



## **Pastoral dreams and quirky goats: An analysis of selling strategies of fiber farmers on Etsy**

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Small scale fiber farming is growing as a hobby and economic activity in the United States (Jolly, 2011). Small farms often focus on rare or heritage breed fibers and offer consumers the chance to interact more directly with the farmer (Jolly, 2011; Trejo & Lewis, 2017). Fiber farmers have also adopted various online platforms to communicate with others about their farms and sell their goods (Trejo & Lewis, 2017). One online market for farm fiber goods is Etsy.

Etsy has been steadily growing as an online marketplace for handmade products (Blanchflower, 2016; Jakob, 2013). The website allows sellers to easily create a shop for their items and also to write an “about” section where they can describe more about their creative process and motives for selling. One researcher found that sellers of craft supplies, like fiber goods, have more success than sellers of finished products (Jakob, 2013). Therefore, Etsy would be a good option for farmers selling fiber products as craft supplies. To the researcher’s knowledge, the use of Etsy to sell fiber farm products has not been specifically explored. Thus, the purpose of this research was to examine the selling strategies of farmers selling fiber goods on Etsy and explore how fiber farmers characterize their farms, animals, and lifestyles.

The results were also examined using the concept of nostalgia and the principles of Slow Fashion. Nostalgia is, “A preference towards experiences associated with objects that were more common when one was younger or even before birth” (Holbrook & Schindler, 2003, p. 106). Slow Fashion is, “based on ethical sourcing, design, production, and consumption with awareness of social, cultural, and ecological implications” (Trejo & Lewis, 2017, p. 2).

### **Methods and Procedures**

To investigate the purpose data were gathered from Etsy. The following sampling criteria were established, only postings for un-spun items such as roving or locks were sought. Only postings for items produced by fiber farmer sellers were chosen. Only one entry per farm was chosen and all farms had to be located within the United States. The written details about each item were recorded. The “about” section of each Etsy shop was also recorded. It is common for Etsy buyers to, “utilized the ‘about’ sections to learn more about particular sellers in order to determine if they were interested in the values and ideals of a particular seller (Blanchflower, 2016, p. 327). Data collection continued until saturation was reached. Data were analyzed using the three stage constant comparison method (on analysis see Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

### **Results and Discussion**

A total of 47 fiber farm product postings and “about” sections were analyzed. The postings produced over 100 pages of single-spaced text. Following the coding procedure, three major themes emerged: *Farm history*, *motivations for farming*, and *buying farm fresh*.

The *farm history* was evident in the discussion of the heritage of the farm. Some of the farmers told tales of their ancestors farming if applicable or for those without a history of farming in the family it was common to discuss the history of their actual farm. One individual

talked about her 100 year old farm house. The farmers explained how they got into farming. Some were born into farming, while others were newcomers to farming. Some farmers described leaving hectic city lifestyles or using their retirement to engage in their own pastoral dreams. Nostalgia, longing for a simpler time and lifestyle, was often a motivator for the farmers and was also a tactic to engage the buyers with their Etsy stores (Holbrook & Schindler, 2003).

The *motivations for farming* theme was next. The farmers in the sample appeared to love farming and their animals, for instance, “My flock is a great source of joy and entertainment, and occasionally exasperation” (P16). Another researcher found that Etsy buyers may be enticed to purchase when they felt that their purchase is helping the seller live out their dreams or if the values of both align (Blanchflower, 2016). It appeared the fiber farmers were using this tactic too.

There were motivation related to community engagement. The farmers often helped other farmers. Some shared their knowledge, others offered services like fiber processing or shearing. A couple used their Etsy shops to sell for other farmers, for instance, “now featuring some of Billy Goat Mountain Ranch Products...Ellie raises angora goats and is my neighbor as well as an amazing friend” (P12). Etsy as a whole is meant to build the community of sellers, therefore, this finding is aligned with the principles of the site (Blanchflower, 2016).

Finally, the theme of *buying farm fresh* was comprised of the benefits of buying fiber farm products. Perceived benefits included the ability to buy local and more eco-friendly products. The farmers also often identified their products as being made in a particular state and on a “small farm,” though the term was never quantitated. It appeared the inclusion of the state and term “small farm” were used as tools to encourage buyers to “shop local” (Blanchflower, 2016; Jolly, 2013). Both of which can be related to Slow Fashion (Trejo & Lewis, 2017).

There was also the ability to buy rare or heritage fibers, thus, unique products. Emphasizing the unique, handmade nature of an item is a proven selling strategy for Etsy sellers (Blanchflower, 2016) and small farmers (Jolly, 2011). Oftentimes, the farmer described the lifestyles and personal characteristics of specific fiber animal. This desire to showcase “happy” fiber animals allowed the farmers to show their ethical care of the animals also helps them to engage with potential buyers (Trejo & Lewis, 2017).

Finally, the products allowed the farmers to reach out to others and educate about farms and fiber animals. The outreach was done in person at events such as fiber festivals, on-farm classes, and also through various forms of social media. The use of both in-person activities like fiber festivals/farmers markets and social media has been found to be one of the major outreaches of small fiber farmer (Trejo & Lewis, 2017).

### **Conclusion**

Fiber farmers were utilizing many of the previously identified successful Etsy selling tactics (Blanchflower, 2016). The postings were highly related to the concept of nostalgia (Holbrook & Schindler, 2003), in which the past history of the land or a farming family was glorified. There were also elements that related to Slow Fashion, which emphasizes locality, small, and moral production (Trejo & Lewis, 2017). Future research should be done to investigate how buyers of fiber farm products feel about these tactics. Additional research could be done to determine how the fiber farming community works to support each other’s efforts.

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