globe and communicate with them quickly and inexpensively at any hour of the day. This chapter seeks to understand how women are enacting social change when embedded in online geographies and how they communicate and collaborate across digital channels.

In this chapter, I show various examples where sewing activism is taking place online and how projects are being organized using digital tools. I compare the digital technologies being used in each online activism example and examine how these media extend the history of women's activism in America, and possibly offer new ways for women to collaborate and speak their minds. I argue that while both large-scale and small activism exists in digital DIY realms, the size of individual movements does not really matter, but rather the collective efforts of women who work to subvert subtle systems of oppression and injustice both in the U.S. and internationally, as well as build new opportunities for women. Seamstresses participate in activism for various causes that

represent a range of political positions, but the most important factor is that women are able to use online platforms to make, do, give, and protest apart from government funding or male leadership. This chapter addresses the following questions:

- What are some examples of the current landscape of women’s activism online?
- What digital tools are being used in these sewing activism efforts?
- What has digital media changed or made possible in regards to feminist activism?

In the first section of this chapter, I look at some of the terms and frameworks being used to describe and understand the intersection between craft and activism. I also review literature that looks at craft activism in online spaces in particular. Next, I survey how women have used sewing for purposes of justice, philanthropy, protest, and social change throughout history to show how modern digital crafting adds to the legacy of women’s activism in America. Then, I turn to today’s online landscape and give examples of small and large sewing projects conducted with activist motives, representing a variety of political positions and social worldviews. My goal is to examine and compare which digital tools are used by women in these activist efforts and how they are using them. Finally, I discuss how the digital media and technologies being used in today’s sewing activism extend and enhance the efforts of women to use their needles to bring about change, growth, and freedom throughout history.

Craftivists and Civic Participation

When I refer to “activism” throughout this chapter, I am broadly referring to women’s efforts to fight for social and economic justice for disadvantaged people groups. Often feminist activist efforts are not overtly political, but instead women activists

regularly disavow being “political” and, instead, turn to everyday forms of activism stemming from their community roles and identities as women (Naples, 2012). While I mention blatant political acts such as yarn bombing and war protest quilts, since they also make up the rich history of women’s activism and fiber arts practices, my data focuses on women whose activists efforts are subtle and philanthropic in nature. These women see needs in their communities or glimpse the hardships of women abroad and seek to serve those needs with their sewing knowledge and production.

Similarly, a term being used more frequently by makers, activists, and material studies scholars alike is the label “craftivism,” or the use of craft practice and products for activist purposes. While recent studies look at craftivism as a general practice with a wide array of general examples across many different art forms (Garber, 2013), this chapter provides an in-depth look at how women use sewing for activism, which is one of the first analyses to focus on one specific “craftivist” practice and community, and the ways women participate in social and political activities through the ways they sew and communicate online. The term “craftivism” is credited to Betsy Greer (2011), but she claims she saw it used on an online forum for the “Church of Craft” collective before she helped the phrase gain widespread popularity. As an avid knitter, she was frustrated that the words “craft” – the “younger child not taken seriously by art” – and “activism” – which makes “people uncomfortable” (Greer, 2011, p. 178) had become words with such negative connotations. She began her quest to see each word as a positive entity, and sought to combine them in order to see new ideas spring forth. Although “craftivism” or one’s attempt to be an agent of change through the practice of craft, does not only take

place in online spaces, Greer does credit the rise of the internet (p. 179) for playing a key role in the term's quick adoption across various communities.

Indeed, the internet has provided unique ways for women to connect, and it gives a platform for a variety of voices. Sewing has always been an activity where women were able to come together to share knowledge and socialize, but when sewing moves online, these important conversations are no longer confined to specific physical locations.

Online crafters share more than craft tips and skills; they also discuss politics and social issues, and provide support for one another by connecting over a variety of online forums such as craft websites, blogs, and podcasts. Winge and Stalpe (2013) maintain that the “social networking component of crafting cannot be underestimated; it connects large numbers of crafters to one another in ways not possible before, and it is significant to maintaining handcrafts for future generations” (81). Even when craftivist activities take place offline, the events are often organized and archived using digital tools. For example, when groups “yarn bomb” a city by knitting on fixtures such as signs, lights, and cars as way to soften the industrialized, urban landscape (Tapper and Zucker, 2011), organizers often use digital mediums such as Facebook to plan these events and might even upload videos of the yarn bombing to YouTube to make an archive that will last long after the strings have been snipped away from the city gates. While craftivism is not exclusive to the digital realm, women who craft to promote change are able to collaborate with more people and spread their messages further by sharing their causes in online spaces.

Another way to think about the intersection of craft and activism is to consider how social change happens by way of “participatory democracy” (Garber, 2013). Many

crafters engage in building their own democracy, especially online, as equal and reflective individuals contribute to building “a sense of community, of association, of neighboring and joining” (Torres, 1998, p. 146-147). In “Craft as Activism,” Elizabeth Garber argues that craft is inherently more democratic than fine art because people can engage in crafts without extensive formal training, the products of craft culture are often gifted instead of sold, and crafts are often functional and connected to daily life (54). Even when women sell their crafts, they engage in micro-level democracy in which they run their own businesses mostly free of corporate control or male management, and have more freedom in how they spend their time and what and how they choose to create.

While online civic participation follows common trends from the pre-internet era, with higher social status or education level making one more likely to participate in civic-related activities, some studies show that those engaged with social media are more likely to encounter diverse political viewpoints (Kahne, Lee, & Feezell, 2012; Kahne et al., 2012), and are more likely to further study a political or social issue because of something they first read online (Smith, 2013). Furthermore, online users, especially those under the age of 29, rarely see their online political activity as separate from their online life in general (Smith, 2013). Most internet users grasp how their daily use of the internet often exposes them to political and civic issues, and they often use digital resources to learn more about these issues and take action on them, by signing an online petition, spreading a message via social media, or engaging in a political discussion on a social networking site. The examples provided in this chapter show that women who conduct their normal sewing activities online, including talking with other seamstresses, selling products, or looking for new project ideas, also see these spaces as avenues for

taking part in civic activities. This is reminiscent of the ways women have historically met together with the primary motive of sewing, only to find that their shared conversations, relationships, and skills are advantageous for civic and political endeavors as well.

Sewing as Service throughout History

Sewing and social causes have been stitched together since the United States' earliest days. While disestablishment caused American churches to lose their political power in the 1780s and 1790s, the change inadvertently opened new pathways for the women who numerically dominated Protestant denominations (Matthews, 1989; Norton, 1984). Glenna Matthews (1989) explains:

As the churches lost their politically privileged positions and access to tax revenues, they needed to generate new sources of funds, support, and loyalty. That need helped promote the formation of voluntary associations tied to individual churches; the earliest of these were denominationally sponsored sewing circles or female charitable societies organized in New England in the last two decades of the century. After the Second Great Awakening (1790-1840), which brought even larger numbers of female converts into Protestant churches, women's charitable and reform associations burgeoned, creating what historians of the nineteenth century called "the benevolent empire" (61).

Although no one intended it at the time, as the church's political influence was curbed, it gave women a chance to organize and empower themselves by creating groups and projects to serve those in need throughout their local communities.

As a result of the informal women's groups begun in the late eighteenth century, sewing charities flourished in the "benevolent empire" of the 1800s. Many sewing circles met to sew clothes for the poor and would sometimes host charity bazaars where sewn products and fancywork trifles (such as embroidery and small decorative items made of leaves, paint, and lace) were sold and the proceeds donated to charity (White Nelson, 2004). These philanthropic events allowed women to justify their fancywork, which was sometimes judged as worthless or wasteful, because "in a charity bazaar the time spent on fancywork was time spent on God's work" (Gelber, 1999, p. 177). Although these "fancy fairs" were sometimes scorned for being a frivolous way to "provide *nouveaux riche* families with an opportunity for mixing with a higher social stratum," as they were spaces where the middle and upper classes converged, they also "permitted women to cross the threshold into public life" by engaging in philanthropic endeavors (Parker, 2010, p. 163). These charity events were one of the earliest visible social practices in which women were encouraged to leave the private sphere of the home to engage in community-wide social causes.

In addition to selling handmade goods, some sewing clubs taught sewing itself as a philanthropic endeavor. Groups such as the Litchfield Needle and Bobbin Club reached out to immigrant families to teach the women and young girls how to sew, so they could begin earning an income for their families (Ulrich, 2001). The motives of these actions were mixed, as these women saw their benevolence as a way to teach foreigners to

assimilate with American culture, but the friendship extended was also provoked by a sincere belief that sewing skills could help these new families establish themselves economically in a new world.

Interestingly, sewing circles and clubs also played a significant role in the abolition movement. Some of these groups, after partaking in lengthy political discussions in their weekly meetings, began circulating anti-slavery petitions throughout their communities, even in the south (Ulrich, 2001). During the war, many women in the northern states began using their charity fairs to contribute to the Union war effort. Women would create and sell patriotic products at their bazaars, and then donate the proceeds to local hospitals, and many sewing circles made clothing and bandages for wounded soldiers (White Nelson, 2004). Eventually these women produced enough supplies that regional drop off and distribution centers were set up to help lift soldiers' spirits and save lives by way of clean bandages and warm socks for the wounded.

The benevolent empire of the nineteenth century paved the way for women to take the helm behind some of the 20th century's most important social issues such as women's suffrage, prohibition, and the creation of urban philanthropies and welfare services (Norton, 1984, 42). Mary Beth Norton (1984) says:

Therefore, disestablishment provided the impetus for one of the most important developments in American community life and in the lives of nineteenth-century American Northern and urban women. Many historians now argue that the benevolent societies were an important step in the American women's movement toward emancipation from patriarchal power (42).

As women met frequently with their sewing circles, they grew in their own independence and in their loyalty to one another, eventually gaining the voice, confidence, and support needed to speak out and take a stance on some of the most important social issues in America's newly industrialized, urban society.

When war ravaged U.S. culture once again, although this time mostly on foreign soil, American women followed the legacy of their grandmothers and began sewing to support the war effort. Posters during World War I read, "Our Boys Need SOX," imploring women to knit and sew socks to be sent to soldiers (Santomassimo & Riad, 2011). During World War II, the Junior Women's Club in Whiteville, North Carolina partnered with the Red Cross to set up a sewing room (Biser & Bragaw, n.d.). Individual women or sewing groups could work in the room, sewing and knitting clothes that would eventually be sold with the proceeds going to the war effort.

Even during the height of second-wave feminism, crafting amongst women was not completely disdained, as some historical accounts would suggest. Publications such as the *Whole Earth Catalog* (1968–72) reveal a growing interest in sustainability during this time, as articles emphasized a do-it-yourself approach to living in a more ethical and environmentally conscious manner (Groeneveld, 2010, p. 269). Furthermore, there was a resurgence of crafting in the 1960s and 1970s that was clearly aligned with anti-Vietnam War sentiments and "flower power" philosophies embracing peace and a connection to natural resources (Minahan & Cox, 2007). This played out in various ways; some protesters sewed the American flag into garments as a sign of rebellion (Gustainis & Hahn, 1988), while others started making their own clothes as a response to what they saw as the hyper-commercialization of culture. The practice of women using their sewing

and knitting efforts to protest rather than support war has continued into the 21st century. One such project was called “Pink Tank,” in which Danish activist Marianne Jørgensen directed a project in which Danish, UK, and American knitters collaborated to knit together enough pink squares to cover a combat tank used in WWII (Garber, 2013). It took over 4,000 squares to cover the large vehicle, and Jørgensen says the pink knitted covering symbolizes characteristics that are opposite of war: home, care, closeness, and time for reflection. As women sew or knit, whether in opposition or support of war, these “domestic” activities become politicized “in a way that troubles” (Groeneveld, 2010, p. 266) clean-cut distinctions between the “private” and “public” spheres.

Since using handcrafts as a means of protest has arguably been the most heavily-studied form of women’s activism, the examples I give in the next section reveal additional ways women are using their sewing for social good in online spaces. While sewing to protest still happens frequently in digital realms, it is only one of many ways that women are stitching to bring about civic action. The examples I provide show how sewing is being used to support other women financially, to promote ethical business practices in the U.S., and to provide resources to disadvantaged women and children both domestically and abroad.

Framework

Within the realm of sewing blogs alone, one can find an array of women’s activism that represents many different motivations and worldviews. Whether liberal or conservative, Christian or atheist, employed or not, women know their sewing can be used for altruistic endeavors, and, furthermore, realize digital tools can help them spread

their messages, deploy supplies, and gather more participants to the cause – whatever it might be. Although there are many political viewpoints behind today’s sewing activism, a common theme in feminist activism is working toward the improved the quality of life for women, their children, and their communities (Martin, Hanson & Fontaine, 2007). The examples I provide below range from personal, short-term projects to global, ongoing ventures. I argue that one project is not necessarily more important than another, but collaboratively all these acts show the various ways women are empowered to use their knowledge and material labor to create positive social change.

As with my other chapters, the data described and analyzed here was collected from sewing blogs and the bloggers’ related social media accounts. In some of these examples, the blogger participated in a project organized by other women. In other examples, the blogger was the initiator and organizer of the event, seeking other people to participate or contribute to the cause. Regardless of the scope of the project, I am interested in how these women are using digital channels to publicize their cause and recruit participants and examining the tangible outcomes of these digital communication webs.

Case Studies of Digital Craftivism

I begin with an example of a small-scale project that benefitted an ill woman and her family. I do not want to overlook “small” projects because often-overlooked forms of activism help us understand the social relationships that lead to broader efforts for social change (Martin, Hanson & Fontaine, 2007). Oftentimes women within sewing and craft circles online donate the proceeds from their shop, either the entire day’s sales or a

percentage of their profits to a charitable cause. In other instances, women have collaborated to give away products in order to raise money for a person in need, often a mother with cancer or a child struggling with a terminal illness. In 2011, a group of DIY and craft bloggers put together a temporary online store called “Shop for Sharlie” and donated items to raise money for a fellow blogger, Sharlie, who was awaiting a double lung and heart transplant. One of Sharlie’s closest friends is a blogger and seamstress who decided to reach out “to the creative community to come up with a way to raise funds for her impending medical bills” (Cheney, 2011). The bloggers who participated gave away a handmade item, a craft tutorial, or online advertising space, and then used their blogs, Facebook pages, and Twitter accounts to promote the event, which took place over a few days in late September. The group raised over \$60,000 for Sharlie’s medical bills, and she underwent a successful transplant surgery just a few weeks after the fundraiser ended. While this short-term project may not seem very impactful, it is an important example of women joining together to support themselves financially.

Throughout history, women have suffered and died from illness and disease (and still do today, especially in developing countries), because they are poor and single or their male partners are unable or unwilling to provide the resources needed to get medical help (Berhane et al., 2001; Kyomuhendo, 2003). Even in a middle class family like Sharlie’s, the cost of cancer treatments, transplants, and ongoing follow-up procedures over a number of years can be financially detrimental, even with insurance. The ability of women to join together and raise such a substantial contribution in such a short amount of time is incredibly significant. It’s important to note the women who participated in this project were separated geographically from one another, and many of them do not even

know Sharlie personally, yet they were able to orchestrate the entire event online and raise a large sum of money in just two or three days. The magnitude of this one small project shows how digital tools create a reach for philanthropy that is unprecedented in women's history.

I now want to show an example of philanthropy on a much larger scale by analyzing the case study of a blog and coordinating project called Craft Hope. This is an example of a long-standing, wide-reaching, not-for-profit charitable project, where women have collaborated across digital channels to sew products and give them directly to people in need. A woman named Jade began a blog called *Craft Hope* in 2009 with the belief that "small handmade projects can make a huge difference" (Sims, n.d.). She had an idea to use pillowcases to make dresses for orphan girls in Mexico. She explains on her blog,

From time to time people ask me how I started Craft Hope. I always respond with, 'it started with a dress.' Twenty-nine pillowcase dresses to be exact. I started this little blog and named it Craft Hope. I probably had twenty followers and they were all blog friends. I said, 'let's make pillowcase dresses for orphans in Mexico' and they say [sic] 'okay.' And the rest is history. Four years and over 100,000 handmade items later here we are (Sims, n.d.).

Since her first pillowcase dress project, Jade's blog and her online reach have grown tremendously, and she has completed twenty-six projects over the past six years, making handmade items such as clothing, hats, and blankets for philanthropic endeavors.

Jade has since published a book also titled *Craft Hope* (2010) that provides instructions for 32 craft projects that can be made and donated to charities, including soap for women's shelters and beanies for cancer patients (Garber, 2013), but perhaps her most impactful activism still happens on her blog where she recruits her readers to make handmade items for charitable organizations worldwide. For one of the latest projects, Jade's blog readers finished the 24th project called "Capes for Kids" in which she paired up with a nonprofit organization called "Enchanted Makeovers" and asked her readers to sew superhero capes for kids receiving care and therapy at women's shelters across the nation. Most recently, Craft Hope collaborated with *Country Woman Magazine* for its 26th project to make hand sewn finger puppets to donate to orphanages worldwide. These animal puppets are used "as teaching tools, helping the children learn to communicate their feelings, solve problems, and the basic skills for making friends" ("How to make," 2015). PDF templates and directions for making a bird, elephant, or monkey puppet can be found on the *Country Woman* website.

On the "about" page on Jade's blog she shares the history of her online handmade mission: "Since our beginning we have collected and distributed over a hundred thousand handmade items to charitable organizations worldwide. We have formed partnerships with incredible charities that work in the heart of communities that need love the most" (Sims, n.d.). She calls Craft Hope "a love-based organization" and uses the tagline "handmade crafts for a cause." Whether making dresses, stitching dolls, or sewing quilts or puppets, Jade's influence in both domestic and international communities cannot be denied.



Figure 7. Jade with 227 handmade sock monkeys for child burn victims

Jade not only uses her blog to publicize her charity events, but she engages on social media such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter to connect with readers and share her projects. She also effectively uses Pinterest as a meeting space for the dispersed crafters who donate to her projects. For each project, Jade starts a Pinterest board to give crafters ideas and instructions for the product they are making. For example, Project 18 asked for volunteers to make quilts for families who lost their homes to the wildfires in Colorado, Nevada, and Utah in the summer of 2012, so Jade started a Pinterest board titled “quilt inspiration, ideas, and tutorials for project 18” (Sims, n.d.). Here volunteers could gather to find ideas for their own quilts or even learn more about quilting before starting the project. Eventually over 300 quilts were made and donated to those left

homeless by the devastating fires. Jade also has boards for other Craft Hope sewing projects, including aprons and bibs.

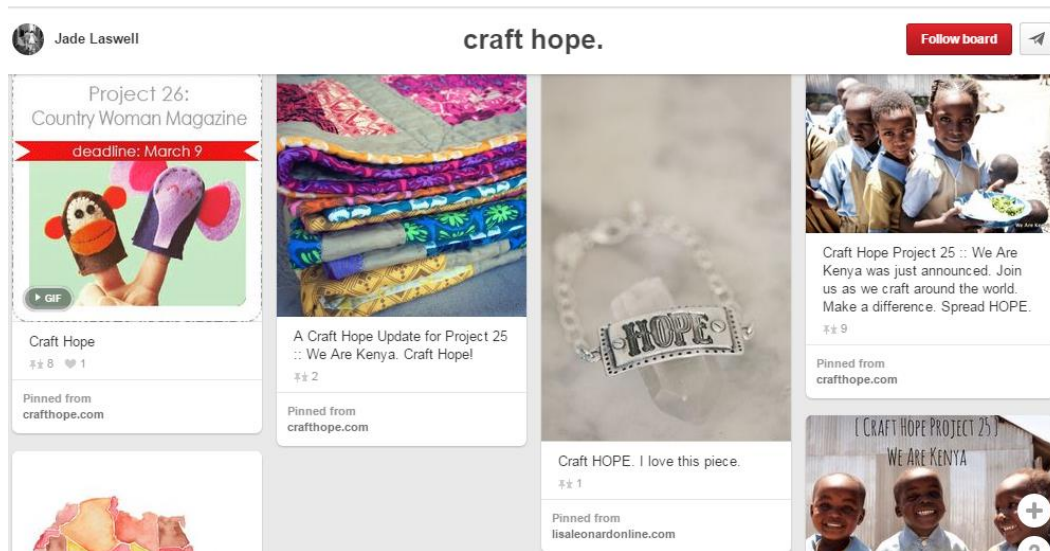


Figure 8. Craft Hope Pinterest board

It is important to remember that activism and learning are not mutually exclusive. Often the act of teaching or training is intricately tied to social causes, especially when one seamstress teaches another how to take care of her own needs or enables her to help others (Garber, 2013). Many of Sims' crafts are intended to help novice sewers learn new skills by partaking in simple projects, such as the pillowcases dresses. Other crafts, such as the recent finger puppets, are simple enough that children can help their parents create the product. This teaches the children new crafting and sewing skills, but also the importance of philanthropy and giving to others in need. In Sims' book, *Craft Hope*, she teaches others how to engage in more meaningful gift giving. She remarks, "A book tote is a thoughtful gift to give someone who is learning to read, but if you also become that person's literacy tutor, you could make an incredible difference in his or her life" (Sims,

2010, p.13). Not only do Sims' readers satisfy their desire to make and get to participate in a large-scale charity, but Sims teaches them how to strategically and deeply give to others in a variety of contexts.

I would like to note that, other than royalties from the sales of Sims' book (which are likely negligible), her organization is not a business in any way, nor is she equipped with assistants or fancy resources to sustain her philanthropy. Since starting Craft Hope, Sims has had two more children (for a total of four) and continues to work full time as a junior high teacher. She is simply a middle-class mom who runs Craft Hope in addition to her other roles. Only from the support she receives from other bloggers and crafters who make sewn goods and publicize her projects is she able to sustain project after project despite her busy schedule and personal and professional demands. Recently, Jade admitted that she accidentally let the domain name (www.crafthope.com) for her blog expire, and it was quickly bought by another party. Suddenly, Jade's primary digital platform was erased, along with the written and visual archives of her past projects. When she announced this dilemma on Facebook, her followers came to her rescue.

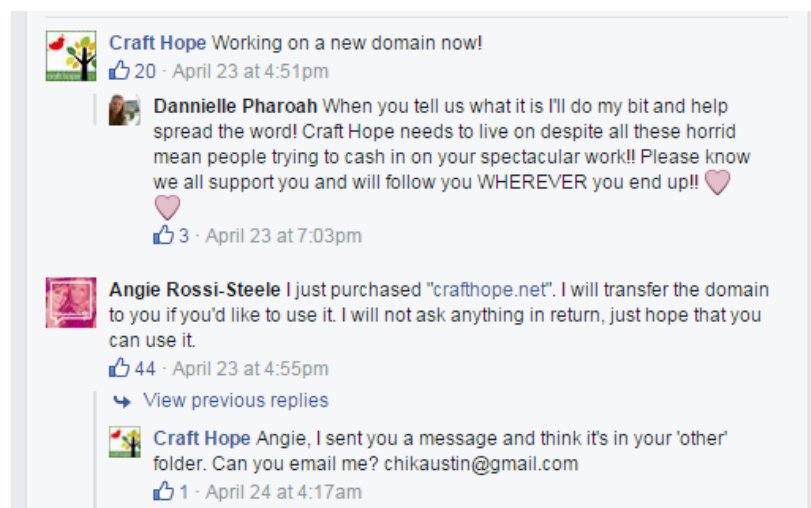


Figure 9. A conversation about a new domain name on the Craft Hope Facebook page

As followers began posting suggestions on the Facebook post, a woman who had long been a participant in Sims' organization immediately bought the domain crafthope.net and eventually transferred it to Jade, who was then able to upload the majority of her past writing to the new site. She wrote about the incident on her blog:

Man, it's been quite a wild ride. For those of you who are new to Craft Hope let me introduce myself. My name is Jade and I run Craft Hope, all by myself, while being a junior high teacher, married to a Texas high school football coach, all while raising four kids. Pfew.

Emails get overlooked.

Website domain names get bought right out from under my nose.

I got a few 'you should have been on top of things better' emails and comments. Haha. Good one.

Generous folk offer to help. We get a new domain name with a fancy .net.

We keep going. Because that's what we do. We keep going (Sims, 2015).

In the same post, she goes on to share the statistics from the conclusion of Project 26, which involved sewing felt finger puppets for orphans in India. The finger puppets are used to help children learn problem solving skills and practice communicating their emotions, and Sims announced that 172 participants from 40 U.S. states, Canada, and Australia collaborated to make 5,733 finger puppets. Jade is able to recruit this many participants only because platforms such as Instagram and her salvaged blog allow her message to spread quickly and broadly.

Jade's ongoing Craft Hope projects are just one example of how women are using sewing to help people in need and participate in social activism, just as women have been

doing since America's foundation. Many women are involved in noteworthy nonprofit organizations that seek to help women and children in need around the world. The nonprofit Project Linus (www.projectlinus.org) has been providing homemade blankets to children in need since 1998. Another organization, The Sewing Machine Project, collects and distributes sewing machines "to groups committed to using the machines to learn new skills, build self-confidence and potentially contribute to their own livelihood as well as the well-being of their families and communities" ("History," n.d.). The project started in March 2005 when founder Margaret read a BBC article online that shared the details of a woman who lost her sewing machine in the devastating tsunami in Southeast Asia. This woman had saved for years to buy the machine, and the storm swept away her means of earning an income. Margaret partnered with the American Hindu Association and began collecting sewing machines in her home state of Wisconsin to send to Sri Lanka and India. When Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans a few months later, Margaret began sending sewing machines there as well. The Sewing Machine Project is still going strong a decade later, with over 1800 sewing machines donated since 2005 and \$27,000 of charitable giving donated in 2014 alone. With a robust online presence and involvement in local, national, and international causes, The Sewing Machine Project is yet another example of how a woman found a cause on the internet by way of an international news article and, in turn, used the web to create a movement ("History", n.d.). Whether sewing skirts for Haitian women devastated by natural disaster or distributing sewing machines to those in need, women today are joining together via online forums to sew, serve, and fight for justice.

While the impact of long-term projects such as Craft Hope is apparent, it might be tempting to write off some of these smaller sewing projects as insignificant in their reach. While “it is possible to argue that third-wave crafting does not go ‘far enough,’ politically; on the other hand, it is important to acknowledge that there is more than one way to ‘do’ politics” (Groeneveld, 2010, p. 267). While not all forms of female engagement through craft are going to be equally effective in all situations, a multifaceted approach seems appropriate in enacting feminist politics. In fact, these subtle and small craft projects and protests embody the essence of third-wave philosophy with its belief that “real social change is achieved indirectly through cultural action, or simply carried out through pop culture twists and transformations, instead of through an overtly political, electoral, and legislative agenda” (Rowe-Finkbeiner, 2004, p. 88). Even the smallest-scale projects and actions continue to break down the separate-spheres discourse and refute the subtle, long-standing myth that domestic tasks are empty of political meaning.

When we think of craft as a form of activism, we must also consider craft’s immaterial components, such as crafting as part of a gift-giving practice, crafting as a form of care, or as a form of information exchange (Braitich, 2010). For example, the talking that goes on in a sewing circle or teaching a fellow seamstress a new skill are both forms of immaterial labor linked to the physical act of crafting. In addition to the material outcome of crafting, the process of craft-making develops mentorship, builds community, and contributes to personal as well as gender empowerment.

Activism and Business

I want to turn here to examine the ways women are challenging the fashion industry with activist motives, even while pursuing entrepreneurial endeavors. While some may be skeptical of activist pursuits within capitalism, feminist scholars urge the examination of activism within all social spheres, including the home and the workplace. Paid labor is one of many domains where social problems can be highlighted and addressed (Hanson, & Fontaine, 2007; Martin, Winge & Stalpe, 2013; Naples, 1992; Staeheli & Clarke, 2003), even when justice is pursued alongside profit. This section also connects to the following chapter which will examine female seamstresses as entrepreneurs, and this begins the discussion about how women are able to subvert common business practices by using materials that are ethically produced and hiring employees who are paid a fair wage.

In recent years, many Americans have become concerned with the international fashion industry and the damaging impact of moving clothing production overseas to take advantage of cheap labor (Rosen, 2002; Esbenshade, 2009), especially since sweatshops abroad typically exploit women and children (Von Busch, 2010). One example of this is the “pledge handmade” initiative, a movement that spreads via blogs and social media, where crafters pledge to support the handmade economy by buying goods from artisans instead of mass produced products made in sweatshops (Von Busch, 2010, 116). When female entrepreneurs in the handmade industry consciously source ethically-made materials, advocate for initiatives such as buying locally or sustainably remixing old products to make new ones, or use some of their proceeds to financially support causes that help other women or children, they are negotiating the contested space where

activism and capitalism collide. When Stephanie Syjuco began studying the effects of sweatshops in her graduate program at Stanford, she found herself wondering if she could make every item of clothing she wore by hand. She explains, “I wanted to wear handmade clothes and be somehow ‘self-sufficient’ and fall outside of the traditional production-consumption model of clothing manufacturing” (Levine & Heimerl, 2008). This curiosity prompted a conceptual art project of handmade clothing that eventually evolved into a business on anti-factory.com, where Stephanie sells one-of-a-kind handmade garments to others wanting to resist the American fashion industry.

On a larger scale, a company called Better Life Bags (BLB) provides a strong example of how women are able to mix handmade business with activist purposes intentionally and effectively. BLB owner Rebecca Smith calls herself a “creative entrepreneur,” although she started her company by accident. After the birth of her first child in 2009, she struggled to find a diaper bag that met her needs. Since she knew how to sew, she decided to make a custom bag for herself instead of purchasing one. When she finished the bag, she posted a picture on Facebook simply to show her creation to friends and family, but the photo gained more attention than she ever expected. She was flooded with questions and requests for custom bags, and her business was born when she first started selling custom bags on Etsy.

Now her company has a dual mission – selling high quality bags and employing refugee women in her neighborhood, who would otherwise be without jobs. As Smith’s company was growing, she was simultaneously watching her city of Detroit deteriorate as factories closed, unemployment increased, and crime manifested throughout the city due to the recession of 2008 and the crippled automobile industry (Ghosh, 2011). As her

neighbors moved away from the city, Smith chose to do the exact opposite. Instead of leaving Detroit, the Smith family moved right into the heart of it. They intentionally chose to live in a low-income neighborhood with a 20% unemployment rate and a high population of first generation immigrant families, mostly from Yemen and Bangladesh (Dybis, 2014). Smith had a vision to help the impoverished women in her community by teaching them sewing skills and offering gainful employment, since her new company was burgeoning and she needed extra help. First, she employed her neighbor friend, an immigrant woman from Yemen with sewing experience. Rebecca says, “She didn’t know a lot of English. I didn’t know any Arabic. But we both knew how to sew” (Dybis, 2014), so the two women began working alongside each other.

Eventually, Rebecca hired another neighbor, an immigrant woman from Bangladesh. Now Better Life Bags has five full-time employees and seven additional seamstresses, all immigrant women. Some of the employees did not originally have sewing skills but were taught on machines provided by BLB. On a blog page describing her company’s missions she explains, “We hire women, who otherwise cannot get jobs, to work for BLB. We rent them a sewing machine and tools while teaching them a skill set that allows them to become a primary or secondary provider in their families” (Smith, 2014). This sustainable business model allows Rebecca to help immigrant women in her own community, while also allowing her to expand her own company. Rebecca works alongside her employees in a small studio workspace in their neighborhood. Each week the women are paid a fair wage, and the employees often post photos online of items they have been able to buy, such as dining tables and beds for their children, because of their paychecks from Better Life Bags.

Just as Rebecca's company started with an unassuming Facebook post, she continues to use social media to market her company today. The Better Life Bags Instagram account now boasts over 28,000 followers. The profile reads, "Official Instagram account of #betterlifebags. Custom bags with a cause: job creation and empowering women in Detroit, MI." The feed shows pictures of new products and sometimes re-posts photos from customers of the bags in use. Occasionally, the Instagram account will show behind the scenes pictures of the BLB workshop space with captions such as this: "At #betterlifebags, our mission is to hire women from our Detroit community who have barriers to employment (usually language, culture, education) and empower them to succeed (in life, family, and society!). Every purchase you make helps us fulfill that goal and opens doors for women who need it most" (Better Life Bags, n.d.). The account also uses hashtags such as #purchasewithapurpose, which is not specific to BLB but is used by a variety of businesses who give back to the community in various tangible ways or whose profits benefit specific groups of underprivileged people. The use of this hashtag gives the BLB Instagram account exposure to a wider audience of people who are interested in activist-driven consumerism. Rebecca continues to use social media strategically to grow her brand, interact with customers, share her mission, and, essentially, hire and empower more women in her neighborhood.

Conclusion

This chapter shows how digital tools are enhancing sewing activism and its ability to play a part in justice, ethics, caregiving, and knowledge exchange amongst women. The case studies shown here are mere examples of a plethora of activist practices taking

part in online realms and being facilitated by digital media. From gr projects, such as a group of women using their blogs to raise money for a friend's cancer treatments to large-scale philanthropies distributing handmade items worldwide, the internet is ripe with activism in various sewing communities and spaces. In this final section, I consider how these digital practices both extend and add to the history of women's sewing activism in America.

Activism continues to be an organic response to community needs, but sometimes that community is online. While some feminist activism is intentionally public and tackles giant international issues (i.e. war, HIV, etc.), most activism has been, and continues to be, the grassroots efforts of women who see a visible need or problem in their community and try to solve it with their available resources (Naples, 2012; Somerson, 2007). In the past, this meant teaching English and sewing to immigrant families or sewing socks for the war effort. Now it looks like employing immigrant women in Detroit or helping out an online friend pay for cancer treatments. These projects might not make the nightly news, but they are profoundly impactful in smaller communities both locally and online.

Feminist activism continues to be tied to women's identities and roles. Activism has often been an offshoot of women enacting their everyday identities. Women often gathered in sewing circles to complete mundane household sewing tasks in a social environment rather than in isolation. Sometimes in these groups, women would discuss political issues such as war or abolition and eventually pursue activist projects related to these topics (Ulrich, 2001). When women completed "fancywork," a practice intricately tied to their identities as middle-class women, they sometimes took the objects they

created for leisure and sold them to raise money for various charities (White Nelson, 2004). Activism continues to be linked to women's distinct identities and roles today. Better Life Bags was born because of Rebecca's initial need for a diaper bag. As a new mom, she created a bag to suit her needs. Other moms were interested in buying her product, and in turn, she was able to hire other moms to help her sew these bags as her company grew. Although Craft Hope is a large and ongoing project, it continues to develop at a pace that allows founder, Jade, the time to pursue her other roles of wife, mom, and teacher. She continues to initiate new sewing projects, but they happen less frequently now that she has more children. She often does much of her philanthropy work over the summer when she is on a break from teaching. Digital communication channels allow women to publicize their activist work alongside other things they may do or write online, such as communicating with friends or posting pictures of their kids. Many of Rebecca's customers or Jade's charity participants came from a pool of people with whom they were already connected online due to their various roles as friends, moms, and workers.

Activism has a broader reach due to digital communication channels. Most sewing activist projects in the 19th and 20th century were carried out locally when women in geographic communities collaborated in sewing items to donate or sell for charitable causes. Now digital communication allows women to collaborate on a much larger scale, sending handmade goods abroad with relative ease and rallying participants to make the goods from across the globe. Jade, who lives in Austin, Texas, has sent handmade goods to various countries including Mexico, India, Nicaragua, and Haiti, and to Minnesota, Colorado, and California, among other states. She has recruited participants to create and

donate handmade items from across the U.S. and from different countries as well. The ability to ship items domestically or to foreign countries is not new, but Jade's ability to determine needs and organize distribution with workers running orphanages and non-profit-organizations around the globe is enabled by email and social media communication. When Jade sent the finger puppets to orphan children in India for her most recent project, Caroline, the founder of The Miracle Foundation, who schemed the project and distributed the gifts, was able to send digital pictures of the kids with their puppets back to Jade almost immediately. Jade then posted those pictures on her blog to thank the people who contributed. This is also a strong visual display of what her organization does in practice, which might later attract new participants for a future project. Digital channels of communication allow people who are spread apart geographically to contribute to the same project. These channels allow activists to assess needs across the country or around the world and communicate with coordinators in distant places to meet these needs and distribute tangible items.

Activism can happen faster and with fewer resources when it takes place online.

Throughout history, women have been able to raise money or goods for social causes in a relatively small time frame. Charity bazaars, for example, could raise anywhere from hundreds and to even a few thousand dollars in just a few days' time (Gordon, 1998). However, a significant amount of time and many resources went into hosting these enterprises, since they required a physical space, many attendants overseeing the event, and days of preparation to create the items being sold, organizing the layout of the venue, and advertising the fair. Sometimes most of the profit from a charity fair would be consumed by the costs of hosting the event itself, the net hardly warranting the toil

behind the endeavor (Cutlip, 1965). However, when women use their blogs and social media channels to market an event and use an online storefront to sell products, money can be raised quickly with fewer people needed for administrative duties. In the “Shop for Sharlie” event, a small group of women were able to raise \$60,000 in just a few days, because each woman contributed one handmade item and wrote a few tweets, Facebook posts, and a blog post to promote the event for free. The collaborative effort coupled with a broad and visible online network allowed a large amount of money to be raised in a short amount of time.

The skills needed to participate in activism can be learned quickly and from a distance. In the past, most women had the sewing knowledge to readily participate in various projects due to the cultural expectation that females learn to sew at a young age. If a woman were asked to sew a quilt or darn a sock in the name of charity, she already had the expertise to perform these tasks. This knowledge was not acquired easily, per say, but was imparted slowly over many years as young girls learned a range of different sewing skills from their mothers, sisters, and teachers. Now, when women want to participate in sewing activist projects, they sometimes need to learn a new sewing skill quickly without any available tutors nearby. As discussed in Chapter 2, women are able to learn sewing from various online resources, such as blog tutorials and YouTube videos. A woman may have acquired fundamental sewing skills, but not the expertise specific to creating an object for a charity event. This is where digital resources play an important part in the ways activists collaborate. Craft Hope participants who lack experience making an item can browse Jade’s Pinterest boards and locate resources that can teach them how to complete the project. Jade’s quilting board, for example, contains

many different quilting patterns, as well as educational links to blog series called “Beginning Quilting” and an article called “Gorgeous and Simple Machine Quilting.” Using these online materials, a novice quilter may rapidly acquire the skills to create a blanket without needing the proximity of a face-to-face instructor. The skills needed to participate in sewing activism are simply taught differently than in past centuries. Since sewing knowledge is not as culturally widespread, the transfer of that knowledge often takes place digitally rather than in person.

Crafting has been tied to issues of “feminism” long before the feminist movement came into existence. Hundreds of years ago women used their embroidery to stitch sentiments they were not permitted to say out loud (Garber, 2013). Likewise, African-American women in the nineteenth century would stitch Underground Railroad routes into their quilts (Garber, 2013). These acts beg the question: must women self-identify as “feminists” or “activists” in order for their craftwork to play a part in activism? I argue that, no, women must not always link themselves to specific social movements in order to make an impact in issues of power and justice, as I doubt many of the women described in this chapter would label themselves as feminists or activists. Even small-scale acts such as charity crafting, where women sell crafts to raise money for a cause such as a female friend’s cancer treatment, challenge dominant social structures of the past, in which women relied on men for their financial well-being or in which poor women were consigned to a life of chronic illness or even early death because monetary need prevented access to medical resources. If we conceptualize craft as “power” or “the ability or capacity to act” (Braitich & Brush, 2011), then all crafting has potential political and social possibilities, whether large or small in impact. Shop for Sharlie, Craft

Hope, and Better Life Bags exemplify the power of women's craft for positive social change.

This chapter only covers a few of the ways women are engaging digital resources to promote their social causes and spread their messages. As new online spaces and technologies emerge, it is important that researchers continue to study the ways women are engaging online as intentional or accidental activists. In the next chapter, I discuss the role of seamstresses as American entrepreneurs and the ways women are using digital platforms to launch products that benefit other women, while stimulating the American economy and promoting job growth in the United States. Activism and entrepreneurship are two topics deeply linked together as women insist on sustainable and ethical business practices that seek to make the world a better, safer place.

Chapter 4

THE BABY MOCCASIN BUSINESS: FEMALE ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN DIGITAL MARKETPLACES

The “working woman” has been an enigmatic figure in America since the nineteenth century. From the rise of the “separate spheres” (Kerber, 1998; Lundberg & Pollack, 1993) to the women’s “right to work” movement (Johnson & Lloyd, 2004), America has been a place where women’s labor, both in the home and outside of it, has been questioned and critiqued. This struggle to classify and compensate women as laborers continues in modern America, with ongoing debates about equal pay, maternity leave, and flexible work hours playing out in the political and media landscapes (“Fair Pay;” n.d.; Ingraham, 2015; Bernard, 2013; McGregor, 2015; Paquette, 2015; Thompson, 2014). Critiques of childcare costs (Martin, 2014) and the surge of women leaving the workplace to stay at home with their children (Miller & Alderman, 2014) only make the issue more complicated. This chapter looks at contemporary entrepreneurs and the ways sewing continues to play an important role in women’s professional lives, especially for middle class women who have historically, along with working class women, used their sewing skills to bring in personal income. The ability to sell sewing knowledge and products on the web adds a new angle to the already-complex identity of the professional middle class seamstress, a long-standing but often ignored figure in U.S. history.

While the previous chapter on activism showed a case study of how women are running businesses with ethical practices and using their companies to empower and benefit other women in need, this chapter turns to look at women-run sewing companies and how they subvert many dominant capitalistic business practices in contemporary

society. An ongoing critique of American capitalism is that not enough women head U.S. companies (“Women and Leadership,” 2015) or work as entrepreneurs (Mitchell, 2011). However, sewing businesses started by women offer strong examples of female entrepreneurship that contrast the examples of male-led businesses that are most widely shared in the media. Most American businesses are primarily focused on growth, expansion, and annual revenue and, as a result, are often sold for a profit or handed over to investors. Often, income is valued over other factors such as ethics, product quality, or employee well-being. However, the case studies of women’s sewing businesses I share in this chapter contrast the prevailing capitalist discourse in American society. I argue that though these female entrepreneurs *do* seek profit and growth for their companies, many are unwilling to pursue revenue if it puts the well-being of themselves, their families, or their employees at stake. These women also seem to follow unspoken business parameters to respect the value and the aesthetic of the “handmade” industry. Even if machines are used or additional seamstresses are hired, entrepreneurs limit the growth of their businesses in order to actively oversee production, interact with employees and customers, and, in essence, “touch” every product with human hands. This chapter seeks to answer the following questions:

- How do women’s online sewing businesses challenge traditional capitalistic practices?
- What digital tools are female entrepreneurs using to help them launch and manage sewing businesses?
- How do contemporary sewing businesses add to the historic landscape of American women who have sewn for profit in the past?

In this chapter, I first look at some of the prevailing trends and problems in today’s American businesses, including stunted job growth, a shortage of female

entrepreneurs, and sexist workplace policies that hinder smart and valuable women employees from thriving in their professional lives. Next, I look back on the ways women have sewed for profit in past American history, focusing especially on how middle class women have used sewing as a means to a sufficient income, sometimes as a full-time endeavor but often in addition to other employment and household responsibilities. I then give brief examples of a variety of online sewing businesses that have been launched on platforms such as Etsy or personal blogs and sustained through social media marketing and customer service. I discuss how these businesses challenge hegemonic business practices as their female founders seek ethical means of production, prioritize family life over work, and uphold the values of the handmade community, even when products become mass-produced. While most of the examples in this chapter are fairly small businesses, either run individually or with a few employees, I conclude with two case studies of sewing businesses that have grown exponentially over the past few years. These companies make millions annually and stimulate job growth as they increase their sales, hire more employees, and use their resources to empower other aspiring female entrepreneurs.

Fast Capitalism and the Global Economy

Scholars have been studying the effects of globalization on American capitalism for decades (Blossfed et al., 2006; Drucker, 1994; Frank & Cook, 1995; Ringen, 1987). In general terms, globalization describes how different nations and people groups have become more interconnected due to increasing forms of communication and technology, especially when countries such as the U.S. seek cheap labor overseas and import a

growing number of its products and services (Blossfed et al., 2006, p. 4). Gee, Hull, and Lankshear (1996) predicted some of the economic changes that would mark the 21st century as a result of globalization, and they named the changing economy “fast capitalism” (see also Agger, 1989). This new form of capitalism is based on selling highly customized goods to niche markets that see the product not just as a commodity, but as a symbol representing a specific identity (i.e. a Starbucks Gold Card member, an “Apple guy”). The emphasis in this market is on knowledge and design, not labor. Businesses focused on mass production of uniform goods made on assembly lines are quickly disappearing in the U.S. Those jobs have either been outsourced to other countries or can be completed by robots. Instead, workers in today’s American economy must have the knowledge to understand the needs of niche markets and they must have the design skills to craft an identity around these highly customized products, often using digital means for the creation, marketing, and sales of these items.

As the production of physical commodities has moved overseas, the rapidly expanding internet and evolving technologies have provided fertile soil for a burgeoning “tech industry” in the United States. With its hub in Silicon Valley and companies springing up in Seattle, Boston, New York City, and other U.S. metropolitan areas, tech companies are prolifically creating digital spaces, tools, and services. From big names like Google, Facebook, and Apple to smaller start-ups that open and close or get sold daily, the tech industry has become a staple portion of the American business landscape. The tech industry epitomizes fast capitalism as a place where entrepreneurs, especially young ones, can launch ideas, build brands, and design products, services, and identities, often funded by venture capitalist firms that are willing to invest in promising innovation.

Entrepreneurs enter the tech industry hoping to launch a company, watch it grow quickly with the use of appropriate online marketing, and sell it for a profit to a bigger company. Some business people grow so attached to this process of starting, expanding, and selling that they become “serial” entrepreneurs launching a new company each time the previous one sells (Gompers et al., 2006; Gompers et al., 2010; Ucbasaran et al., 2008). Although many new companies fail to thrive, successful start-ups are crucial to growing the American economy and helping citizens recover from the recession of the early 2000s.

Even though large publicly traded companies employ the most people in the U.S., these firms are not significantly helpful in augmenting the American economy through net job creation (Mitchell, 2011). While some larger companies have caused net job loss in the U.S. as they have moved their labor overseas, most established domestic companies simply gain and lose a steady number of employees each year, and therefore do not contribute significantly to the country’s economic growth. Therefore, it is essential for entrepreneurs to start new companies and shoulder net job growth for the United States. These growing companies, “especially in high-tech areas, tend to be innovative and additive” (Mitchell, 2011, p. 10). Since these firms are typically creating vastly different products and services, they are rarely in tight competition with each other. Therefore, the more males and females who start these companies successfully, the better the economic outcome. However, females are noticeably absent from the entrepreneurship scene in the U.S. Although women now outnumber men as college graduates (Golden et al., 2006; Gemici & Wiswall, 2014) and make up roughly half of the American workforce (Rampell, 2010; Rosin, 2010), females only make up roughly 30% of people starting businesses in the U.S. (“Women CEOs,” 2015). These statistics

should be alarming to citizens. Although our nation's women are well-educated and willing to work, their knowledge and skills are not being used to their full potential to stimulate the economy. One study shows that women's research regarding product creation and patenting in business school was equal to or perhaps slightly better than their male peers, yet women's products are patented at 40% the rate of men's (Ding, Murray, & Stuart, 2006). Women are not underqualified to be entrepreneurs, yet they continue to be underrepresented in entrepreneurial endeavors.

Female Workers in a Fast Capitalist World

There are many promising changes in fast capitalism, especially with start-up companies, that could challenge former traditions and develop new values within the workplace. Many U.S. companies have flattened out their leadership structures by removing mid-level managers and the need to slowly climb the corporate ladder. Companies expect their workers to collaborate on invention, marketing, and sales. Designers should be able to communicate with upper-level management quickly and easily (Gee, Hull & Lankshear, 1996). The goal is for workers to feel empowered by having more say in the company and the design of its products, services, and overall brand. In addition, traditional markers of the work place are diminishing – including formal attire, rigid work hours, and advancements being linked to age and tenure. Companies are more open to hiring and promoting young people, women, and minorities (Lapowsky, 2015; Wollman, 2015). Flexible work hours and telecommuting are possibilities for employees in many organizations (Brescoll, Glass, & Sedlovskaya, 2013; Fondas, 2013). Small gains are being made to provide paid and flexible maternity leave

to women (McGregor, 2015). But are these changes enough? Are they happening too slowly to benefit women who desire to start companies or gain leadership positions in a fast capitalist world?

Studies show that women still face significant challenges in the workplace, even after decades of progress in the fight for women's rights. One study by Hall, Carter, and Shied (2002) found that women saw their workload increase when middle management was removed and did not feel they had more of a voice within their company, despite worker empowerment being a goal of "flattening out" the organization by removing mid-level liaisons (p. 117). Additionally, women struggled to juggle their working identities with their non-professional roles of mother, wife, and caretaker. Even in the most "family friendly" companies, female employees received mixed messages from superiors regarding their lives outside of work. For example, "One manager constantly told workers, 'Do not work late' and 'Take care of your personal life.' But in the next breath, there was a very different message. 'Don't forget, these deadlines must be met'" (p. 122). Often the dissonance of juggling employment with the unpaid labor of the home becomes too much for women to bear and they revert to part-time work or staying at home full-time, especially after taking childcare costs into consideration.

Although the face of American capitalism is slowly changing, American women are still being left behind in the formal marketplace. Women represent only 4.6% of Fortune 500 CEOs ("Women CEOs of the S&P 500," 2015). Even with enterprises to hire more women in the tech industry or encourage more female entrepreneurs, such as President Obama's 2015 "TechHire Initiative" ("Fact Sheet," 2015), many women face significant gender-based challenges at work. Many of the programs intended to promote

gender equity in the workplace ironically cause women, specifically mothers, to be stigmatized by their co-workers. For example, many studies show women who take advantage of company policies such as flexible work hours or extended maternity leave are penalized, whether formally or informally, for doing so. These women are often disrespected or disregarded by co-workers because they do not work at the office on a traditional schedule (Correll, Benard, & Paik, 2007; Stone & Hernandez, 2013; Williams, Blair-Loy, & Berdahl, 2013) and studies continue to show that women who partake in flexible schedule benefits eventually fall behind their peers in pay (Budig & England, 2001; Goldin, 2014). It is no wonder women are hesitant to keep their employment or pursue advancement in a business landscape filled with gender discrimination.

U.S. businesses cannot seem to shake these lingering misogynist traits, whether capitalism is fast or slow or products are physical or digital. Instead of entering into the tension of the public American workplace, many women are evaluating their own skills and knowledge and turning to the internet as a space to make a profit and grow professionally. The sewing blogs and online shops I examine in this chapter are just one sect of the burgeoning handmade industry online, but they provide an excellent example of the ways women are building businesses that offer an alternative model of capitalism and subvert many values of the male-dominated entrepreneurial world. While one might argue that women sewing from home or from privately rented studios perpetuates the tendency to make women's sewing labor anonymous or, worse, invisible (McLean, 2009, p.4), I argue that as female entrepreneurs build their businesses using digital tools and interact with customers online, they make the home a public space and bring more

visibility to sewing labor than in past eras. Therefore, before I describe and examine contemporary sewing businesses, I want to first look at how women have always used their sewing skills professionally throughout history. The digital sewing shops and classes prevalent on the web today only add to the rich history of women's sewing entrepreneurship.

The Prick of Profit: Sewing as Paid Labor throughout American History

Historically, sewing has been a point of intersection between the home and the marketplace. While women have always sewed as a household chore, sewing has also been a skill sold for profit amongst the middle and lower classes. Sometimes wealthy women would hire out their sewing tasks, offering employment to women in the social stratum beneath them. Even as decorative needlework became the dominant form of sewing for many middle class women and was often considered a leisure activity, women often found a way to make even their fancywork an economic endeavor by selling their creations at charity fairs and women's exchanges, and creating patterns and writing instruction manuals to sell to their peers (Gelber, 1999; White Nelson, 2004). Other women were employed in schools to teach young girls the skill of sewing, and some women worked as private fancywork tutors, earning "between ten and twenty dollars a week, an income that exceeded the earning possibilities of most work available to women" at the time (White Nelson, 2004, p.136). Although the middle class idealized the rigid lines between the male life in the public sphere and the female life in the home, this separation was often threatened by adverse circumstances, such as illness or bankruptcies, which drove women to the marketplace to sell their sewing skills or sewn

products in order to provide financially for their families (White Nelson, 2004). The market economy and the domestic economy were never truly separate.

One example of the so-called spheres colliding can be seen in the life and writings of Sarah Sheldon, a farmer's wife living in Vermont in the first half of the nineteenth century (Ulrich, 2001). Although the Sheldons were not poor, they had four sons to raise in an era where crop prices fluctuated often and cash was often scarce. In order to alleviate family financial concerns, Sarah turned to her skill of weaving to make a profit. She kept a "dye book" that chronicled her knitting and weaving, as she would sell house linens and wool stockings to her neighbors in addition to the fabrics she created for her own household. She even writes of staying up all night to finish spools of linen for commissioned projects. Sarah, like many other women of her time, would often complete her weaving, sewing, and knitting, and then divide the final product, keeping some for her own family and selling the rest within the local community, demonstrating that the production of the home was central to the functioning of the marketplace. Yet, sewing was not a completely individualistic endeavor for Sarah. She relied on her neighbors, including other women, to buy her goods, and she also credits her mother for teaching her the sewing skills that helped her feel settled and successful after moving to a new town with her husband (Ulrich, 2001). Women supporting and training other women has always been an important aspect of female entrepreneurship.

Even as machines took over much of the sewing production in the late nineteenth century, especially within the city, rural women continued to foster craft industries to provide work opportunities for women. Middle class ladies would organize embroidery sales to alleviate the economic hardship of women whose husband's wages could not

fully support their family (Parker, 2010, p.178). Rural women in the Appalachian region of the United States would often work from home by sewing, quilting, or knitting, continuing to radicalize the notion of the home by turning “feminine” and “domestic” tasks into waged labor (Domosh & Seager, 2001, p.33). Even during the peak of the industrial revolution, sewing labor never fully left urban homes despite factories multiplying within most large cities. Many women continued to sew, piece together garments, and make lace from their own houses for extra money (Domosh & Seager, 2001, p.53), even if they had full-time employment outside of the home as well.

For a while the spread of the sewing machine caused quite a bit of tension over the spaces in which sewing should take place. As clothing became a mass produced commodity, tailors would often contract work out for the lowest price. Often garment production was executed in factories filled with machines and workers, but sometimes women could make the lowest bid on these contract jobs and piece together garments in their own homes. Eventually though there was a push to move all sewing to factories with central supervision, especially because some feared tenement diseases would spread through women handling garments in sub-par housing. As factories became the designated space for sewing labor, some women benefited by forming successful unions to protect their rights as workers (Kessler-Harris, 2003, p. 151). However, many women suffered from losing the flexibility to work from home while raising young children, while becoming subject to male supervisors who might unjustly deduct their wages or harass them in the work place (Kessler-Harris, 2003, p. 78). The concerns women face in their workplaces today are eerily reminiscent of the problems women met in factories a hundred years ago.

At the turn of the century, the opportunities of industrialized America were rumored widely abroad and immigrants continued to flood the country in hopes of a better life in the U.S. While many immigrant women worked in factories, others worked from home to supplement the family income. Many Asian immigrants were quite successful in their new country, particularly Japanese men who worked as merchants. However, even these men relied on their wives' sewing to bring in supplementary money (Espiritu, 2008). Although the husbands were able to provide for their families' basic needs, it was the women who took in paid sewing and embroidery jobs and actually built capital for the family, often earning an additional 35% for the household income (Nourma, 1989, p. 40). Immigrant women from all nationalities continued to sew throughout and after both World Wars and were successful at making money for their families; however, this income did not come apart from personal cost. One Chinese-American woman describes working from home with her small children in her care:

I can still recall the times when I had one foot on the pedal and another one on an improvised rocker, rocking my son to sleep while the other was tied to my back. Many times I would accidentally sew my finger instead of the fabric because one child screamed or because I was falling asleep on the job (Yung, 1986, p. 81).

There are always hardships when the home also becomes a space for wage labor, and women throughout history have had to negotiate their household roles with their employment, sometimes for significant financial gain and sometimes at the cost of physical and emotional distress.

It was not until after the world wars that commercial sewing, especially garment production, was almost completely removed from the home. By this point, sewn goods were easily mass produced in factories and the values of America were changing with the rise of feminism and more women attending college and finding jobs outside of the home. Of course, women have never entirely ceased from home sewing as labor, whether fulfilling mending and alterations jobs or making custom clothing; but in post-war America being a work-from-home seamstress became more rare than ever before in history. However, these same changing values produced a flourishing craft industry where handmade items were seen as a means to oppose a growing commercial culture (Welters, 2008). As an arts and crafts industry emerged in the U.S., women had yet another reason to sew from home and their hobbies often blossomed into businesses. Many of the handmade items of the late twentieth century were sold in craft fairs where women would set up booths and sell their goods during short 2-3 day market events. Of course, the arts and crafts fairs that gained popularity in the 1970s and 1980s were not completely original but rather an echo of Victorian fancy fairs and charity bazaars where women sold décor and accessories made by hand. However, craft fairs in the twentieth century became exceptionally large, with the most popular fairs in the U.S. and Canada boasting between 60,000 – 100,000 visitors in a single weekend (Dormer, 1997, p. 88). Often these events were strategically held in the late fall and late spring to encourage gift-buying for Christmas and Mother's Day. It turns out the textile craft industry was "bolstered, rather than usurped, by advances in technology" (Dormer, 1997, p. 173). Ironically, although sewing machines led to the gradual decrease of certain types of home

sewing, these same machines allowed amateur crafters the means and time to produce batches of handmade items to sell in craft markets.

Although the craft industry was mushrooming at the end of the twentieth century, there were certain shortcomings to the craft fair model that prevented seamstresses and crafters from building sustainable companies. Although the traffic at many craft fairs was significant, these events were only held sporadically and at various geographic locations. A woman might travel many hours to sell at one of these events and the labor and time required to set up and tend a booth was intense and sometimes expensive, usually requiring one's entire weekend with days of toil before and after the event as well. Especially for mothers with small children at home, this type of workload and travel time was not ideal, but if one did not participate in fairs frequently it was hard to sustain a craft business.

Some women sold their crafts out of private studios, often in addition to selling at craft fairs, but the overhead of maintaining a retail space was untenable for most small-scale independent artisans (Dormer, 1997). Sometimes groups of women would wisely join together to rent spaces to make and sell their crafts. They would run these stores as "craft collectives" or "co-ops" that were staffed and stocked by women. However there were numerous complications within this model:

The problem was that a group of women had to raise the capital to rent or purchase a location, pay the overhead on the property, and staff the store. Most of the workers in these collectives were volunteers who had to work in the shop and therefore donated their time to help the business succeed, but this often inhibited their pursuit of other money-making enterprises.

This was, of course, a difficult means of survival for the majority of women involved, and these businesses were often unsustainable due to the sheer amount of profit needed to pay bills and eke out a profit (Chanksy, 2010, p. 692).

Although the limitations of maintaining a physical retail space apply to any demographic, it is reasonable to assume that the female artisans of the 1960s -1980s were more limited in their business background, negotiating skills, and ability to raise capital than their male counterparts, even as they optimistically rode upon the second wave of feminism and sought to become entrepreneurs.

As the century turned yet again, the seeds of the internet age fell on soil that was fertile for female entrepreneurship. Even the American recession of 2008 aided the growth of online craft businesses, because women who could not find work or desired to supplement their family's income after one partner suffered job loss turned to their hobbies and artistry skills as a means to an income. Suddenly, it was possible to sell one's handmade items to a broad audience online without the overhead of a physical store space. As women successfully grew handmade businesses online, the appeal of entrepreneurship with its flexibility and independence enticed other women in other industries to leave their careers to pursue online businesses as well.

Craft Goes Digital

The craft industry has exploded in the past decade. Thanks to increasing digital tools, access to a global community of makers and consumers, and even financial woes that have kindled a creative, thrifty spirit in many American homes, the 21st century has

been kind to artistic entrepreneurs wanting to make and sell handmade goods. In 2010, five million Americans reported making at least part of their income through selling crafts, a 4000% percent increase since a 1999 survey (“The CODA Review,” 2011). Likewise, the online marketplace Etsy reported a 5000% increase in sales between 2008 and 2011 despite the national recession (Jakob, 2012). More recently, Etsy reported 1.92 billion in sales in 2014 alone (“Etsy Common Stock,” 2015). Of course, Etsy is only one place where handmade products are sold. Increasingly, women are hosting their own websites to sell their goods and controlling their marketing over personal social media channels such as Facebook and Instagram. As feminist rhetoric scholar Ricia Chansky explains, the advent of the internet with its nominal fees for hosting a shop combined with a high level of web proficiency among most young women means “opening a business is much simpler for Third Wavers than it was for our Second-Wave predecessors” (p. 692). The remainder of this chapter will look at the types of sewing businesses women are operating online, and the ways these companies offer an alternative rhetoric to the prevailing model of American capitalism.

Exploring Etsy

Many female entrepreneurs originally set up shops in the Etsy marketplace, although some eventually move to independently hosted shops if their companies grow significantly. Because Etsy is a common starting ground for so many women and arguably the most expansive site to sell handmade items online, I would like to provide a detailed account of the space and describe some of the digital tools Etsy provides for its vendors. Beyond functioning as a mere marketplace, Etsy prides itself on being a

community “where people around the world connect to buy and sell unique goods” (“Etsy ‘About’ page,” 2014). Etsy claims its site “is lovingly built and maintained by” a staff of 450 employees who work together from locations around the world. The overall mission of Etsy is to bring people together from geographically separate locations to create, sell, buy, and even curate art together in a digital space.

Etsy is a community of 54 million members and has recently grown more global in its focus. For example, the homepage often boasts taglines such as “shop with people around the world.” According to the Etsy “About” page and government securities and exchange report, Etsy is made up of 1.5 million storefronts (as of September 2015), where artisans are able to personalize their own page and list products for a fee. In 2015, the cost to list an item on Etsy is a flat rate of 20 cents per item and the listing lasts four months. When an item sells, Etsy collects an additional 3.5% commission on the selling price. This is an affordable way for many entrepreneurs to open a shop, and in exchange for the fees, they get access to approximately 22 million active buyers on the site.

To cultivate the feeling that Etsy is a “community of artists, creators, collectors, thinkers and doers” (“Etsy ‘Community’ page,” 2014), the company offers many features beyond its digital storefronts. For one, the Etsy blog is updated daily and is available in multiple versions (UK and Australian editions) and various languages (French, German, and Dutch). Both staff writers and shop owners contribute blog posts, and the topics range from sales tips, shop features, tutorials for crafts, and other cultural information, such as Etsy’s efforts to reduce its carbon footprint. The blog has a high engagement level, and usually 100-200 readers leave comments on each post. Etsy also hosts other community pages where users can carry on discussions and post to forums. There is a

“teams” page where sellers can collaborate on projects or solve problems collectively. One example is the “Shipping Management Improvements” team, which over 900 sellers have joined “to test new shipping features and tools on Etsy” (“Etsy ‘Teams’ page,” 2014). Etsy also hosts “online labs” which are short videos to help vendors with issues such as “promoting your Etsy shop,” “taking better photos with your smartphone,” or “holiday merchandising.”

Maggie, the seamstress who learned to sew from YouTube, used Etsy to host her shop for two full years until she eventually switched to an independent shopping site that would allow her to customize her shop interface more than Etsy permits. She shares her decision to move to a new e-commerce site in a blog post, saying she was thankful to start her business on Etsy because the company “offers newsletters... and a bajillion articles and forums” to help its sellers (Whitley, 2010). Although Maggie reached a point where she needed to move to a self-hosted site to save money on her high volume of sales, she credits Etsy for helping her brand grow for her first two years selling handmade items online, and says she will miss the community feeling Etsy provides. Even though Maggie left Etsy as a seller, she continues to use many free Etsy resources, such as its weekly newsletters. In one blog post, she shares some of her favorite newsletters with her readers by linking directly to articles such as “A Creative Way to Promote Your Shop” and “What Buyers are learning from Your Profile Page” (<http://www.maggiwhitley.com/2011/03/7-helpful-etsy-articles>). Many of these topics that relate to selling on Etsy can be universally applied to any online handmade shop regardless of where it is hosted.

Surprisingly, Etsy is a space that encourages collaboration and support between shop owners, despite the fact that there is obviously competition in the online marketplace. Etsy invites its members to create lists of their favorite items for sale across the website. These members, many of whom are shop owners selecting and highlighting products from other shops, are called “Community Tastemakers” and their top picks are shared with a wide audience on the Etsy homepage. On the Etsy “Teams” page, thousands of sellers have officially joined forces to promote each other’s shops. For example, sometimes teams will form on Etsy who live in the same geographic location (“Greater Asheville Traders”), so they can meet up and support each other in person or trade items locally. Sometimes teams will form around a specific medium such as crafters and seamstresses who use felt to make items (“I love felt”), and they will use their team page as a place to advertise and promote their personal shops and items.

Although Etsy is a vast marketplace that now allows the selling of vintage items and craft supplies, handmade items still rule the Etsy landscape. Of the top ten handmade shops on Etsy, five involve hand sewn, knit, or embroidered goods. These shops have between 100,000-180,000 total sales as of June 2015. The highest ranking shop, Think Pink Bows, sells “affordable hair accessories, rompers, leg warmers and much more for your precious little one!” The store’s profile states that the LLC is run by “a team of hard working mommies all based in Utah. For some of us this is a full time job and for others just part time or helping when help is needed. We love to design, to create and work with our hands. Some of our favorite materials are ribbon, fabrics of all kind, lace, flowers and anything that shines or sparkles” (“Think Pink Bows,” n.d.). Think Pink Bows started when one woman, Francesca, started making custom bows and headbands for her baby

daughter ten years ago. When she started getting custom requests for accessories, she asked her friend Laura to join her bow-making team. They worked out of their homes until the demand for the product was too great. They eventually rented a basement apartment for production and slowly started hiring additional workers. The company now has nineteen employees to help with design, social media, customer service, shipping, and creation, and sells locally in Utah as well as online. The team credits its online Etsy storefront for giving them greater flexibility as workers and allowing them to move into a bigger warehouse-like workspace. At the time of this writing (January 7, 2016), Think Pink Bows had 223,056 sales on Etsy and 31,397 customer reviews with an average five of five star rating.

Sewing Bloggers Unite

Many seamstresses opt to host their own shops online instead of using the Etsy marketplace. Some women build websites to function as custom shops, and WordPress and Squarespace blogging platforms now offer tools to host a shop via one's blog. Other seamstresses use e-commerce companies such as Shopify or Big Cartel to host their shops. These sites charge a flat monthly fee instead of a listing and commission fee like Etsy. Many women choose these alternatives to Etsy because the fees are lower or at least more predictable and these online shops can be customized to match one's blog or website design, as opposed to Etsy that only offers vendors limited design control.

However, many of Etsy's community values overflow to sewing blogs as well, as businesses collaborations happen between bloggers consistently. DIY and sewing bloggers often exchange shop advertisements and are willing to feature each other's

products. One blogger, Lindsay, recently shut down her handmade accessories shop “The Pleated Poppy,” after six years of business, but even when she was working hard to sell her own handmade scarves, purses, and tote bags, she also promoted other bloggers’ handmade endeavors on her own blog and still does to this day. Female artisans who sell other handmade goods, such as children’s swimwear, women’s clothing, jewelry, or handmade dolls, can buy ad space from Lindsay in the form of a hyperlinked graphic called a “button” that is posted on the sidebar of her blog. A click on one of these buttons will lead to another online retailer’s handmade shop. Lindsay also supports these advertisers by writing “Sponsor Shout-out” posts, where she will highlight favorite items from her advertisers’ shops. Sometimes her sponsors will give away items to Lindsay’s readers in order to market their products more widely. In addition to supporting online businesses, Lindsay also helps host a local craft fair called “Stitch Market” and she uses her blogging forum to promote the event and recruit vendors. During each Stitch Market, she takes pictures of the various booths and her favorite items being sold and shares about the event on her blog and Instagram account, highlighting different companies and sharing links to buy their products online.

Often bloggers will collaborate and sell a product jointly. One blogger, Lindsay, is a painter, and she collaborated with her blogging friend, Kim, to design a fabric headband. Lindsay painted an abstract canvas, and Kim was able to turn the design into a fabric pattern and then sew the fabric into a line of her signature headbands. Both women promoted the product on their individual blogs and social media channels and split the sales profits. Customers who follow both women online were ecstatic to see them create a product together, and each woman was able to gain some new followers or customers via

exposure to a wider audience. Another example of artist collaboration is when Erika of Rouge and Whimsy teamed up with her friend, Allie Seidel, to create a make-up bag. Allie hand lettered the phrase “kiss and make-up” and the ladies hired a local Seattle company to screen print the design. Erika then sewed 30 of the limited edition make-up bag and each woman sold the bag on her personal website.

Friday, March 14, 2014

coming monday:: a collaboration with oh, sweet joy!



Figure 10. A headband collaboration between an artist and a seamstress



KISS & MAKEUP BAG

\$28.00

My friend Erika Riggs was the brains behind this line. She is owner of **Rouge and Whimsy** and creates modern, handmade totes and clutches. When she pitched me this collaboration with my lettering on a makeup bag, I couldn't say yes fast enough.

I designed the lettering by hand and Justin at **The Salt Foundry** screen printed the design (locally!) in black ink onto white organic cotton. The inside is fully lined with imperfect tiny white polka dots on black fabric. We added a hot pink zipper for a pop of color and a black leather pull for both style and function. The bag was designed and created from start to finish in Seattle, Washington.

We designed this bag specially so that it would be big enough to hold everyday makeup items, but not too bulky that it wasted extra space. We are big fans of the idea behind "kiss and makeup," and the little daily reminder that it's never too late to say "I'm sorry."

Figure 11. A make-up bag collaboration between a calligrapher and seamstress

Often sewing bloggers will help each other out when launching a new product. When Caroline of *Sew Caroline* launched her first official pattern for the “Out and About Dress,” she asked a handful of her seamstress friends to test the pattern for her. These women were given the pattern for free in advance of its online sales debut. They sewed the dress, choosing their own fabric as well as deciding between the two length options (knee or ankle). For example, Caroline’s first featured tester, a fellow seamstress friend Abbey who runs the blog “Sew Charleston,” sewed the dress in a gold colored knit and chose the floor-length option. She shared on Caroline’s blog: “The Out and About Dress is a great first knit project. It is comfortable yet stylish. Easy to fit and very flattering” (Hulse, 2014). Abbey was the first of five bloggers to test the dress and share her review and photos on Caroline’s blog. The process was mutually beneficial for each woman. The tester received the pattern for free (a \$16.00 value), and also received backlinks to her blog or shop on Caroline’s well-read website. In return, Caroline received a handful of excellent, thorough reviews that included pictures of the dress sewn with a variety of

fabrics on women with various body shapes (including two testers who were pregnant). A Google image search for Caroline’s “Out and About” dress pulls up hundreds of images. About half of the pictures are marketing photos featuring Caroline herself, and the other half are photos of other bloggers sharing their own versions of the dress online.

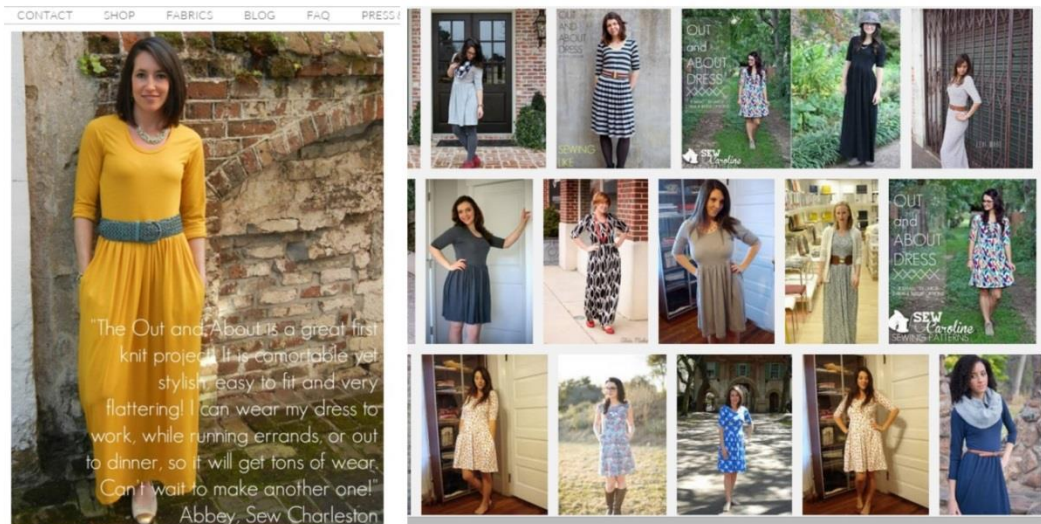


Figure 12. Google image search for “Out and About Dress”

These are just a few examples of the products women are selling in online marketplaces and the ways women are banding together to support female entrepreneurship. There are thousands of examples of online sewing businesses in which women are selling digital products such as patterns, as well as physical products such as clothing, accessories, baby items, and home décor. The online marketplace is reminiscent of nineteenth century fair and exchanges, as women create and sustain their own marketplaces – spaces where capitalistic endeavors, philanthropy, and gifting culture merge together. Whether promoting one another’s shops, sharing business advice, donating a portion of one’s proceeds to charity, or simply trying to earn enough money to

support one's family, the handmade marketplace continues to be a place where women emerge as creators, collaborators, and entrepreneurs, even when the market moves online.

A Converse Capitalism

Although I could fill this chapter with pages of detailed examples of female online entrepreneurs, instead I want to look at the ways these seamstresses are subverting or overcoming many of the practices common within the sphere of American fast capitalist economy. With all the evidence that women continue to be marginalized in modern workplaces (Bernard, 2013; Brescoll et al., 2013), it is no wonder women are building their own businesses with a different set of values than those common in today's business world. These women-lead sewing businesses are not problem-free, but as the examples in this chapter show, women are using their available resources to build companies that sell quality products, promote ethical production, and facilitate the wellbeing of employees and customers alike.

Easing into business

Unlike traditional capitalism, where women are slighted for working part-time or taking advantage of flexible work scheduling (Correll, Benard, & Paik, 2007; Stone & Hernandez, 2013; Williams, Blair-Loy, & Berdahl, 2013) online entrepreneurship allows and even encourages women to ease into business on a part-time schedule. For many women, their company starts as a hobby and turns into a business when friends and family begin purchasing their items, especially after seeing photos of handmade products posted online, as was the case with Francesca, the founder of Think Pink Bows, described

earlier. Other women intentionally ramp up their online businesses as they taper off full-time work outside of the home. Maggie originally learned to sew and began selling some of her items on Etsy during a nine month period of unemployment. However, her new shop was not financially viable at first, so she ended up going back to work full-time in the advertising industry while keeping her online business open on the side. As her shop continued to grow, Maggie decided she wanted to pursue “Gussy Sews” full-time, so she and her husband worked together to establish some financial goals that would allow her to do so. Maggie shares about gaining the support of her spouse in a blog post:

I had saved 3 months of my salary as an emergency fund in addition to being able to pay all of our bills each month. The numbers were solid proof for our family that this could work. Sales had been consistent, my online community was growing steadily, and we were making a nice profit. All of these things combined showed Zack there was no reason to doubt this new opportunity (Whitley, 2010).

Instead of insisting Maggie work full-time, her husband was supportive of her side business and believed it could morph into her full-time career. She quickly proved that her job with flexible scheduling was more legitimate from a financial perspective than a job with traditional in-office hours. It took only two months for Maggie to meet the financial goals she had set and she quickly gave notice at work that she would be quitting her traditional day job.

Maggie used her experience to encourage other women considering a career switch into the handmade industry. After she transitioned to running her shop full-time, Maggie wrote a blog series titled “Quit Your Day Job,” and wrote features on several

women who had moved from traditional, full-time work to self-employment running online shops. In the series, Maggie interviews the entrepreneurs and asks them to tell their story of changing careers. She focuses on specific details such as the timeline they followed when changing jobs, how they set financial goals for their new company, and what digital tools they currently use to grow their audience online.

Keeping costs low

One of the benefits to working mostly online in any industry is the low costs for starting and running a business. As Chansky (2010) points out, the low fees and commissions associated with hosting one's own website or online shop have allowed far more third wave feminists to dabble in handmade entrepreneurship than their predecessors. Chansky argues that "the small monetary outlay needed for an internet business allows women to keep their day jobs, so to speak, as they experiment with owning a small business" (p. 692), as one can see in Maggie's example above. Recent figures indicate fewer than 1% of Etsy's sellers take out a loan to start their shops (Zarya, 2015). Furthermore, advertising is far less expensive as women rely on their personal friends and family, as well as their greater social media networks, to spread the word about their shops and their products. Women can advertise for free by posting pictures and links to their Facebook pages and Instagram accounts, and many shop owners will also send discounts and newsletters to their customer base through email as well. These virtual tools allow shop owners to bypass "the expenses involved with traditional mailers, including design, printing, and mailing costs" (Chansky, 2010, p. 692), and even avoid buying traditional online ad spaces.

Furthermore, many women choose to work from home to save on childcare costs. When new moms consider the standard U.S. unpaid, twelve week maternity leave combined with the costs of childcare for an infant, many decide that it is not worth returning to their career after having children. Many moms say they would consider going back to work if benefits worked differently, such as companies providing a longer maternity leave or the ability to work from home at least part of the time (Miller & Alderman, 2014). Studies show that benefits such as paid maternity leave *do* encourage women to stay at their jobs (Waldfogel, Higuchi, & Abe, 1999), but since benefits like this are rare, women are dropping out of the workforce rapidly. In 1990, the United States boasted the highest labor force of women in the world (likely due to 20th century policy changes such as the Civil Rights Act, the earned-income tax credit, and the legalization of the birth control pill), but by 2010 that ranking had fallen to 17th (Blau & Kahn, 2013). Women are opting out of work as they weigh childcare costs against the value of time with their kids and the amount of paycheck that comes from a company that is possibly inflexible or even hostile to working moms. However, the extra time at home allows many handmade artisans to turn their hobbies into businesses and recover at least some of the profit from their surrendered paycheck.

Lindsey ran her sewing business, The Pleated Poppy, from home for six years while homeschooling her three children simultaneously. Her kids attend a local school two days a week and spend the other three days at home where Lindsey instructs them using a curriculum provided by the school. Her family created a shared schoolroom/workspace that houses four desks, one for Lindsay and each child, books and learning tools, and also a work table and storage space for Lindsay's fabric and sewing

machine. She teaches in this space and also ran a successful handmade accessories company for six years from the very same room. Like many moms, Lindsey's business started out as a hobby. Then her family faced a period of financial difficulty and Lindsey's handmade accessories shop became an essential part of the household income. Lindsey explains the evolution of her company in a blog post:

What started somewhat accidentally, just for fun, became a necessity for our family just a couple years later, getting us through some hard years. We were so thankful for the recurring support of my faithful customers, and for the ability to provide for my family in our time of need, and to also give work to other local women (Cheney, 2015).

Lindsey's shop was a financial necessity for her family, but at the same time it provided many benefits. She was able to homeschool her children while working, and as her company grew she was able to employ other women in her local community and provide them with a flexible working experience as well. The low entry cost into the handmade business meant Lindsey could make and sell her product without paying for childcare or needing to work outside her home.

Space

Interestingly, although many businesses operate almost fully online now, there still seems to be a dominant belief that companies *must* meet in a physical workspace. Perhaps this unwavering value regarding space can best be seen in Silicon Valley. Although many companies in the Valley could be labeled as "online businesses" that focus mainly on digital spaces, products, and tools, billions of dollars have gone into

building giant complexes for employees to meet together, as is the case with large companies such as Google, Apple, and Facebook. These facilities boast office spaces for thousands of workers, as well as gyms, basketball courts and other recreational areas. Although the majority of the work in these tech companies could be done remotely (and probably is done remotely from smart phones and iPads before, during, and after formal office hours), the prevailing capitalist belief is that workers need to come “to work,” even when that space is more about play and socialization than actually serving as a location for labor. Even those running fast capitalist companies seem to cling to the idea that separate spheres are best; home and work should appear to be neatly divided, even if work goes on almost invisibly through digital channels at all hours of the day. Although studies show there is value in working around others in collaborative spaces (Whittaker, Frohlich, & Daly-Jones, 1994), and there is no doubt that large companies in Silicon Valley do need some physical spaces for meetings and tangible supplies and equipment, it is shocking how extravagant and costly the complexes are for companies whose employees could work from almost anywhere at any time. However, the money put into these buildings and the social events that take place there make it less surprising that women are judged by co-workers for not showing up to the physical workspace, even when company policies allow them to work out of the office. Missing “Food Truck Friday” to work through a child’s naptime is not acceptable in a capitalist world that values the office space more than the labor being produced within or beyond it.

However, handmade entrepreneurs blatantly refute the idea of separate spheres as they bring work into the home and even embrace the challenges that a shared home/work space creates. Like many types of women’s work, sewing has often occurred

anonymously within the home (Cott, 1997; Mathews, 1987; Strasser, 2000), but today's sewing entrepreneurs are making their work visible by sharing it and selling it on the internet. On a deeper level, these women are inserting themselves "into the male-dominated world of business" (Hoffert, 2008, p. 34) by creating spaces to buy and sell online, even though they conduct business from their own living rooms, offices, or bedrooms. Working from home is not without specific challenges, some of which would not be present at a traditional job or with paid full-time childcare. Handmade businesses owners often discuss the challenges of working from home, especially when young children are present. Moms will show pictures of messy studios or babies lying in the midst of fabric samples of the floor. Sometimes moms will teach their older children to help them with some aspect of the business, such as sticking mailing labels to outgoing packages, usually with the motive of keeping the children entertained rather than acquiring free labor. Other mothers admit in blog posts or tweets that they often stay up until the early morning hours attempting to get the majority of their work done after their children are in bed for the night.

Lindsey tried to refrain from working on her shop at all while she was homeschooling her children three days a week, but she found it difficult in the shared classroom/sewing room workspace. She writes:

Since my kids are at school 2 days a week, I try to get as much work done as I can while they are gone. And then I work pretty much every evening once they're in bed. But since my work is so fun, and it sits behind me while I'm working with the kids, and emails constantly need to be answered... distractions come easily. So I try my best to not do any work

during homeschool time. I keep my computer closed and try not to answer work-related texts (I'm not very good at that one). I'll check my email in the early morning before we start school, at lunch, then after we're done (Cheney, 2013).

Lindsey does not hesitate to share the difficulties she faced in owning her own business and educating her children at the same time. Many blog readers ask her questions about how she balances motherhood with her work. One of her answers follows:

I don't love teaching at home, but I love having my kids home. It doesn't feel that way every day. In fact, most days are really hard. But I have finally learned after years of struggling against it that not all good things have to be easy and feel good. Lots of good things and right decisions are hard. And that's ok. (Cheney, 2013).

Lindsey is just one example of how mothers struggle to run a business while also filling other roles such as wife, mother, or teacher. There are countless stories online of seamstresses admitting how hard it is to run a business from home, but most of them admit the drawbacks are worth the independence, the time with their families, and the flexible working hours that no other career could provide. Furthermore, with today's digital access to work email, text messages from co-workers, and business related social media, I would argue most middle class employees struggle to truly separate work life from home, regardless of their gender or their industry. But instead of pretending that these worlds are neatly divided, handmade entrepreneurs are admitting that blending work and home life together is sometimes difficult, often physically messy, but usually worth it for the flexibility and financial results.

Growth

While most start-ups operate with the goal to grow as quickly as possible, handmade entrepreneurs tend to prefer organic growth at a slow pace. Many women work individually for as long as possible before the demands of a burgeoning company require them to hire additional help. Sometimes women need help with the digital side of the company and choose to hire a “virtual assistant” to help with emails, online marketing, and customer service. Often virtual assistants will live in another city or state, and sometimes they will be a friend or acquaintance of the shop owner. The virtual assistant role allows female entrepreneurs to hire other women for a role that is flexible and remote, so both women can share benefits that would not be offered to them in many traditional companies. Sewing entrepreneurs specifically might also hire women to help with physical sewing labor or the packaging and shipping of products. These are typically local employees and are usually women (and often moms) who are looking to use their sewing skills or administrative background in a flexible, part-time job.

When Lindsey started to feel overwhelmed with the digital side of her sewing shop The Pleated Poppy, she hired her friend Jeanette to help her with email and marketing tasks. Lindsey shares: “We always joked about what her title was: administrative assistant, business associate, business manager, the-girl-that-does-all-the-things-I-don’t-want-to-do. But in the real world, her title was ‘virtual assistant,’ because in reality she was able to do all her work virtually, from her own home or wherever she wanted” (Cheney, 2011). Likewise, Maggie was able to hire a number of co-workers as her shop Gussy Sews expanded. She hired women locally by posting detailed anonymous descriptions on Minneapolis job boards online. Maggie had a virtual assistant for her

blog, as well as a number of local seamstresses who worked from her in-home studio. Once she relocated to Los Angeles many of these women continued to work for her remotely. Interestingly, even before she had kids of her own, Maggie was conscientious about her female employees' schedules and work needs, which is rare when an employer is not a parent themselves. Maggie wrote a blog giving advice to other shop owners about when and how to hire extra help and she says, "One thing I've learned — adding to our team is just as much about growing the business as it is about the personal needs of the applicant. It's very much a two-way street" (Whitley, 2012). Throughout the American business world, there has long been a plea to hire more women, especially in recent years where a well-educated generation of women is underrepresented in industries such as science, technology, and entrepreneurship. Both Lindsey and Maggie are examples of women providing flexible remote or part-time work for other women, benefits that many working women in this country seek but cannot find at traditional companies.

Closing Down Shop

Perhaps most contrary to the start-up model of launching a business, growing it rapidly, and selling it at a profit, is that handmade entrepreneurs are more likely to shut down their shop completely or put it on hold instead of selling it off, even if it would be feasible and lucrative to do so. Both Lindsey and Maggie have slowed or stopped their shops in the past year. Lindsey shut down her shop completely after 6 years of successful business because she was feeling too busy with other endeavors and the company was no longer an economic necessity for her family. She sold all her remaining products at a discount and even sold off many of her shop supplies such as fabric and shipping

materials. With the arrival of two new children and a cross-country move from Minneapolis to Los Angeles, Maggie has changed the pace of her own business. Instead of working constantly with a team of seamstresses and assistants to keep her shop open constantly, she now just opens “pop up” shops intermittently throughout the year. Each time she has a batch of sewn products to sell, she posts a picture of them on Instagram and writes a blog post with details about when the shop will open. Once the products sell out, which usually happens quickly due to the online hype regarding the limited inventory sale, she closes the shop again for a few months until she has another round of inventory. Her shop webpage remains open for browsing, but almost every product reads “sold out” until Maggie hosts her next sale. These intermittent sales allow Maggie to create new inventory at a pace that also allows her to be main caretaker for both her children.

Why did Lindsey and Maggie choose not to sell their businesses for a profit, which would be the goal in most other industries? For one, I think Maggie sees her company as something she can return to when her children are older and she has more time to devote to business. She blogs often about how she misses running her business full time and how she has struggled to find ways to be creative in the midst of motherhood. She shares in one post:

I’m still learning our new routine as a mama of two. I’m still learning how to process the fact that I don’t have time to run two handmade businesses... I’m not sewing much right now but I’m still creating, and I’m thankful for the change in mediums and textiles (play-doh, water colors, crayons, chalk, and embroidery) (Whitley, 2014).

By maintaining her blog and her social media presence, as well as opening her shop on a part-time basis, Maggie continues to be a voice in the handmade industry. She still shares business tips and glimpses of her creative projects on her blog, so her expertise as a shop owner and the style of her products cannot be forgotten. She is continuing to engage with her potential customers on a daily basis, even if she does not open her shop up full time again until years down the road.

Even Lindsey, who claimed she was shutting down her shop for good, has left the links to her shop visible on her blog, but they now say “Shhh... taking a nap” across the icons. Lindsey has never shared any desire to re-open her shop in the future, but perhaps as someone with an entrepreneurial nature (she has started a non-profit thrift store and started taking on home design jobs since quitting her sewing business), she wants to maintain an online platform to host some kind of storefront in the future. Lindsey continues to blog consistently since closing her shop, often sharing fashion posts, craft and design projects, and even works on some marketing campaigns to share products, such as make-up and bath items, with her readers. Because Lindsey’s blog and all her social media handles are titled “The Pleated Poppy” it would have been difficult to sell off her businesses, without drastically changing her online persona. For many entrepreneurs who start their businesses gradually or “by accident” their personal identities are so closely tied to their business identities that it would be virtually impossible to separate the two if they were ever to sell their business.

Some entrepreneurs are now intentionally keeping their online persona and their shop branding separate in case they ever hire an intern or employee to take over social media posting for a product or a brand. Elise Blaha Cripe, for example, has maintained a

personal blog since 2005 and sold handmade merchandise online since 2008. She dabbles in creating various products, including quilts, hand sewn clutches, and art prints. She also runs a weekly podcast on crafting and entrepreneurship. She uses her Instagram account to promote all these different forums where she writes, speaks, and sells products. Her main @elisejoy Instagram feed is used for “sharing bits of my work and home life. BITS being the key word. I am selective and critical about what ‘makes’ this feed and have tightened that window over the past year. I work to share photos that are creative, informative, colorful & (for the most part) upbeat” (Cripe, 2015). She explains this main Instagram account is used “to promote my blog, podcast and business BUT I also use it to document my family and our adventures” (Cripe, 2015). This used to be Elise’s only Instagram account, but she recently opened a separate business-only Instagram account where she promotes her products with behind the scenes pictures of design choices and packaging. She also reposts customer photos on this account which is something she would never do on her @elisejoy account, which contains only her own original photographs. She shares about her decision to separate her professional brand from her personal account: “I love that I split it off from @elisejoy. I use this account to share product photos, shipping updates, (hopefully) inspiring goal-setting tidbits and customer photos” (Cripe, 2015). Elise also shared in a recent podcast that she likes having a separate account for her business, so that as her company grows, she can allow an employee or intern to take over online marketing responsibilities without giving them access to her personal Instagram account. This allows the flexibility for Elise to grow, or even sell, her business, which is not feasible for most women whose online persona is too deeply linked to the products they are selling.

However, even if selling one's handmade shop is feasible, these women do not seem likely to cash in on the brands they have built. They seem to adhere to unspoken values of the handmade marketplace that their businesses remain fairly small in order for them to "touch" every handmade item, even if they have hired other women to help with production. Because these businesses are personal in nature, as these entrepreneurs interact with their customers on a daily basis through their blogs and social media, most cannot fathom selling the companies they have built. If they must put business on hold, they hope that maintaining a strong presence online and sharing creative projects done for fun instead of profit will help maintain their relationships with their customers, so they can pick up business again in the future if they so desire. Only time will tell if these goals are realistic, but they certainly provide an opportunity to extend a business venture instead of just selling a company and stashing the profit. Although these women have financial goals with their businesses, they seem to prize the running of the business as much as the profit itself. Instead of just walking away from a company with a set monetary amount, the ownership of the business, the relationship with the customers, and even the freedom to stop and start producing at will, seem to be top priorities for these women.

The Solly Wrap and Shark Tank

The previous examples describe small-scale cases of entrepreneurship, women who are running companies entirely on their own or with a modest team of women (and sometimes men) either locally or virtually. However, not all these companies remain small. Since entrepreneurship is vital to job growth in America, I share here two stories

of seamstresses who humbly started one-man operations that have since evolved into large flourishing businesses.

Elle Rowley's company, Solly Baby, sells specialty soft wrap baby carriers, a product that has become wildly popular in just four years since the company began. Elle explains her company's origins:

Solly Baby was born in 2011 in the sewing nook of a little house in Salt Lake City right after I had my second child, Solomon (hence the name Solly Baby). I had always been a babywearing advocate but I was frustrated with other carriers that I'd used so, after buying my first serger on Craigslist, I went to work while my babies slept. I designed and experimented with fabrics, turned my house upside down and into a factory with tape lining the living room floor for cutting guides (Rowley, n.d.).

Elle's company grew rapidly, so she no longer works from her home. Her family has since relocated to San Diego, and Solly Baby works with small local manufacturers so Elle can oversee production closely. The company uses American factories, fabric mills, dye houses, and printers. Elle also works with her husband and a team of employees on other aspects of the company such as marketing, customer service, and shipping. Elle has hired a large team of employees, and she gives them credit for helping her company thrive. She says on the company "about" page, "With the help of many other people, we were able to create a truly beautiful, functional, and safe product that I am proud to share with caregivers."

Elle says, “We are able to offer a customized, superior product because of how closely linked we are with this process and our customers.” Not only is Elle a mom of three who understands the needs of other moms, but she also maintains close ties with her customer base through the use of social media. The Solly Baby blog features posts relevant to motherhood and often features Solly customers in series such as “At Home With,” which shows how real working moms use the Solly Baby Wrap in daily life in order to fill their mothering and career roles at the same time. Solly Baby also uses its customers in company photo shoots and throughout its Instagram feed. Although mothers are usually featured, Solly Baby also makes a point to encourage dads to babywear, and occasionally shows fathers sporting the wrap along with tips geared toward males who want to babywear.

Although Elle’s Instagram and Twitter feeds are used mainly to market her product, she also shares personal photos of her family, and likes to highlight when her professional and personal life collide. On Elle’s birthday this year, she shared a picture of herself peeking over a pile of more than a hundred Solly Baby Wrap boxes. In the caption, she shares how her business truly remains a family affair, even though her company has grown quite large. She writes:

Okay, so I kind of imagined on my 30th birthday I'd have my picture taken looking super-hot jumping out of a giant birthday cake, but turns out a pile of Solly boxes is just as good! Ha! We had a shipping issue yesterday that made it so our fulfillment center wouldn't be able to ship a few truckloads of stripe backorders that are promised to go out today. All but one employee was out of our office today so Jared and I came in to do it. Then

we got here and our office was decorated by our employee's wife and my sister-in-law and her little kids all came to help too. And then I started looking at your names on the boxes and felt so grateful that I couldn't be even a little bit bummed. Best birthday ever. #notjoking

Both Elle's Instagram and Twitter account share the handle @sollybabywrap, but her profile can also be searched by her full name, Elle Rowley, and her Instagram bio is very personal in nature. It reads: "Elle Rowley: I live in a little house by the ocean with my surfer boy + 3 babes. We make baby wraps + try hard to be good people. Made in LA | Est. 2011 sollybaby.com" Elle thoughtfully blends her personal and professional life online, and has gained nearly 150,000 followers as a result.

Another example of a sewing entrepreneur whose company has grown exponentially in just a few years is Susan Petersen and her business, Freshly Picked, which sells genuine leather baby moccasins. Susan's rags to riches success story has led her to be an icon of sorts for other female entrepreneurs, and her story is one where sewing, business savvy, grit, and female empowerment collide. Similar to Elle and her baby wrap, Susan's business started when she became frustrated trying to find a baby shoe that would stay on her son's feet. Feeling creative one day, she picked up bag of scrap leather at a yard sale and began experimenting with shoe designs. The Freshly Picked "Our Story" page explains: "Working at her kitchen table, on a shoestring budget, Susan persisted through several attempts until she had created a pair of moccasins that not only looked adorable on Gus' chubby little feet, but stayed on his feet as well." Once she perfected the product, Susan was interested in starting a business, but she and her husband were very poor at the time and she had no capital to buy the high-quality leather

needed to make the shoes. Susan got resourceful and convinced her brother who owns a window installation company to let her keep the old windows he removed on the job. Susan “spent a whole summer banging the glass out of the windows because they were encased in aluminum frames. At the end of the summer she took the aluminum window frames to the scrap yard and recycled them to get money. She made \$200 dollars and with that literal sweat equity, she started her business” (“Our Story,” n.d.). Her business was not an instant success though. She priced her first moccasins too low at a \$20 price point and struggled to make a profit in the early years, as she did not fully understand the high cost of leather or the value of her time (Clifford, 2015). Now her shoes sell for \$45-60 a pair.

In the past three years, Freshly Picked sales have grown from 120,000 to 5.4 million thanks to great media exposure, celebrity endorsements, and Susan’s strategic use of social media. Susan appeared on the ABC show *Shark Tank* in January 2014 and struck a business deal with investor Daymond John in which he would give \$150,000 for a 25% share of the company. After the show, the contract was renegotiated and eventually fell apart, which Susan says worked out in her favor because she got all the exposure “and at the same time I didn’t have to give up any piece of my company” (Clifford, 2015). Before her *Shark Tank* appearance, Susan had the opportunity to provide shoes for a Parenting Magazine cover shoot. When the cover model, Kourtney Kardashian, saw the moccasins on the set, she went home and bought a pair for her son (Clifford, 2015). This began a long list of celebrity moms who personally endorse and support the Freshly Picked brand.

But the most influential factor in Susan's success was her early adoption of online tools and her strategic use of social media. When Susan saw her friends selling in the new Etsy marketplace back in 2006, she became intrigued. She quickly taught herself to sew and opened up a shop selling baby blankets. Although the shop was never a huge success, the skills she learned in selling online were invaluable when she switched to selling moccasins a few years later. Susan kept a blog in addition to her Etsy shop and she discovered if she blogged tutorials about how to make what she was selling, traffic in her shop increased (Clifford, 2015). Now she uses Instagram to drive traffic from her 540,000 followers to the Freshly Picked website. Her feed is mostly marketing photos of cute kids wearing her moccasins (often the children of real customers or fellow bloggers), but she also adds personal pictures from time to time, such as a recent "#tbt" (Throwback Thursday) picture to the time when Susan and her friend met fellow entrepreneur Pat Flynn or a shout-out to a new local laundry service she has started using for her kids' clothes. Susan knows the power of social media in growing a business and she now offers classes to other aspiring entrepreneurs. In a recent Instagram post, Susan advertised an in-person Instagram marketing class she would be offering along with her creative team. In the caption she writes: "I started my business right here on Instagram, in many ways you can say I am the company that Instagram built. In fact, one of the most asked questions I get is, how? So my team and I came up with the answer to how, how to market your small business on Instagram." Susan knows that social media was vital to growing her company, and she wants other entrepreneurs to be able to harness Instagram's power for building their businesses.

Susan does not shy away from her titles of “entrepreneur” and “CEO.” Instead, she spends her time mentoring other female entrepreneurs. Over a year ago, Susan began hosting a weekly discussion on the Freshly Picked blog that she calls the “Entrepreneurial Empowerment Conversation.” Now that conversation has moved from her blog to Twitter and Instagram, and she uses the hashtag #eemovement so other entrepreneurs can follow the dialogue online. Every Tuesday, she writes a post sharing an inspiring quote and some thoughts on entrepreneurship. For example, in one post she shares a quote from the book *The E-Myth* by Michael E. Gerber, which she is currently reading with her staff. She quotes: “If your business depends on you, you don’t have a business – you have a job.” Susan adds, “The E-myth is a must read for any entrepreneur, and I’ll be talking about my favorite parts of the book for the rest of the month.” In another post, she writes:

Sometimes when I am feeling overwhelmed, when I have a lot of big decisions to make or if I have something really hard to do, I will fall into a habit of working in my business instead of on it. I will allow myself to get caught up in tasks that at the end of the day, don't get me any closer to my end goal(s) and I think this trap is typical for a lot of entrepreneurs. You cannot be the technician and the entrepreneur in your business. They have competing goals and priorities. Be the entrepreneur! (Peterson, 2015).

Other female entrepreneurs engage with the hashtag online and share their responses to Susan’s weekly prompts on their own feeds. For example, Megan Reynolds, a jewelry designer follows along with the #eemovement each week. Here is a caption she shared on Instagram in response to Susan’s weekly post:

Reposting from @freshlypicked: it's time for the #eemovement prompt for today. Susan asks what your biggest business mistake has been? For me, it's been not planning out things enough. I'm great at dreaming and making goals, but I struggle with planning out the quarter, year etc. This can get me and my bank account in trouble, but I'm really working on it this year! What's been your biggest mistake and how have you learned from it? (Reynolds, 2015).

Susan takes her role of mentoring other entrepreneurs very seriously, and she has continued the Entrepreneurial Empowerment Conversation online since 2014.

Susan also provides opportunities and resources for aspiring entrepreneurs. In the spring of 2015, Susan opened a “women only workspace” at the Freshly Picked Headquarters in Utah. She advertised the collaborative working space for females in an Instagram post. She writes:

Here at FPHQ we will be opening 16 spots at our brand spanking new Women Only Open Workspace. What does this mean? First of all, we're not hiring, this is for you and your business so, do you need to take your business to the next level? Do you need a spot to work outside your home on your business but can't commit to an office space? Do you thrive in a collaborative work environment? Then this is for you! (Peterson, 2015)

As someone who started her business from her home with young children in tow, Susan knows the pains of trying to grow a company from within one's own household.

Although there are many benefits to the flexibility of working from home, many female entrepreneurs need a space away from the home as their business expands. By offering

spots in collaborative workspace for a low cost, Susan is allowing other women to grow their companies in a feasible and affordable way.

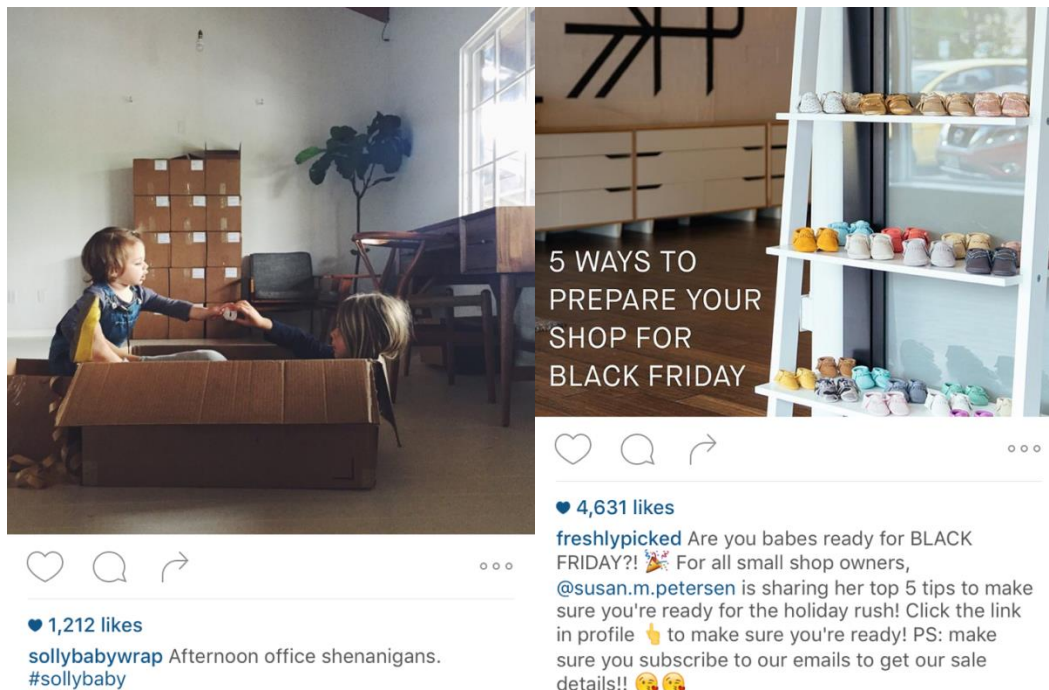


Figure 13. Instagram posts from Solly Baby and Freshly Picked

Although Solly Baby and Freshly Picked sell distinctly different products, the companies share very similar roots. Both CEOs launched their business when they saw a need in the baby market that was not being met. Elle knew the benefits of baby-wearing (Charpak et al., 2005; Ludington-Hoe & Swinth, 1996), but struggled to find a carrier that was comfortable and safe for her and her baby. Susan wanted her baby to wear shoes, no doubt a necessity during Utah’s cold winters, but could not find a pair of soft shoes that stayed on her infant’s feet. Female entrepreneurship should not be limited to the baby product industry, but there are countless products for moms and babies that were originally designed by men and lack safety, comfort, or aesthetic beauty (Martin & Cary,

2014). The Solly Baby Wrap and Freshly Picked moccasins are two examples of functional products that were improved by the knowledge and creativity of the moms who use them. The range of products and services that could benefit from the knowledge and invention of women, and specifically mothers, is nearly endless.

Conclusion

This chapter looks at how seamstresses are launching online companies to sell their sewn goods and how they are marketing their products and interacting with customers using digital tools. Women throughout history have sewn for a profit, and in this final section I want to consider how online sewing businesses extend and add to the history of women's sewing entrepreneurship.

Female entrepreneurs continue to collaborate with and employ other women. Since America's earliest days, women have joined together to complete their sewing labor. Much like Sarah Sheldon (Ulrich, 2001), the farmer's wife who worked with neighboring women to complete large weaving and sewing jobs, women seamstresses continue to collaborate with each other today, especially in the design of new products, such as the abstract headband and limited edition make-up bag. Furthermore, the women who run the companies described in this chapter have chosen to employ other women on a part-time or flexible basis as their companies require more laborers. This provides accommodating working conditions for a larger number of women seeking to bring in extra income with their sewing skills.

Women are able to reach a broader customer base through digital channels. Whereas women traditionally have sold most of their sewn items locally, today's online

business owners can easily sell to customers across the country, and often, worldwide. Even for the crafters of the late 20th century who could travel more extensively than women in previous centuries to sell their goods at craft fairs, such trips were timely and costly, and the base of customers even at widely attended fairs was still somewhat limited (Dormer, 1997). Now women can reach an international audience of consumers when marketing products online through the Etsy marketplace or even by strategically growing their social media accounts. Of course, one does not easily gain followers and convert them into customers, but as examples such as Susan Peterson's company Freshly Picked show, it is possible to virtually build your company through platforms such as Instagram with perseverance and strategy. Susan actively shares her expertise on reaching a broad audience with other hopeful entrepreneurs in the form of online and in-person classes and how-to blog posts.

Women can start companies with lower overhead and less financial risk. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, today's technologies allow women to launch businesses at very low costs compared to women who used to have to rent, buy, or share a physical store front to sell their goods in the past (Chansky, 2010). The nominal fees on Etsy or the even lower costs to run a self-hosted website for those with the technological savvy allow women to ease into business without a significant financial investment other than the materials to make the goods themselves. Often women never even have to pay for advertising, but instead share their products on social media or ask other friends to highlight or link to their company on various online platforms. This allows women to gradually transition to a full-time career in the handmade industry, as is the case when Maggie opened her shop Gussy Sews. The downside to this is that many companies fail

to launch successfully, because the owners lack the time, attention, or money needed to help a new online business thrive. This was the case of Peterson's first baby blanket company. Sometimes this failure is helpful though, because entrepreneurs will learn technological and business skills that help them open another company in the future, or they begin making a new product based on a void they discover in the rather saturated online handmade marketplace.

Women continue to use the home as a workspace. Perhaps now more than ever before, the home is visibly recognized as a place of work due to the visual descriptions shared on social media. Instagram, for example, bursts with images of women working from home, and those who run sewing companies often maintain lively social media feeds of bright fabrics strewn about the living room or a new garment being sewn at the dining room table. Hashtags such as #wahm (work at home mom) or #femaleentrepreneur, or sewing specific labels such as #lovetosew or #sewingblogger, help organize these photos and allow women with similar backgrounds and interests to find each other online. Working and middle class women have always worked from home, not just by completing household chores that were often physically taxing and time-consuming, but also by taking in waged labor. One of the most available forms of work for women seeking extra income was to take in sewing tasks such as mending for other families (White Nelson, 2004). Historically, however, these forms of labor taking place at home often remained hidden, sometimes because middle class families did not want to share the financial necessity of such work, but primarily to maintain the ideal that home was a private realm and that women were, above all, nurturers taking care of baking and babies, not entrepreneurs launching businesses. The digital showcasing of

women working at home on their sewing labor vividly depicts that divide between home and market never truly existed.

Working logistics are still troublesome for women. Although women's sewing labor may be more visible than ever before, the photos of women working posted on Facebook and Instagram reveal that the logistics of being a female entrepreneur are still problematic at times. Even women who run successful sewing companies full-time still face gender-based challenges present in the business world. For all the pretty pictures posted of women sewing at home, hiring more employees, or opening up shared workspaces in their communities, the handmade industry is not immune to the problems women face in other trades. Many women work "overtime" for months or years, trying to launch their businesses, often juggling two careers at once. For entrepreneurs who are also mothers, finding affordable childcare or balancing business and one's personal roles are still difficult. For some, like Maggie, putting business on hold is the only option when child caretaking options are limited. Obviously, though, this means a significant financial loss for her family, much like the mothers who quit their careers once they have children. For Maggie though, her online activities have allowed her not to lose her company or her customer base entirely, and she hopes to devote more time to her career in the future. Other moms, such as Elise Blaha Cripe, are surprised by the difficulties of running a business from home while raising children. Although Elise could afford childcare for her daughter, it took her a full-year to realize that it was "okay" to send her daughter to a daycare while she pursued her business. She spent nearly a year struggling with post-partum depression as she tried to be a "work from home mom" until she finally devoted

two full-time days a week to work while her daughter attended a nearby daycare. She reflected on her struggle in a blog post:

I planned to take a two month "maternity leave"... but what I didn't come up with was a plan for after the maternity leave ended. I somehow thought that I could actively raise a kid and actively grow a business without help. I'm not sure why I thought this. It's true, many people, all over the world, successfully do both by themselves. But many people, all over the world, also return to work and have childcare... I so wish I would have gone easier on all three of us those first few months. I wish I could have believed the people who told me it will all even out and be okay. I also wish I would have planned from the beginning that we'd get part-time childcare. Before I went on maternity leave, my job was contributing substantial income and we always expected that I would keep working. It would have saved me so much guilt and stress and sadness if I had known to do that I needed help (Cripe, 2014).

Although Elise is successfully self-employed and is hoping to outsource more of her business in 2016 as her company grows, her story shows that even handmade entrepreneurs are not immune to the struggles that plague working women. From childcare costs to battling socially-imposed ideals about how one should enact the roles of wife, mother, or business owner, even women who have their "dream job" still face a biased world where women face many obstacles when running their own sewing company.

Despite lingering difficulties for working women, there is so much potential for female entrepreneurship in today's digital world. Solly Baby and Freshly Picked are two companies that show what is possible for women's entrepreneurship, especially in industries that combine handmade products with online markets. With sales in the millions, growing staff numbers, and the intentional sourcing of American products and factories to make their goods, Elle and Susan exemplify the spirit of female entrepreneurship seen in the smaller handmade shops on Etsy and in the sewing blogosphere. The owners of Freshly Picked and Solly Baby care deeply about other female entrepreneurs, ethical production, and providing flexible, positive working experiences for their employees. For example, Susan gives company-wide vacations to all employees when they meet business milestones (Clifford, 2015). Furthermore, even as their companies grow, these female CEOs remain closely tied to the production of their products and to their customers through the use of social media. The handmade community holds to the unwavering value of putting human touch on each product, and Elle and Susan have not forgotten this, even years after their businesses outgrew their own homes. From Elle hand packing orders on her 30th birthday to Susan, who still personally writes every post on the Freshly Picked company blog, they know they must remain closely tied to the fabric and the leather, the posts and the pictures, and the wide online audience that purchases their products and supports their growing companies.

CONCLUSION

Women's sewing culture has been enriched by contemporary digital tools and platforms for communication. However, modern sewing practices are not entirely new. Instead, today's seamstresses build upon the rich history of American sewers, often reweaving traditions of old or stitching together former practices with new digital methods of development or delivery. For example, Maggie (Chapter 2) learned to sew almost entirely from YouTube videos, a resource not available to novices in the past. However, when confused by concepts in the videos, she sometimes called her mother-in-law, a seasoned seamstress, for clarification and help. Her learning experience included the technologies of online videos and a cell phone combined with the more traditional method of receiving instruction from a family member.

As the collection of feminist research on women's material culture grows, scholars increasingly acknowledge that material practices in the so-called "domestic" realm help us understand women's lived experiences and the identities they assume, the knowledge they create and share, and the challenges they face (Beaudry, 2006; Goggin & Tobbin, 2009; Parker, 2010). The archives of sewing practices women are generating online are utterly important as they create a vivid, detailed history of how and why 21st century women sew – whether for hobby, philanthropy, or profit, among countless other reasons. In the past, descriptions of women's sewing were often hidden away in diaries, captured in fading photographs, or seen in the rare articles of sewing themselves that have survived the centuries since their creation. Scholars have worked for decades to unearth the details in these pages and pictures (Nelson, 2004; Ulrich, 2001), and have

labored even harder to show the significance of women's sewing in a world that often dismisses women's skills and activities as less meaningful than the work of men. Now thousands of pictures are uploaded to Facebook and Instagram every day that capture the details of women's sewing. Along with these photos are captions and written posts in which women describe their practices, such as how they invented a new product or why they learned to sew in the first place. With this stream of visual information, sewing, a hallmark of women's history, is more visible than ever before. With visibility comes credibility as women are able to showcase the ways they sew to help people in need or contribute significantly to their household income.

Although the constant stream of sewing photos, videos, and blog posts shows a world of brightly printed fabrics, five-star Etsy ratings, and hashtags such as #ilovesewing and #dreamjob, these records also hint that contemporary women still confront many challenges that middle-class American women have always faced. Many Etsy sellers are attempting to turn their hobby into a trade because of a job loss. Some sell handmade products as a side job because of economic need, reminiscent of the farmer's wives who took in sewing work to make up for a year with poor crops. While craft culture has boomed in the past decade despite America's ongoing economic slump, the sewing activities scattered across social media are often motivated by fun, but sometimes by famine. Even women successfully operating online sewing businesses face challenges in meshing their professional jobs and their personal lives. Finding affordable childcare continues to be a hindrance for women, even for entrepreneurs who enjoy the alleged benefits of flexible hours and working from home. For some, the cost of childcare is too great to pursue business on a full-time scale, and others struggle to negotiate their

personal and professional identities in the face of culturally imposed ideals of what it means to be a mother or a working professional. Too often these roles still feel mutually exclusive, even in an online world that claims to revere the “mompreneur.” Even today’s sewing philanthropies, although inspiring, remind us of the brokenness in the world, as clothing is sent to women’s shelters and handmade blankets are delivered to communities ravaged by earthquakes, fires, and floods. Pictures of emaciated children and destroyed houses may not be as pretty as Instagram photos of patchwork quilts, but sometimes gifting a quilt is one tangible way to help these groups of people who are suffering so badly.

Nevertheless, this new digital archive of women’s sewing depicts hope and progress for women, regardless of the ongoing gender biases and social challenges they face. Sewing shops display women’s ability to invent products and operate businesses when financial needs arise. Conversations across Twitter and Instagram photos of women hugging at blog conferences reveal women’s ability to forge friendships and build communities unbound by geographic location. The piles of dresses and finger puppets sent to orphanages around the globe show how women are perceptive and sensitive to the needs of others and able to collaborate to fulfill these needs in tangible ways. The thousands of YouTube sewing tutorials demonstrate how women are able to create and curate resources for teaching and learning, even when time or money constraints do not allow them to pursue formal education. These attributes of female grit, compassion, and ingenuity are not new, nor are they exclusive to seamstresses, but the digital archives of sewing blogs and Etsy shops illustrate more vividly than ever before the importance of women’s needles and the stories behind their stitches.

Future research

This dissertation provides only a few examples of how women are navigating and leveraging digital tools in their sewing endeavors. I examine only a handful of case studies amongst thousands, perhaps millions, of women who are showcasing and sharing their sewing activities across the web. As technologies evolve and emerge, scholars must continue to study how women use available digital resources in their handmade endeavors. Even as I complete this project, mobile technology and the use of native video within social media networks (Klein, 2015) continue to expand and will undoubtedly play a role in the future of women's sewing. It is imperative that material culture scholars stay abreast of these changes so data regarding contemporary seamstresses does not get lost in the ephemeral flow of information online.

My ultimate goal in this project is to bring internet researchers into conversation with feminist material culture scholars by exploring the juncture where the handmade world collides with the World Wide Web. I investigated the dominantly female realm of sewing blogs to demonstrate to internet scholars some of the concerns of feminist researchers and ask them to consider the nuances and ethical choices of studying gender in online spaces. I examined women's digital sewing practices to serve as an example for feminists seeking to collect and analyze online data about material culture. In the future, scholars should deeply examine the technologies women are using to collaborate on sewing, such as conducting genre analyses of YouTube sewing videos or using network theory to examine women's relationships on sites such as Twitter and Instagram. Even methods such as data scraping and collecting big data on an expansive site such as Etsy would be helpful in understanding how material culture takes place online and how

women are acting and writing in digital spaces. And, of course, my project is limited as it looks only at case studies of English-speaking, American women. Future research must examine how online sewing practices are taking place on an international scale and how women with diverse backgrounds are engaging in the digital world as they pursue handmade activities for pleasure, profit, and philanthropy. Just as sewing is a highly social activity where women join together to collaborate and teach one another, whether in a nineteenth century sewing circle or in a forum online, research is also never done in isolation. Internet researchers and feminist scholars have much to learn from one another. If they combine their methods, ethics, and knowledge, the resulting conversation may look something like a quilt, stitched together from disparate pieces to form something cohesive, practical, and even beautiful.

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