



Bringing Craft Back: A Netnographic Study of Etsy as an Online Marketplace Community

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With over 800,000 sellers and total sales reaching \$80 million, Etsy has experienced tremendous success since its introduction in 2005 (Hall, 2013). Bringing artists, crafters, collectors, and consumers together around handmade and vintage products as well as supplies, Etsy has developed into an online marketplace centered on the crafting community. Previous research on consumption communities has primarily examined communities formed through interest in brands (Cova, 1997; Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001). In contrast, there is very little academic research that examines communities formed through online marketplaces like Etsy. This study addresses this gap by exploring how, as an online marketplace, Etsy provides a business infrastructure that is designed to foster community, rather than competition, among its sellers.

Using a netnographic approach to research design (Kozinets, 2006), data were collected via two primary methods: (1) online participant observation and (2) auto-netnography. Online participant observation of Etsy occurred over a period of four months and focused on the collection of text-based interactions between sellers, such as blogs, community stories, and online workshops. Observation data were also collected from the “Seller Handbook,” which is a series of posts provided by Etsy about how to sell products on the site. Auto-netnography, the second method used, requires a fully participative role within the setting under study, relying on personal experiences within the community rather than observations alone (Kozinets, 2006). To this end, one of the researchers participated in the Etsy marketplace as a seller of handcrafted jewelry for a period of four months. This participation included spending approximately 30-40 hours a week on the development and maintenance of the shop, as well as interacting with other sellers and responding to and posting comments on Etsy’s various blogs, forums, online workshops, and labs. Additional interaction was achieved through direct correspondence with both sellers and buyers, as well as by joining two online Etsy teams, which are groups of sellers that are organized around a common interest.

Upon completion of data collection, Spiggle’s (1994) suggestions for qualitative data analysis and interpretation were followed, wherein patterns in the data were first identified and labeled. Then, conceptual links between patterns were defined and examined for similarities and differences. A set of thematic categories emerged and relationships across these categories were identified to develop characteristics and dimensions of each theme. As a result of this iterative process of analysis, three themes were identified and used to structure the interpretation of data: *The Etsy Ethos, Telling the Etsy Story, and Empowerment through Etsy.*

The Etsy Ethos examines Etsy's message of collaboration among sellers and promotes the idea that selling products on Etsy is a learning experience. That is, mistakes made along the way are seen as learning opportunities rather than failures. This idea is supported by the extent to which Etsy encourages sellers to develop and maintain an open dialogue and participate in collaborative activities through the various social networking tools used by the site (e.g., forums, posts, and Etsy Teams). *Telling the Etsy Story* explores how Etsy encourages sellers to use story-telling as a means to communicate Etsy's message of collaboration within its marketplace. Stories include sharing strategies for constructing an Etsy shop, ways that sellers can help each other to make their products stand out, and individual struggles and successes with selling on Etsy. Etsy facilitates this story-telling through its social media tools, educational materials, and community activities (e.g., forums, Seller Handbook, and craft parties). Attempts to align competing sellers with Etsy's message of community are also reflected in *Empowerment through Etsy*, where sellers are encouraged to develop a sense of ownership over Etsy's marketplace practices and functions. This sense of ownership further facilitates the notion of community, as sellers, both expert and novice, work together through open and ongoing dialogue designed to serve as a support system that benefits not just the sellers, but the Etsy site as a whole.

Etsy continues to grow at a rapid pace, with sales increasing by 70% since 2011 alone (Hall, 2013). This growth indicates that Etsy has been extremely successful in popularizing crafts through its sellers and their handmade products and craft supplies. However, as this study found, Etsy's collaborative approach and nurturing ethos have been instrumental in shaping the site into more than just a place to buy and sell unique, one-of-a-kind products, but an online marketplace community. This study points to how Etsy achieves this community by its approach to online retailing, an approach that serves to unite competing sellers through a common objective: creating and sharing the Etsy experience. Further research on Etsy's community-focused retail business strategy is needed, as are studies that explore the notion of the Etsy marketplace community from the perspective of consumers who purchase goods from Etsy shops.

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