Risky Business: Buyers and Sellers on Etsy.com

By

Alexandra Cuervo
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I would like to thank my advisor, Sarah Croucher.

Without her help
I would definitely still be saying
“Etsy is just like, soo hipster”
I. Introduction

Founded in 2005, Etsy is an e-commerce website that follows the tradition of open craft fairs, giving sellers storefronts where they list their goods for a fee of $0.20. It has been compared to “your grandma’s basement”¹ as well as “a crafty cross between Amazon and Ebay.”² The site also has a large social networking component, where users can add each other to their “circles” and see lists of fellow users’ “favorited” items. Etsy is composed of largely female user base; at last count ninety seven percent of its users were female, the average user’s age was 35, over 60 percent have college degrees, and 55 percent are married. Furthermore, the average household income is $62,000--well above the national mean.³

The Etsy “ethos” is a subtle, but very tangible aspect of the brand; for example, in his blog post regarding venture capital firm Union Square Ventures’ $27 million investment in Etsy, company founder Rob Kalin reiterated the company’s belief that “the world cannot keep consuming the way it does now, and that buying handmade is part of the solution.”⁴ However, this moralistic tone is invoked infrequently, instead Etsy promotes an idea that shopping on Etsy can be personally fulfilling and thus, by association, beneficial to the world around us. This attitude is best invoked in the section of Etsy’s mission statement which reads “by looking around at the stuff that matters to our lives, we believe we can understand more about what moves us as human beings.”⁵

Though all of these facts are pertinent the analysis to follow, none paint the holistic portrait of elite bricolage, the “picturesque-vintage-design-craft rabbit hole”\textsuperscript{6} that I believe is the heart of Etsy, and what draws people to it as both buyers and sellers. Perhaps I should give a small offering of my current “favorite” Etsy items. “Favoriting” describes the practice of Etsy users adding items they like to “wish-lists” by clicking a heart next to the image, and is one of many methods Etsy offers for compiling and finding objects. The current political moment surrounding women’s reproductive rights has inspired particular zeal from Etsy’s feminist quadrant, including myself. I have a beautiful “Uterus Embroidery Wall Hanging Hoop Art,” $34, (Fig. 1) as well as a pair of “Panties With Uterus Print,” $8.50 (Fig. 2) both favorited. Time will tell if I ever decide I cannot live without these objects and add them to my shopping cart rather than my digital “heart.” Etsy also sells vintage items, and as a collector of antique watch keys I have “favorited” many of these, as well as shops that specialize in selling them. One such “favorite” of mine is a set of “Authentic Pocket Watch Keys,” $34, (Fig. 3) that have been craftily repurposed as earrings, and which the seller has displayed beautifully in an outdoor setting, hanging from a porcelain teacup.

At around Christmas of last year, Etsy rolled out a feature that allowed users to search for gifts for individuals by using their friends’ Facebook “likes.”\textsuperscript{7} (Fig. 4) I was reminded of one friend’s taste for French new wave cinema using this application, though several of my other friends’ ironic use of the Facebook “like” application meant that Etsy severely miscalculated what they truly want for Christmas. Such are the limits of technology. In another tale of Etsy Holiday Bliss, my friend Callie’s boyfriend bought


her everything from her favorites list! Everything. Callie said it was a wonderful gesture, even though “buying stuff on Etsy always feels like I’m getting myself a present anyway.”

Upon asking Callie to clarify (and to please stop downplaying her good fortune) Callie explained she was referring to Etsy sellers’ practice of elaborately wrapping purchased items, and often including handwritten notes and small offerings alongside what has been purchased.

In Marcel Mauss’s book *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, written in 1924, modern capitalism is interpreted as the driving force in the elimination of the spirit of the gift. Mauss’ perspective interpreted gifts in direct opposition to commodities. Later scholars, in particular, Arjun Appadurai in *The Social Life of Things*, recognize that the categories of ‘gift’ and ‘commodity’ are not mutually exclusive; objects move from one realm into another, acquiring meaning based on the way in which they are exchanged and intended for use. The distinction here is the emphasis on the value created by the emotionally evocative power of objects rather than their production process, though on Etsy it is the production process that creates the emotional connection. In the framework of contemporary scholarship, it is useful to think of material culture within what Appadurai calls “regimes of value,” highlighting the way that an object’s value changes depending on its social context. One example of this would be a masterwork of art that is considered priceless until it is put to auction, at which point it is momentarily commodified – but only in this moment does it acquire an actual value. Etsy’s regime of value is one that plays which mainstream American conventions of value; the objects bought and sold are cultural, decorative, distinctive and

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memorable. They are, somewhat like the painting, simultaneously consumer goods and artistic expressions of identity. As an object is endowed with specific connotations of value within a particular context, it is interpreted as having qualities of alienability and/or inalienability.\textsuperscript{11} Inalienability can be understood as the extent to which the value and significance of an object cannot be disengaged from the relationships of those who own that object.\textsuperscript{12} Thus, Etsy’s emphasis on handmade items and direct buyer seller relations represent a certain amount of inalienability that is then destabilized by these objects’ having been commodified. Therefore, on Etsy, as is the case in many regimes of value, objects circulate in a manner that often crosses these categories, operating as commodities and indicators of selfhood.

Etsy locates itself uniquely among its e-commerce competitors, offering an experience that purports to transcend the business exchange. In the context of neoliberal capitalism, Etsy commodifies ideology by exploiting the symbolic value of the objects bought and sold. But this commoditization is only part of the social life of things. As we have seen, the objects on Etsy operate within what Appunjurai termed ‘regime of value.’ By interpreting these objects as having value as art, as artifact and as commodity, one can see how they deny simple definitions as either ‘gift’ or ‘commodity.’

\textsuperscript{11} Alienability and Inalienability are terms derived from Marx’s theory of Alienation, and concern “the relationship of the worker to production.” Marx believed that alienation occurred when individuals engage in labor that gives rise to a product they feel no connection to. The less a worker related to his labour and the labor of others, which he purchases through commodity exchange, the more the world around him become alien to him. These two forms of alienation, alienation from the product and alienation in the process of production, produce alienation from the species. See: Karl Marx, \textit{Karl Marx: Selected Writings}, ed. David McLellan (England: Oxford University Press Inc., 1977).

II. A Digital Department Store

Women and Window Shopping

“None of these advertisements was concerned with selling goods… simplicity, dignity, disarming frankness, geniality—these were to be my shot and sell”13 – Harry Gordon Selfridge, founder of Selfridge Department and Co.

On Etsy, the clear idea of buying and selling has been removed, replaced by an aestheticized world of curated galleries, seller testimonials, and tools to enhance and personalize your shopping experience. The company, sellers, and shoppers engage in practices that ensure shopping on Etsy feels culturally productive. Ironically, this emphasis upon everything but the transactions at hand is reminiscent of the nascent beginnings of department store culture, responsible for birthing the same Big Box retail giants Etsy claims to differentiate itself from. In the same way that changes in 19th Century Western production of goods created opportunities and challenges for the producer-come-retailer, 21st Century changes in the dissemination of goods through e-commerce have created “a stage upon which a new dramaturgy of social and economic relationships can be developed and articulated.”14

The rise of the department store in the late 19th and early 20th century had an impact on women, most notably the petit bourgeois who were employed by the consumer institutions and the upper middle-class who shopped and spent much time in within department store walls.15 For both these categories of women, the newly saturated, spectacular world of the consumer space spelled a liberation that promised to

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expand the province of rewarding work and of individual expression for women; “a
significant part of the department stores merchandising revolution was the presentation...
the salesperson was herself part of that presentation, helping to create an atmosphere of
service and contributing to the seductiveness of the merchandise.”16 The department
store became one of the growing spaces appropriate for women to seek work, as well as
an anonymous arena for women to venture out into the public sphere and begin
purchasing; “never before, as shoppers, had they been treated as guests or flattered with
the illusion that they were connoisseurs of their surroundings as well as of what they
wished to buy.”17 In this sense, department stores had a significant impact upon gender
relations and stereotypes, simultaneously reinforcing and challenging them. By
consciously crafting lavish interior spaces and schemes around them “the fashion and
the theater, the indulgence and the impulse became ever more associated in the minds of
both sexes with femininity.”18 At the same time, department stores had a reputation for
encouraging loose sexual mores; this reigning thought was probably unfounded and
speaks more to societies discomfort with women roaming public spaces unsupervised
and anonymously.

As a consequence of the turn of the 20th Century’s increasing reliance upon mass
production, the tasks of packaging, stocking, evaluating, and pricing goods increasingly
fell into the hands of wholesalers and manufacturers, leaving retailers with the newfound
task of drawing consumers to their stores in novel ways. In order to combat the
monotony of mass produced goods as well as differentiate itself from competition, the
department store of the mid-19th Century transformed into a place of glamour and

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16 Cheney, “The Department Store as a Cultural Form,” 27.
17 ibid: 25
18 Leach, “Transformations in a Culture of Consumption,” 325.
spectacle. This change not only enhanced the visibility of the department store, it also gave the salespeople, recently stripped of much of their professional identity, a new sense of professional purpose. Countless manuals dating back to the late 19th Century encourage a view of salesmanship as a fine art, linked to psychology, and the subtle implanting of desire within the customer.19 The heroine of Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* illustrates the need for even the sales people to reflect the opulence and refinery cultivated within the spaces of the department store. In this passage Carrie, on the verge of poverty after losing a job in a garment factory and desperately seeking work, stumbles into "The Fair," one of the city's department stores:

Not only did Carrie feel the drag of desire for all which was new and pleasing in apparel for women, but… [prior to this day, Carrie had not] known the nature and appearance of the shop girls with whom she now compared poorly… and wherever she encountered the eye of one it was only to recognize in it a keen analysis of her own position--her individual shortcomings of dress and that shadow of manner which she thought must hang about her and make clear to all who and what she was. A flame of envy lighted in her heart.20

Besieged by the incredible array of goods on display, Carrie is made to feel ever more conscious of her humble condition. Furthermore, as we see with Dreiser’s sexualized language, “the new department stores seemed to naturalize the limitlessness of female shopping... [as] an unsuccessful struggle against overwhelming temptations.”21

As well as facilitating the entrance of bourgeois women into the commercial sphere as both workers and consumers, the new focus on display and grandeur created a sense of the department stores physical space as a new form of public sphere that

21 Bowlby, *Carried Away: The Invention of Modern Shopping*. 
catered to and normalized bourgeois culture as national culture. Their important role in inventing the great national pastime known as “shopping” can be seen in their inventions of public pastimes like window-shopping; for the first time, customers were free to enter the store without any obligation on their part to buy.\textsuperscript{22} Window displays came to be known as “invisible salesmen” within the industry, encouraging customers to enter and find something to purchase. Department stores were (and still are today) attractions for visitors to cities, “and had the same sort of cultural resonance as… fairs, exhibitions, and sports stadia.”\textsuperscript{23} Even today, a visit to New York City would not be complete without climbing the Empire State Building and making a purchase at FAO Swartz. Finally, department stores began commissioning publicity material, none of which was concerned with selling goods so much as it was with selling “bourgeois culture as something natural and unquestionable… The ensuing elusion between national culture and bourgeois commerce may not have been deliberately intended but was hardly to be regretted.”\textsuperscript{24}

Rather than associating themselves with the buying and selling of goods, department stores earned “monumental status which transcended the market place which was their base.”\textsuperscript{25} A hundred years later we need look no further than cultural stalwarts like the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade to see the continuing association of department stores with a general public sphere in addition to shopping. The aforementioned “dignity of public service”\textsuperscript{26} was also implicit in the provision of

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{22} The French term for window shopping is rather more evocative (even sensual): “lèche vitrine,” implying that consumers would literally “lick” the display cases or plate glass. Truly, this is an indication of consumers’ love affair with material culture.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid: Cheney, 25.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 24.
\end{footnotesize}
facilities such as reading rooms, nurseries, and restaurant within the confines of the department stores. Both the marketing and integration of non-consumption spaces ushered in the modern department store and with it, our modern ideas of shopping as an activity that is far more than the acquisition of goods, but an exercise in offering “every shopper the status and freedoms of the riches... a metaphoric prefiguring of mass society.”

The department store remains today an important institution both as a means of driving commerce and also for its impact upon the even larger megamalls that proliferate the United States and other nations. However, the rise of the Internet and with it e-commerce changed the way many of us purchase. While early digital retail giants such as EBay or Amazon gained popularity among consumers seeking convenience, niche spaces such as Etsy have emerged in more recent years. Etsy is distinct from many older e-commerce sites in that it has moved away from a user experience that is purely utilitarian, instead taking cues from the splendor and experiential nature of department stores, tweaking the underlying culture to emphasize a 21st Century ethos of networked collaboration and interconnection.

Social Shopping and the Feminization of Digital Community

“To provide a memorable offering—an experience—the consumer must be understood as a “guest” who needs to be drawn into the offering to feel a sensation...”

The above quote is from an article that explores the role web designers play in planning ecommerce experiences for buying craft online. For the department store that sells only mass produced commodities, insinuating itself into a general public sphere of

27 Ibid., 21.
courtesy and luxury allowed for shoppers to indulge in an experience that went beyond the banality of buying. Likewise, for Etsy and other online websites dedicated to selling crafts, while their products may be unique and personalized, the online consumer experience is one of alienation. Devoid of their context, these craft commodities lose much of their allure to potential consumers. In the same way that the wrapping of a gift gives an anonymous commodity a new, more personalized context, or the creation of a luxurious space of consumption propels the consumer to stay within the physical confines of a department store, designing a web-space around the idea of hospitality and the creation of relationships makes a consumer more open to and aware of the personal nature of the commodities for sale.

Etsy is able to translate the consumption experience to an online interface traditionally considered to be cold and alienating by playing off of the strengths a web-platform provides, and encouraging community between members. Like a department store, Etsy as a corporation does not sell anything it itself produces. Instead, its job is to create a space that fosters consumption. The About Etsy section of its website promotes a sentimentalized world of inalienable commodities; it’s Mission Statement reads, “we are anthropologists of commerce… we’re here to tell these global stories, to introduce you to makers and collectors and the history of their goods.”\textsuperscript{29} Etsy goes on to describe itself as “a beautiful experiment in restoring community and culture to our commerce.”\textsuperscript{30} By making a claim to anthropology, Etsy, like department stores, differentiates its relationship to the commercial sphere from that of mere commodity exchange. In the same way that late 20\textsuperscript{th} and early 21\textsuperscript{st} century department stores fostered spaces of excitement and total lack of restraint, Etsy is creating an educational, introspective space

\textsuperscript{29}“Etsy Blog Mission Statement.”
\textsuperscript{30}Ibid.
with the refined aesthetics of a gallery; it is taking on the role of archivist, curator, and careful distiller of a world of goods.

Just as possible investors in a department store would congratulate inventive window displays, hospitable salesgirls, or any nascent attempts to brand bourgeois lifestyle, Etsy has been lauded by its investors for the value added to the website by innovative web-design and use of Flash; in the words of one Union Square Ventures board member, Etsy has created a sort of “Flickr for commerce.”\textsuperscript{31} As its investors pointed out, a large part of Etsy’s commercial appeal is the pairing a curated aesthetic experience with shopping.\textsuperscript{32} Etsy manages to do just this by capturing certain elements of, as well as create new online-specific venues for, vibrant and dynamic consumption experience. Not only are Etsy’s sellers encouraged to take beautiful photographs of their wares (in much the same way they are encouraged to wrap their products impeccably, preferably with a handwritten note), Etsy has created a variety of avenues for its community of sellers to aggregate and curate these photographs. One example would be Treasury Lists, a feature that allows anyone with an Etsy account to publish their own hand-picked, aesthetically appealing collections of listings. (Fig. 5) When one enters a farmers market, craft fair, vintage store and even department store, one does so with a purpose; however, there are also multitudes of items, often beautifully arranged, that capture ones attention. Etsy recreates this experience while simultaneously promoting sellers, and interaction between sellers, through its member-curated displays of products on the Etsy homepage. Rather than seeming like a forced attempt to market specific

\textsuperscript{32} In their own words, Flickr is “almost certainly the best online photo management and sharing application in the world.” one might even compare the experience of browsing through Flickr’s 6 billion images is a bit like being an avid window shopper.
goods to you, the handpicked items on the homepage are aesthetically appealing, often seasonal, and a source of inspiration for shoppers entering the site. Etsy has also harnessed the specific powers of its web medium to provide shoppers with experiences they might not be able to get in a physical store. (Fig. 8) An example would be Etsy’s Color Shopper, an application where shoppers can curate their shopping experience based on color. (Fig. 6) On top of being just one example of Etsy’s layering of multiple avenues for commodity selection (simple keyword search, color selection, shopping locally) into one site, the color selection tool also stands out, in the words of investor Rob Wilson as “some of the most advanced flash work we have ever seen... for a commerce oriented application.”

Just as brick and mortar department stores created spaces of commerce centered on the celebration of 20th century bourgeois public life, Etsy fosters community based on 21st century values of participation and collaboration. Etsy has an integrated social networking component to its website that allows users to add each other to circles and engage in other forms of online activity not directly associated with shopping. (Fig. 7) Just as department stores found ways to draw people into their stores, social networking features prolong users visiting time and encourage them to come more often. By engaging with technology such as Etsy’s treasury lists, adding offline as well as online friends to their circles, reading and commenting on Etsy’s blog, and watching live-steamed crafting labs, Etsy users are creating a personalized environment to mediate and construct their identities.

As more commerce websites pick up on the advantages social media can offer, it can be difficult for companies to “cut through the noise, reach an audience and make an

33 Wilson, “Union Square Ventures: Our Investments.”
impression.” Etsy has created a name for itself among investors and the social shopping industry for its ability to successfully nurture a distinctive online culture of consumption that lends itself to the social networking features. There are many reasons for this happy marriage of culture and commerce, but most begin and end with Etsy’s ninety seven percent female user base.

Department stores initially hired women for their ability to make customers feel at ease and enjoy themselves—character traits that women have been trained from childhood to cultivate; studies have found that the same traditional gender roles are still present in our respective uses of social networking systems. Internet use is generally broken down into three components or motives: communication, information gathering, and entertainment. Females are most commonly associated with the communication motive, while males are linked to the information gathering and entertainment motives. Across the existing research, this pattern tends to hold up. Wikipedia’s dearth of female editors speaks to the information gathering bias, while Hargittai’s groundbreaking 2007 study examining race, gender, and other differences between undergraduate college student users found that women were not only more likely to have used Social Networking Systems more than men but they were also more likely to have used many different services, including Facebook, MySpace, and Friendster.

Etsy taps into a variety of other cultures, all of which are associated with crafting and thus the feminine. These include but are not limited to American D.I.Y, “living the handmade life” and late 20th century feminist coalitions such as riot grrrl, post-feminism,

35 Lindsey Shaw and Larry Gant, “Users Divided? Exploring the Gender Gap in Internet Use,” Cyberpsychology and Behavior 5, no. 6 (November 6, 2002): 517.
and neo-domesticity, all of which center around the idea that the self is best expressed through meaningful relationships and experiences with the world around us, an ideology that dovetails nicely with Etsy’s utilization of social networking strategies to encourage online shoppers to engage and participate in their Etsy experience.

**Romantic Ideals as Marketing Strategy**

“She wanted to get some personal profit out of things, and she rejected as useless all that did not contribute to the immediate desires of her heart, being of a temperament more sentimental than artistic, looking for emotions, not landscapes.”

Perhaps the most well known derider of the connections between and pitfalls of romanticism and consumerism is *Madame Bovary*’s author, Gustav Flaubert. Emma Bovary’s character read one too many mediocre romance novels and began attempting to live out the passionate fictions in her reality, trying to create melodrama where there were only dull middle-class values. She succeeds only in driving her husband to financial ruin. While Flaubert’s novel is a send up, it is not entirely off base. Sociologist Colin Campbell believes much of our modern consumer spirit was founded on romantic ideals of selfhood and its proposed escape from the oppressive conformity of bourgeois life and industrialization. If the department store provides a physical blueprint for Etsy’s virtual consumption community, Romanticism can give us a unique insight into the creation of a self that desires such dramaturgy.

Etsy has created a distinctive online culture of consumption by deemphasizing the commoditized nature of the goods, in favor of mining notions of self-affirmation through consumption. While there are ethical underpinnings to Etsy’s general call to shop handmade or sustainably, the broader tactic is one that insinuates that by being a

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part of a community and knowing what you buy, you can better know yourself.

Campbell argues that Romanticism, which emerged as a reaction to industrialization, unwittingly facilitated the rise of the modern consumer ethic centered on similar notions of self-actualization. While Campbell restricts his analysis the way in which Romanticisms’ emphasis on desire and fulfillment of selfhood worked in conjunction with the project of industrialization, on Etsy we see the same ideas of desire and selfhood working against the forces of mass production, but still very much in line with consumption.

In the same way that the Romantics were concerned with the dangers of the industrial revolution’s dehumanizing machinery and the obliteration of the artisan, Etsy posits itself as an alternative to the state of commerce today. The Romanticists simultaneously rejected “the heartlessness of a middle-class laissez-faire, urban, industrial society—its soulless individualism, its economic egoism, utilitarian and materialistic…”38 and also felt compelled to engage with industry and capitalism for fear of “starving in the service of their art.”39 This same tension is seen on Etsy, which encourages consumption—but only consumption that fosters a reconnection between the consumer and the buyer. Etsy portrays itself as “more than a marketplace: we're a community of artists, creators, collectors, thinkers and doers.”40 By engaging with commodities on Etsy the consumer is doing more than consuming a product, they are consuming an experience—one imbued with notions of an escape from the mainstream of consumer culture and practices. The Etsy mission statement encourages individualization via a community oriented consumption experience. Etsy believes that “by looking around at

39 Ibid., 288.
the stuff that matters to our lives, we believe we can understand more about what moves us as human beings.”

To Etsy, a community of buyers and sellers is best used towards the facilitation of intimate knowledge of goods available, because “what we buy and the experience of buying it defines us.”

The Romantic movement was largely rooted in the belief that every human being is a distinct and autonomous entity, and it is for each human being to, through experience and feeling, come to understand his subjective nature. For Campbell, the Romantics promoted “a doctrine that provides an intellectual justification to the consumptive mode as via powerful experience we can come to know both the world and ourselves.”

To return to an article quoted earlier, Saikaly’s user guide for facilitating online interactions between consumers and crafters, the word “guest” steps out as a key to understanding the relationship between Etsy and its consumers. The term seems to hold weight both with the Etsy’s roots in the cultural history of department stores, as well as Campbell’s analysis of Romanticism and consumer ethic. The term “guest” is also imbued with notions of exclusivity; guests are invited, they do not wander in of their own accord. One may ask, “Do guests pay?”

41 “Etsy Blog Mission Statement.”
42 “Etsy Community.”
III. Etsy’s Crafty Consumers

The Etsy Girl

“I have, of late, been living in the Land of Etsy… I have, for quite a long time, been deeply disenchanted with mass merchandising and retail in general… These days, I am drawn to the repurposed, the upcycled, the handcrafted and the fair trade. Even more, I want a connection to a person who has put a bit of herself into the creation of my mug, scarf or notecard. I liked that no one else has one just like mine, and I am thrilled to support working craftspeople, and do it without burning a drop of fossil fuel.”44

The above quote comes from a recent blog post by Ann Nichols titled The Etsy Girl. With broad strokes, Ann illustrates many of the beliefs and attitudes I found people took towards shopping on Etsy. There is disenchantment with the anonymity of mass-production, a sense that our consumption choices should reflect our values, and a desire to feel connected to the person on the other side of the trade.45 All of these separate threads help create an overarching sense of self that comes through Anne’s narrative. One can assume that Anne has a rather strong conception of a unique, individualized self, replete with convictions; the objects she buys should be just as unique as she is; “no one else has one just like mine.” This preoccupation with being “true to oneself” or authentic is a modern value, linked equally modern understandings of concepts such as individualism, uniqueness, sincerity, self-determination, and personal choice.46 My interviews showed that while Etsy shoppers have very different ideas of what these concepts mean to them, prioritizing ones sense of self, and performing it through

45 As well as know that the seller is inalienably connected to the object being exchanged: she wants to know that the sellers “has put a bit of herself into the creation”
46 Lionel Trilling, Sincerity and Authenticity (Harvard University Press, 1972).
specific consumption methods and desires is common throughout the community of shoppers.

In the Etsy world, a conversation about steam-punk jewelry will coexist with one about the merits of buying handmade dresses, the cheapest way to personalize an IKEA desk, or the true way to spot a fake vintage Chanel handbag. This is to say there are many reasons to shop on Etsy, and just as many different types of shoppers, making it difficult to speak about consumption on Etsy as a strict phenomenon. However, just as Etsy shoppers prioritize individualism and uniqueness, there are connecting threads in the ways in the methods they use to define these qualities and thus create hierarchies of value. As in other more conventional modes of cultural consumption, Etsy operates under Bourdieu’s idea that aesthetic preferences serve to legitimate social status; how a ruling class create a sense of “elite” taste by possessing cultural capital that is difficult to acquire without being born or socialized (through education) into it.47 While cultural capital is no longer only associated with high brow over low brow, the code that demarcates exactly what is highly desirable from what is not is still linked to socioeconomic standing, and thus is exclusionary even in its attempts to destabilize the more overtly exclusionary system of arbitrary snobbishness that preceded it.

Omnivorous cultural consumption, as it is typified by the range and type of goods available on Etsy, is characterized by "a qualitative shift in the basis of marking elite status-- from snobbish exclusion to omnivorous appropriation."48 The post-modern ability to play with and thus subvert traditional binaries such as high brow versus low brow, tradition versus radicalism, etc. is an indicator of successful cultural

omnivorousness. Scholars have suggested that the emerging popularity of omnivorousness is a strategy for settling the tension between any contemporary well-educated group’s conflicting impulses towards democracy and distinction. A democratic culture brings together and values all people, rendering “arbitrary and explicit exclusion culturally illegitimate,”49 whereas a culture of distinction is stratified and requires an “in group” versus an “out group.” Despite attempts to mediate these tensions, consumption remains a realm where we perform ideas of self that are necessarily constructed by factors such as socio-economic status; Bourdieu’s analysis of cultural capital as working within an exclusionary, hierarchical system that can be accessed only by those with means remains relevant. This is to say, even though not everyone in Etsy’s “democratic” community has money, their typical college-educated producers and consumers are all swimming in a certain type of educated cultural capital from these backgrounds.

The Revolution will not be Televised (it may be tweeted)

“Our brand grows with a thousand different focal points”50

– Robert Kalin, Etsy Founder

Though never cited as a reason to buy the sorts of handmade or vintage clothes found on Etsy (as it would be if one were studying conspicuous consumption habits of say, haute couture enthusiasts), it is unavoidably true that handmade is less accessible and requires more specific cultural knowledge to appreciate than mass-produced alternatives.51 This, of course, is not a function of overt exclusionary practices such as

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51 While there are those that make goods from scratch out of necessity, in most Western industrialized areas there is a certain kind of luxury implicit in having the time, resources and social capital needed to
inflated prices or discrimination on Etsy’s part; rather the exclusive qualities of Etsy and its wares are a product of the relative ease with which mass-produced items can be consumed. Take for instance, the difference between going to CVS and buying generic brand face wash as opposed to seeking out handmade, environmentally friendly face wash on Etsy. The latter requires time, knowledge, and a certain prioritization of both self and the world around oneself.52

A notable characteristic of much of the type of cultural capital observed by Bourdieu in France during the 1960s was the paradoxical accessibility offered through public works projects but persistent inaccessibility due to the cultivated education and “eye” one must have to appreciate patronizing, say, an art museum.53 A similar phenomenon of implicit rather than overt exclusion exists on Etsy, and also speaks to the company’s reluctance to commercialize itself as well as the importance of social ties to access Etsy, is Etsy’s lack of self-promotion. Unlike similar Internet marketplaces like EBay or Amazon, Etsy itself does not advertise the company itself through popular media sources, claiming that it doesn’t want Etsy’s image as a grassroots organization to be compromised by Big Box practices. In a video interview for advertising trade magazine Adweek, Company Founder Rob Kalin states “If we were to take out, you make things, especially within the aesthetic realm that is marketable on Etsy. One respondent to an online questionnaire emailed to members of the Detroit Craft Community sums up the paradox:

“Oh yes, its white kids who have the luxury of DIY. Most of the Black community has been DIY out of necessity for years here. Drinking out of a jelly jar because you don’t have dishes is poverty. Drinking out of a jelly jar with a cute decoupage picture of a robot because you are privileged enough to differentiate between a store bought branded set of dishes is DIY” Nicole Dawkins, “Do-It-Yourself,” Utopian Studies 22, no. 2 (July 2011): 267–268.

52 A Google/Etsy search confirms that a CVS brand face wash averages around $3 to $4, while ones on Etsy begin at around $8. Furthermore, the CVS brand face washes are relatively indistinct, offering users clear choices such as “for oily skin” or “for dry skin.” On Etsy, the consumer is inundated with variety including information regarding ingredients and the specifics of production process, thus making the matter of “choice” become a project that requires great investments of time and research.
53 Bourdieu, Distinction.
know, full-page glossy ads in magazines or television commercials that [would change] how people perceive even what your company is. ‘Oh now they are a full glossy page company;’ that’s not what I want Etsy to be seen as, I want Etsy to be seen as and to stay small and keep that handmade feel.”54 Kalin goes on to explain that advertising as we know it today is outdated and unsuited for the digital age, calling upon a connection between the social, handmade, DIY culture of Etsy and the similarly interactive, grassroots culture of the web. Kalin posits Etsy Teams (local support groups sellers can join) as a form of viral, grassroots advertising: “our brand grows with a thousand different focal points instead of just one sort of, ‘here we are.’”55

While Kalin’s anti-establishment rhetoric is attractive, there are other implications. From the perspective of a seller, this lofty approach unfairly places much of the burden of marketing and promotion upon the individual. Furthermore, as commentators were quick to point out, the “local seller teams” privilege sellers that live in metropolitan areas, in close proximity to other Etsy sellers. Furthermore, from a consumer standpoint, relying solely on social networks and word of mouth leaves many would-be Etsy customers unexposed to Etsy; in other words, access to and knowledge about Etsy is limited to those with social ties it. Interestingly, none of the Etsy buyers I interviewed could point to a particular instance in which they learned about Etsy. Some of them (myself included) actually learned of Regretsy.com, an Etsy offshoot and self-proclaimed “hall of fame for artistic impulses gone oddly awry”56 before learning about Etsy. All my interviewees implied that that their exposure was social, and somewhat organic. However, what can be perceived on the subject’s end as “organic” or “natural”

54 Bertozzi, “Adweek Video with Rob Kalin.”
55 Ibid: Adweek Video with Rob Kalin
is in reality a very constructed (though not deliberate on the part of individual) positioning by society and social class to receive information based on whom you associate with.

**Wise Shopping: Deals, Distinction and (Adorable) Drawstring Bags**

Not only does reaching Etsy often require social access, Etsy consumers, like all consumers, use the products they purchase to build identities and achieve distinction. On Etsy, displays of expertise and specific cultural knowledge take multifarious forms; throughout my interviews with buyers, however, when asked about their favorite Etsy purchases, interviewees tended to link their answers to their own personal skill sets or aspects of their identity. In displaying their ability to personalize or appropriate within the act of consuming, individuals imply a self-awareness and agency that requires thought, expertise, and cultural knowledge.

One example of this display of personhood would be the knowledge required to successfully shop for vintage clothing on Etsy. For many on Etsy, vintage can be a way to display highbrow fashion knowledge, often without the expense and associations of conspicuous consumption such displays would otherwise entail. In fact, the ability to combine thrift with aesthetic (often extremely high-brow) taste is a major source of distinction among the Etsy vintage crowd. Take for example, one buyers description of their vintage Saks Fifth avenue sequin dress from the early 80s: "It is incredible, really one of a kind, the sort of thing Ziggy Stardust might wear if he shopped at Saks. It was way underpriced for what it was-- which is a collector’s item, frankly. I love finding deals
like that."\(^{57}\) The interviewee has been able to reaffirm his knowledge and appreciation for traditional highbrow retail while also emphasizing their own, personal craftiness.

One way in which consumers imbue personal identity onto anonymous commodities is through exercising consumer choice, specifically the practice of meticulously comparing price, quality and value, a form of cultural work known as Wise Shopping. “Wise shoppers invest effort prior to and during the act of shopping itself.”\(^{58}\) While there are obvious economic benefits to shopping carefully, media sources such as a *Washington Post* article titled “When the Tough Go Shopping” imbue both seriousness and a glory to the act of shopping carefully.\(^{59}\)

The consumption of craft, one may think, has few ties to promoting a sense of distinction or obscure cultural knowledge. However, if we return to the ways in which craft’s subversive association with late 20\(^{th}\) century feminist movements, opportunities for displaying cultural knowledge via the wares of like-minded craftsmen become plentiful. As with vintage, there is also an underlying idealization of thrift within this mode of consumption. One interviewee described one of her proudest Etsy consumer moments:

"My boyfriend and I really love music. He's in a band, and I interned at Rolling Stone magazine last summer. Anyway, he’s very interested in synthesizers, his favorite being the mini moog model d, which is a classic analog synth that's highly sought after by collectors and renowned for this, well its called a 'fat' bass sound, its produced by the moog’s 3 selectable waveform oscillators—I won’t bore you. For his birthday, I found this German lady on Etsy that makes pillows and commissioned her to make one that looked like his favorite synthesizer. It was pretty expensive with shipping from Germany and everything, but he loved it."\(^{60}\)

\(^{57}\) Harry Hanson, “Personal Interview,” Personal Interview, March 1, 2012.


\(^{59}\) Carrier, “Reconciling Commodities and Personal Relations in Industrial Society.”

\(^{60}\) Beausman Callie, “Personal Interview,” Personal Interview, March 2, 2012.
Not only is the mode of craft subversive in its reimagining of decorative pillows (conventionally corralled into a sphere of the quaint and pre-modern) as a space for displaying modern affinities for indie-rock music, the appreciation of synthesizer itself is another temporal appropriation, this time of 80s pop music and its influences upon current musical trends. Furthermore, we note Callie’s apologetic tone over having spent a lot on the gift. While for others, the ability to have spent a lot may be considered a source of pride, for the Etsy shopper it is symbol of weakness.

In addition to affirming distinction through specific cultural knowledge and thrift, Etsy's personalized shopping experience delivers another, less overt prize in its external trappings of twine, elaborate wrapping, and handwritten notes. This element of the consumption experience has less to do with distinction and cultural omnivorousness, and more with satiating the Etsy consumer’s desire for an inalienable consumption experience. As Appadurai notes, commodities move between realms of meaning and value depending upon context.61 Though there is always a conflict between “the anonymous commodities that people confront when they go out and buy things, and their need to have personal possessions to transact in the gift relations in which they are involved,”62 this tension is highlighted in times of ceremonial gift exchange such as Christmas. The tradition of wrapping is a means of personalizing and de-commoditizing objects; the giving of wrapped gifts exemplifies “a task that occupies us in more mundane ways throughout the year: converting anonymous commodities into possessions suitable for transaction in personal relations.”63 Interestingly and perhaps tellingly, the gift societies that Mauss describes rarely adorned their gifts; there was

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63 Ibid., 585.
perhaps less need to personalize what is already considered by a culture to be inherently personal. Similarly, Carrier notes that the gifts traditionally exempt from the ritual of wrapping are baked goods, “they do not need wrapping; they have the personal identity that common, anonymous commodities do not.”64 This point seems to invalidate the need for wrapping products on Etsy, most of which have the aforementioned personal identity. In this context, wrapping serves to ameliorate the “unsavory” involvement of the personal object within a commodity transaction. Wrapping creates an aura of care, and of labor that is included within the gift.

By virtue of interacting with another person (as one would not do on Amazon or another large online corporation) as well as the handmade and/or curatorial nature of Etsy merchandise, the Etsy experience is inherently more personalized. This personalization is further highlighted by Etsy’s culture of elaborate wrapping, handwritten notes, and small “extras” that come with purchases. In her post The Etsy Girl Anne describes the experience of receiving an Etsy purchase in the mail:

“I receive things in tiny, adorable drawstring bags, Kraft brown boxes tied with snips of twine and tiny charms, and wrapped in remnants of quilt fabric. Often, there is a bit of lagniappe included, maybe a few sample vials of perfume oil or a translucent sliver of obsidian. Although I paid for them, and even if I bought them to give to someone else, each Etsy packages is like a gift prepared for me with care and love.”65

All this makes for an even more seemingly personalized, de-commoditized, and gifted shopping experience. Another interviewee breathlessly described the experience of receiving an Etsy package in the mail, saying “It’s like Christmas.”66 The care that is implied with such a high level of personalization and adornment is clearly an additional source of the Etsy experience, regardless of whether or not the makers motives are more

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64 Ibid., 584.
65 Ibid.
about marketing and less about preparing each and every package “like a gift… with care and love.” The extent to which the Etsy commodity moves between gift and commodity would seem to reside in whether or not these practices serve to, as gifts do, create and solidify relationships between Etsy’s users.

When Etsy users receive something for themselves, wrapped by the seller, it provides them with the feeling of receiving a gift. This action can make us feel as though we’re not just shopping for commodities. This gifted, Etsy experience, can be contrasted to other forms of more overt commodity transaction. Take, for example, the experience one has of walking into CVS and buying a generic face wash; it is one in which the buyer is fully aware of being in a commodity transaction—there is nothing lingering between the buyer and the person at the register from whom they do the purchasing. On Etsy, this is altered a little. While it is still a commodity, the wrapping helps to mask the commodity transaction, and is part of the web of material that allows Etsy to make one feel as though you’re not in the same sphere of consumer culture, but in an intimate set of gift relations.

When asked whether or not they felt a personal relationship to sellers on Etsy, most individuals would anxiously begin to make reference to the narrative they know Etsy is attempting to align itself with. In other words, many Etsy shoppers are aware and suspicious of the aesthetics and philosophy behind Etsy, largely because they recognize, (upon being prompted to analysis) that it is at least on one level an elaborate form of the very branding that Etsy proposes an aversion to. At this point a tension is revealed between the underlying anti-marketing ethos and the elaborate, almost servile lengths that Etsy an seller will go to, in the words of Ann Nichols, “put a bit of herself into” their commodities, presumably in the hopes of making one-time consumers into repeat
customers. Most interviewees mediated this tension by calling upon the pragmatic, thrifty elements of their consumption values when explaining whether and to what extent they do feel a connection or a relationship to the maker or seller of their purchases. Harry Hanson, a senior at Wesleyan and proud owner of one vintage Saks sequin dress elaborated by explaining his affinity for particular Etsy stores; “Because Etsy is so curated, you get a sense of each sellers’ personality. I often find that if I like one item being sold, my tastes will align with the sellers’ in general. That doesn’t happen so much on EBay.” This point emphasizes the complex, intertwined relationship the Etsy brand has with its sellers. The fact that when prompted to discuss his relationship to sellers he ends up speaking about Etsy being “curated” indicates that much of what individuals interact with on Etsy is the brand, not the sellers. Others cited “fringe benefits” of doing business with an individual rather than a faceless corporation; “one time I bought a pair of earrings and when they didn’t arrive a week later, I contacted the seller. She said she had been super busy and apologized; when I got my package, I found two additional pairs of earrings and a necklace.” For many, it seems that the idea of getting a good deal, or shopping well, allows them to excuse any obvious pandering or marketing that, while as consumers they take obvious enjoyment in, troubles their sense of individuality and self-affirmation.

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67 Hanson, “Harry Hanson.”
68 This fact is also apparent when you ask someone where they got a piece; they will almost always answer “Etsy” rather than naming a specific store. Again we see that Etsy as a whole (and most certainly Etsy the corporation) benefiting from this kind of “grassroots marketing” with individual sellers’ labor going unrecognized.
IV. Labor as Leisure

Popular Media Reacts To The Etsy Utopia

Since its creation in 2005, Etsy has received generous amounts of media attention, not all of it positive. A 2009 New York Times article entitled “That Hobby Looks Like a Lot of Work” investigated the lives of several successful sellers that made up to $100,000 a year. They found that they were only able to do so by working upwards of 16 hours a day and paying themselves far less than minimum wage for their labor. Later that same year, Sarah Mosle wrote an article for Slate’s feminist blog Doublex, titled “Etsy Peddles False Feminist Fantasy” as a reaction to Etsy’s recent release of the aforementioned demographic statistics. Mosle argued that Etsy was a “female ghetto” that sold women on the “feminist promise that you can have a family and create hip arts and crafts from home during flexible, reasonable hours while still having a respectable, fulfilling, and remunerative career.”70 71 Mosle’s article in particular was met with significant backlash from commentators, in addition to receiving a lot of attention across the online crafting community. Many accused Mosle of being sexist herself, not accounting for the multifarious gray areas of what it means to be successful on Etsy, and holding Etsy unduly accountable.

The accusations leveled on either side of the debate hold water; in many ways the most interesting and telling aspect of the situation was the anger shown both by Mosle and her attackers. The standoff reveals a curious problem not with the way Etsy does business, but the way its business structure makes it difficult to conceptualize where it

71 Many commentators took note of Mosle’s hypocritically calling Etsy as a “female ghetto” whilst writing for a publication that cordoned off its “feminist” writers into a section of their publication.
ends and its sellers begin. Furthermore, the issues both articles point out (the precarious work situation of many creative workers, and the general preference for sentimentalizing women’s work rather than compensating it monetarily) are larger than Etsy, though that does not make Etsy’s capitalization off of them excusable. Quite to the contrary, these unjust situations are all the more difficult to swallow when coming from a company that promises something that is for the benefit of others, not simply to make profit for the company founders and owners.

**21st Century Business Model**

Perhaps one of the reasons it is so difficult to address Etsy as an entity or pin point issues within it’s labor policies is its decentralized labour model, characteristic of the new working paradigms in post-industrial societies. Etsy sellers are independent contractors; anyone can pay 20 cents to list an item for four months and if the item sells, Etsy charges a 3.5% transaction fee.” Furthermore, while Etsy provides the digital framework, most promotion and marketing (both on and off the site) is left in the hands of sellers. Though it is in Etsy’s interest to encourage the best and the brightest sellers to join Etsy and nurture them (as these individuals will bring in more revenue for the company), it is not Etsy responsibility to ensure that they all achieve a relative amount of financial success. As Ernesto Grantmen writes in his book *Capitalism, Social Privilege, and Managerial Ideologies*, these ideas figure prominently in many recent writings dedicated to promoting the virtues of “flexible structures, the end of hierarchy, employee

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72 In fact, if its users are maximizing Etsy’s complex social networking system, it should be almost impossible to differentiate where a seller’s brand ends and the Etsy brand begins.


74 Examples of on-site promotional tools include creating Treasury Lists, or building a large social network through “favoriting” other sellers’ items. Off Etsy promotional tools include facebook pages, or twitter, or any other forms of promotion.
‘empowerment’, workplace ‘democratization’, organizational ‘citizenship’, and the overcoming of the labour-capital dichotomy in the new postindustrial society.”\textsuperscript{75} Etsy is essentially structured as a pure meritocracy, a survival of the “craftiest.” Sellers work when they want, however much they want; their ability to succeed or fail on Etsy is entirely up to them. As Grantman implies with his use of scare quotes, this relationship between management and labour can be seen as the height of worker liberation through self-realization, but contains a darker element of precariousness and autonomy.

Etsy’s managerial side is entirely characterized by the information age. As an engineering and support-driven company, 90% of its actual employees are either building the web-platform or supporting the online community of buyers and sellers.\textsuperscript{76} Etsy provides a lot of support for its sellers, largely because they get their profits from their sellers’ loyalty to the site. Support is characterized by blog posts, how to guides, advice and generally fostering community and enthusiasm amongst its sellers. Older industrial forms of labor organization such as assembly lines and management hierarchies are non-existent, replaced by new emphasis upon communication, human intellect, and peer production.

Finally, while at first glance Etsy’s goods and modes of production (handmade, vintage) are curiously anachronistic, harkening back to a pre-industrial time rather than being emblematic of a 21\textsuperscript{st} century condition, the personalized nature of the website’s goods and services jives with the general consumer spirit of individuality, specialty, and convenience. While these wares would be considered ahistorical in 19\textsuperscript{th} or 20\textsuperscript{th} century contexts characterized by industrialization or fordism, the ability to create products that

\textsuperscript{76} http://worldaccordingtocarp.wordpress.com/2010/09/12/techcrunch-teardown-etsy-business-model/
can be or are personal, such as a smart phone that allows one to download independent applications, is what characterizes 21st century modes of production. As one New York Times article on customized holiday gifts states, “mass-customization has not always been cost-efficient, but advances in technology have made manufacturing one-off items possible.”77 Within this context of personalization, Etsy’s methods and one-of-a-kind aesthetic is rather in line with the zeitgeist. The economy of the 21st Century, and the economy Etsy belongs to, stresses the “codification and contextualization of practical and implicit knowledge. Situated, personal and implicit knowledge is not easily reduced to machine or to mere information (codified software or data),”78 and thus is valued. In a world where most things can be mass-produced and most labor has been mechanized, what becomes highly prized is that which cannot be mechanized, meaning complicated information and emotive, personal detail.

Feeling it Out: Theorizing Labor on Etsy

What sorts of “situated, personal and implicit knowledge” are prized on Etsy, and is there a link between these knowledges and the virtually all-female, middle to upper-middle class, college educated user-base? Much has been made of the fact that it takes more to succeed on Etsy than simply making crafts and putting them online.79 Aesthetically minded product presentation, strategically listing items that Etsy buyers will

79 As one commentator on Sarah Mosle’s article wrote: “The "real" Etsy fantasy is that you can just make whatever you like and la la la isn't this little funny little bag cute let me take a blurry picture pray to the online selling gods and toss it online to "magically" sell.”
purchase, excellent interpersonal skills and 21st Century self-marketing savvy are all necessary ingredients for a successful entrepreneurial run on Etsy.80

Given this, a surprisingly diverse combination of intellectual and emotional, not to mention physical exertion is involved in being an Etsy seller. Contemporary Marxist scholars have defined work that “no longer institutes a dividing line between intellectual and manual labor”81 as immaterial labor: intellectual, communicative, symbolic or emotional labor that is produced outside the sphere of production.82 The discourse surrounding Immaterial labor is often a utopian one, latching onto notions of the Digital Revolution as a stage for true social and political change.83 Immaterial labor’s new, positive relation between labor and capital creates work that is “autonomous, self-organized and productive of social cooperation... [And ultimately]… teaches self-government.”84 Etsy’s encouragement of a digital community that drives commerce and relationships, its self-employed labor demographic, and Rob Kalin’s instance upon peer-to-peer marketing as being “the future,” aligns with this new worldview—to the extent that any company can align itself with trends that culminate in a utopian future.

Feminist scholars however, have called into question immaterial labor’s utopianism. Emotional labor is a term intimately connected to that of immaterial labour, and was coined by Arie Hochschild in her book The Managed Heart: The Commercialization

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80 The online-mall format amplifies market driven trends. Eerily echoing Fordist production line woes, one soap maker told me she was sick of making the same Buddha soap cast over and over—but that’s what her customers wanted.
81 Peters and Bulut, Cognitive Capitalism, Education, and Digital Labor, 58.
82 Autonomous Marxists believe (as Marx stated in the chapter “On Machinery and Large Scale Industry” in Capital V.1) that as more and more “labor” becomes digitized and mechanized, all forms of work will become immaterial (Negri and Hardt, 2004, pp. 107)
83 The utopian nature of networked, immaterial labor has been simplified by the utopian statements of cyberlibertarians. Kevin Kelly’s Out of Control, for example, posits that the Internet is a collective “hive mind.” According to Kelly, the internet is the material evidence of the existence of the self-organizing, infinitely productive activities of connected human minds.
84 Peters and Bulut, Cognitive Capitalism, Education, and Digital Labor, 55.
of Human Feeling. Hochschild takes up Marx’s ideas of a laborers’ alienation from the product of his labour, and applies it to work in the caring and service occupations, terming this work “emotional labour.” While all human’s are routinely asked to “manage” their feelings as general properties of ordinary sociality, Hochschild believes that a more specific and problematic phenomenon is occurring when employees are required to manage their emotions in an appropriately prescribed manner, for financial remuneration. She writes:

“Emotional life now appears under new management… In the United States, this public culture is not simply public; it is commercial. Thus the relation between private emotion work and public emotion labor is a link between non-commercial and commercial spheres. The home is no longer a sanctuary from abuses of the profit motive. Yet the marketplace is not without images of the home.”

Feminist scholars have argued that the push to characterize immaterial labor as an ahistorical trend, springing purely from a digital revolution, neglects the feminized elements of such labour, elements that have traditionally gone under-recognized and undervalued. Immaterial labor’s characteristic traits of emotional labour: communication, relationship building, and affect, are all rooted in the kinds of labor women—especially women of the well educated, reasonably well-off demographic that characterizes Etsy—have traditionally been associated with. Furthermore, these “emotional” components of immaterial labor are exactly the elements that are hardest to quantify and mechanize. Within a framework that argues technical advancement will free us from the repetitive drudgery of labor as we know it today, they should be the most valuable. If we examine the labor demographic in this new immaterial economy, especially with regards to Etsy, we find recourse in this feminist argument.

Etsy is an example of the clashes between discursive struggles within labor theory. On the one hand, the brand attempts to play into the idealistic utopias described under the concept of immaterial labor, on the other it is exemplary of the exploitation and devaluation of emotional labor, characterized by the movement of middle class women out of the home and into the service sector, where they continue to employ the same skills they have been taught to cultivate since childhood. By connecting current labor patterns to historical phenomena, namely the commercialization of services that the family once provided but have now been taken out of the home in the wake of women’s entrance into the waged workforce, we can better understand how these practices operate today. Emotional labor is work that women have always done; “its existence capitalizes on the fact that from childhood, women have been trained to have an instrumental relation to their emotions.”

Due to operating outside the sphere of monetary compensation, homemaking is not viewed as labour. While feminism’s fight for equality in the public sphere was one of the most important and transformative socio-cultural transformations of our time, it neglected to draw attention to the value of labor being performed in the home, and in many ways inadvertently played a role in further devaluing the importance of mothering and homemaking. There reigned (and continues to reign) a myth that men “supported” women as well as children; the household had evolved from a place where most

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87 Domesticy as we know it today was a creation of industrialization and capitalist production; prior to its systematic transferring of labor outside the home due the proliferation of a cash economy, this devaluation of reproductive work was not the case.
88 Again, this was not always the case. The earliest women’s rights movements of the Eastern United States (characterized by the same privileged class of women that are homemakers today) did in fact fight for the recognition of domestic labor as labor that deserved compensation or at the very least recognition. Unfortunately the ground under which they were arguing was shifting as they spoke: “as the story of the family is conventionally told, virtually all serious economic activity had left the household by the mid-nineteenth century.” Ann Crittenden, *The Price of Motherhood: Why the Most Important Job in the World Is Still the Least Valued* (New York, New York, USA: Henry Holt and Company, LLC, 2001), 60.
necessary goods were produced into a ‘haven in a heartless world.’ The fact that the creation of such havens and the socialization of children to become active economic agents in said “heartless” (read: industrialized) word was work in and of itself was conveniently left out of the narrative. Rather than compensating women monetarily, society sentimentalized domestic labor as a “labor of love.” An additional advantage to this sentimentalization of the home meant that women “couldn’t feel cheated of the fruits of their labor if they didn’t believe what they were doing was labor.”

Craft, another traditional form of domestic labor, has seen its use values and complexity go undervalued. For a long time, crafting was viewed as another distracted enjoyment of women who had little else to fill their time with. Recent feminist movements have embraced crafts history of feminine community and relationship building, as well as its associations with gift exchange. Today, Etsy commodifies both the material and immaterial content of these practices by creating a space to sell crafts that has a built-in framework for community building.

History has created a domestic skill-set that is simultaneously put on a pedestal and seen as unproductive. This paradigm is brought into even harsher relief when one considers the monetary value placed on domesticity’s commoditized corollaries. On one level, traditional female roles are invaluable, pure and above the grit and self-interest of the marketplace, however, when they are monetized (in the form of nanny, maid, and perhaps even the in-between status of daycare assistants and hairdressers) are considered relatively unskilled, even illegal. Even today, the home “continues to function as a magnet for unpaid/low paid labor.”

90 Peters and Bulut, Cognitive Capitalism, Education, and Digital Labor, 67.
Capitalism’s strange relationship towards care is revealed in society’s impulse to place care outside of its system of disinterested exchange, and when circumstances force monetization, pay very little. At the same time, the growth of the service economy in late capitalism has eagerly capitalized upon these skill sets. If “the organizing cell for the first phase of feminism was the sewing circle, the quilting group, or the ladies’ charity organization,” then the first seeds of monetary possibility for women were similarly their traditionally feminine abilities to love and care for others. Similarly, their entrance into the working industry was by way of care and comfort in department stores, as flight attendants, and ensuring we have everything we need including a smile from them.

It follows that as housewives began to seek work outside of the home, the professions that embraced their presence were ones that capitalized on the skills this set of women had been taught to cultivate as homemakers and mothers. Thus, what initially appeared to be a reimagining of woman’s role in society was really a reconstitution of the labor they had always performed. We are reminded of 19th Century retail magnates like George Selfridge who found in women the perfect employees for realizing his project of creating commercial space that made customers feel comfortable and catered to.

Etsy encourages idealized notions of labor to a point where the line is blurred between labor and leisure, following a line of techno-utopian Immaterial labor theory. The presentation of meaningful and enjoyable labor performed by creative and fulfilled female sellers is a similar to the complicated situation of unpaid domestic labor. By examining the ways in which the two are interrelated, or the ways in which much of the labor performed by women today (especially including labor on Etsy) is a reconstitution of traditional domestic labor, we can uncover a blueprint for understanding the

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particular functions, challenges and contradictions inherent in the labor performed on Etsy.

**The Romance and Reality of “ Quitting Your Day Job”**

Given the fact that Etsy makes 20 cents on each item listed on Etsy on top of skimming 3.5% of the price of any item sold, it makes sense that as a company a large part of their business plan is drawing sellers as well as buyers to the site. Thus, it makes sense that one of the biggest “myths” Etsy tries to promote to its community is the ability to support oneself via an Etsy store. Though many sellers have no intention of supporting themselves and view their participation on Etsy as a meaningful way to pursue their hobbies, others that are attempting to generate income display mixed feelings of bitterness towards the site that told them they could achieve this.

That said, Etsy is hardly one of those predatory websites that announces, “MAKE $2,000 A DAY WORKING FROM HOME.” However, Etsy’s business model requires that it sell more than craft and vintage clothing; in order to generate revenue it must sell women on the possibility of pursuing meaningful careers that allow them to work from home with the prospect of moderate financial success. To say that Etsy sellers are being taken for a ride is unfairly victimizing, but to leave a phenomenon so tied up in class and gender—both with regards to the work produced and the individuals

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93 The Etsy blog features sellers that have been able to successfully support themselves on Etsy in daily “quit your day job” blog posts that are featured on the homepage of their website.
producing it—unanalyzed is equally careless.94 The choice that many Etsy sellers make to quit their jobs to pursue a more meaningful career even at the cost of a significant pay cut says a lot about conflicting roles we (and in some ways, particularly women) are encouraged to adopt by society. Perhaps like never before, there is a pressure to “do what you love” been pushed upon individuals—the sense that ones career defines who you are can be seen in innumerable self-help books.95 At the same time, the pressure to be financially successful is similarly powerful. For many of the women I interviewed, Etsy allowed them to meet the first of these criteria, and held out the second as a carrot.

In line with Hoschchild’s view, I found discrepancy between sellers’ expressions of “job satisfaction” online versus in person. I found that online seller profiles displaying a love for craft, nostalgia for that which is old and in need of mending, and joy over being able to provide free shipping and customization were by and large sales techniques. This does not exclude these same sellers from also feeling that their work is meaningful, and from enjoying it on a personal level, but it does indicate that they are commodifying their emotions in a similar way as Hochschild described.

Somewhat sardonically, feminist economists Paula England and Nancy Folbre suggest, “Workers who provide care must love their work, we tell ourselves. Otherwise, why would they do it for such low pay?”96 England and Folbre are pointing to the

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94 In addition to being careless, portraying the women on Etsy as universally frivolous and easily cajoled into participating in an intrinsically exploitative system is just as inadvertently condescending as similar arguments leveled against the “oppressive” institution of motherhood and homemaking by mid-century feminists. The perception that women need enter and succeed within the male-dominated, cash-based economy in order to feel as though the work they do is meaningful displays nothing but the pre-eminence society places upon money and making it. Mothers have known for a long time that financial compensation is but one way to measure an individuals contribution to society; but the sentimental veneer placed over their labor often works against this viewpoint truly entering the general consciousness.


96 Paula England and Nancy Folbre, “Care, Inequality, Policy,” in Child Care and Inequality: Re-Thinking Carework for Children and Youth (New York: Routledge, 2002), 134.
paradox of commodifying care. These workers must display love and affection as part of their job description; furthermore, it must not look like “work.” When something doesn’t look like work, society compensates as such, hence the historically lower pay levels for service and care work than comparable positions.\textsuperscript{97} In some ways, Etsy sellers think of their craft not as work, but as something charitable that brings good feeling into people’s lives. As one woman quoted in \textit{Handmade Nation}, a book and documentary that chronicles the rising interest in DIY and craft said:

\begin{quote}
I like to feel like we are wrapping things with love. It’s humanizing. We’re adding a human component so you are not so disconnected with your everyday environment. Industrialization is everywhere in urban areas, and pinks and reds are a lot prettier than grays.\textsuperscript{98}
\end{quote}

On Etsy there is however, a tension between this mode of thinking and the actual drive to make money. These opposing thought processes work both against and with one another; on one hand, the Etsy seller that is able to imbue her products with the correct symbols of care and love (via packaging, and personalization) is more likely to be successful, on the other hand, by emphasizing selling on Etsy as being a labor of love, consumers are less likely to want to pay high sums of money. As seen in interviews with consumers, a large portion drew connections between the sense of community fostered on Etsy and the ability to find deals.

For a long time, scholars have been engaged in debates surrounding the relative amounts of alienation that occur in housework; for different feminist theorists they can be viewed as “the most rewarding activity or as the greatest oppression.”\textsuperscript{99} Some


scholars argue that in the same way Marx saw alienation from one’s physical labor occurring in factories during the industrial revolution, a post-industrial move into a service economy has witnessed a new form of alienation from our emotions, a paid situation similar to that of being a mother or caretaker. Industries requiring emotional labor tend to have a higher degree of females, and also tend to pay less than comparable fields. Just as a mother’s work has been endowed with a sense of sentimentality, some would argue to compensate for the lack of either monetary compensation or genuine recognition of labor, Etsy sellers and others involved in care and service industries are rewarded with the idea that they are doing something meaningful. There is a growing desire, particularly amongst a certain privileged socioeconomic group, for a sense that their consumption habits are personal and endowed with meaning, rather than address the root of this concern, society has addressed it as an economic opportunity. In the same way a housewife’s economic contribution is emotional as much as it is physical, so too is the Etsy sellers’ in that their labor involves ensuring that the consumers desire for a particularly meaningful consumption experience is fulfilled. In a world dominated by a Cartesian bifurcation of that which can be quantified (logic, action etc.) and that which cannot (feeling, care, affect), the latter realm (consequently the female realm) has consistently been less valued than the former.

**Interviews**

I interviewed six Etsy sellers, from a variety of backgrounds while I was at Wesleyan and on intermittent trips to New York City. The process by which I chose my interviewees had little method beyond geographic proximity, and who answered the

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100 Managed heart
twenty to thirty requests I sent out. All my interviews were conducted in person with the
exception of Roberta, a retiree living in Baltimore. While the demographic differed in age
and expectations for financial success on Etsy, all fit Etsy’s middle to upper-middle class,
college educated, female demographic. Our conversations were largely unstructured, and
ranged from forty minutes to an hour or so. My interviews with sellers who were
attempting finically success on Etsy while being supported financially by their husbands
were perhaps the most interesting, as they reveal the tensions at work between
commodity and gift, leisure and leisure, and most reflect the historical situation I have
based my analysis upon. All of these interviewees expressed a certain pressure to
perform the work of housewives despite working full time on their Etsy shops. There
were various reasons given and discerned for why this was the case, working from home
was a contributing factor as was their relative lack of economic success.

Both Annie of GiftshopBrooklyn and Jessie of SpeckledPerch are young wives
who quit their jobs soon after marrying, and decided to pursue a career on Etsy. Though
both work extremely long hours, neither makes enough from their craft to support
themselves. Jessie makes about $1000-$1200 a month, while Annie barely breaks even.
Annie is still hopeful that with continued effort she will begin making a profit, but Jessie
is realizing that simply selling on Etsy is not enough for her to support herself. These are
women that came to Etsy eager to begin a career that could sustain them, and their
feelings regarding their success are complicated. On the one hand, they both feel far
more fulfilled pursuing craft as a career than they did before, on the other hand, both
feel more indebted to their husbands for taking on the role of primary provider.

On the other side of the coin are Connie and Roberta, retirees that have turned
their hobbies into side-project entrepreneurial ventures. While they too, don’t “need the
money” they feel less pressure to be successful on Etsy, or be perceived as such by others. Once again, there is a financial success differentiation, with Connie making one or two sales a day from her soap shop on Etsy, and Roberta making only one or two sales every few months. Regardless, neither view what they are doing as gainful employment in the way that the younger housewives Annie and Jessie do.

Jessie is a 30 year old freelance stylist as well as owner of The Speckled Perch; she lives with her husband in Bushwick, New York. Through she attended four-year college in her early twenties, upon graduating she found herself stuck in a vicious cycle of post-graduate waitressing gigs. A few years ago, she began exploring the possibility of starting a vintage store on Etsy; she started selling in 2009 and a year ago she quit waitressing (her day job, if you will) to focus on TheSpeckledPerch. She currently makes $1000-$1500 a month for what she considers full-time work. When I met Jessie in a coffee shop in Brooklyn, I was surprised to find the very woman that I had seen modeling the vintage clothing on the Etsy shop. I found myself feeling that she seemed almost out of her element, clad in a T-shirt and jeans rather than daintily slipping off a pair of “crochet antique ivory gloves from the 1950s,” or posing in a “vintage 1960s full skirt dress in warm mauve featuring a white floral embroidery, collar button-down neckline, cinched waist, full pleated skirt, quarter length sleeves and matching belt.” Jessie explains that she models, photographs, markets, curates, and sells everything on The Speckled Perch by herself, though in her store description she uses the “royal we” to give the impression of professionalism. The more I spoke to Jessie and learned of her dual life as an Etsy seller and homemaker, the more I thought about the images of her posing in her vintage wares, slipping out of one identity as virtual shopkeeper and into another as housewife, and the similarities between these states.
Though she works from about 9-5 everyday, Jessie intimated that it was hard to separate her work from her life as a homemaker. However, she also views Etsy as a jumping off point to starting her own “brick and mortar” vintage store at some point in the future. Given the amount of money she makes on Etsy is not enough to contribute equally to her and her husbands lifestyles, she described her second “profession” that of being a homemaker, as compensation for the lack of monetary contribution she was making. This entails, she said, “ensuring the apartment is clean, cooking meals, having a nice record on when my husband comes home from work.”

101 Just as her husband expects her to perform these duties while also running a store, her buyers expect her to be available at all times to answer questions and ship items. Though she tries to make time for her husband, she recognizes that in order to generate sales, she has to be available to answer questions and “convo” with buyers all the time. Over the past few months, her shop’s page views have more than doubled from 300-400 views a day to 1000 views. She attributes this to her adding inventory to her store daily, which allows her to remain on the top of searches Etsy users make. While she hopes to expand her Etsy business, she is also realistic about the possibilities of doing so. Given how much time she devotes to it already, any advancement would involve “letting things slide” at home, which she doesn’t feel entitled to do. This pressure to be both an economic contributor as well as homemaker represents a crisis facing all women “trying to reconcile paid labor with reproduction, and the fact that social reproduction still relies on women’s unwaged work.”

102 Her husband sees her duty of care to him and the home, but her buyers see her as having a duty of care, on some level, to them.

102 Peters and Bulut, Cognitive Capitalism, Education, and Digital Labor, 67.
Jessie finds combining a friendly “Etsy brand” experience with the professional trappings needed to run a full-time business can be hard, as can be persuading her friends and family not to see her as “just a housewife that runs an Etsy store on the side.” Both of these issues can be attributed to the carefully cultivated labor as love ideology surrounding Etsy. Jessie expressed frustration that many people in her and her husbands circle of friends viewed the work she did on Etsy as a hobby instead of a career that could generate income; she attributed this in part to the fact that a lot of her friends run Etsy stores casually, “listing maybe one item a week, they obviously don’t make much money. I’m not saying that I’m making tons, but I’m working my butt off here.”

Customer interactions can be fuelled by a similar lack of seriousness. Though TheSpeckledPerch has a “No Returns” policy, if a customer is not satisfied or wants to return something (The Speckled Perch has a “no returns” policy) Jessie often feels uncomfortable putting her foot down. “I usually just let them return it,” she said. Other times, when she has put her foot down, she has encountered teacup-sized identity crises in which she must drop the sweet and excited affect of an Etsy seller for a more corporate tone; “replacing all the hearts and exclamation points with discussions of my store’s policy can be strange, and forces me to consider which is my ‘real’ professional attitude.” An accentuation of the same problem is revealed in Jessie’s reluctance to sell to friends and family, saying that the closer you are to the customer, the more difficult it is to demand monetary compensation. This phenomenon can be characterized as “colonization of life by work,”103 or “the blackmail of affectivity.”104

104 Peters and Bulut, Cognitive Capitalism, Education, and Digital Labor, 67.
On the one hand, the gendered learning of interpersonal and relationship building skills should be a female professional’s greatest asset, one that they’ve exercised for generations. But just as trading emotional support for monetary support in a pre-feminist world where women could not work was ultimately oppressive and victimizing, such practices can often have the same effect on Etsy. While the earlier form of inequality has become common knowledge for most, as emotional labor becomes more generalized (i.e. dispersed across every form of work, paid or unpaid, that women are involved in) taking us back to a pre-feminist situation, “where not only the specificity but the very existence of women’s reproductive work and the struggle women are making on this terrain become invisible again.”

Roberta is what one might consider the paradigm of elderly, female crafter. A retired secretary, she expressed an intrinsic pride in her work which was either missing or had been transfigured into something more of a professional pride in other sellers. In line with this pride came her conviction that much of what touts itself as “handmade” on Etsy is not handmade, “unless the definition has changed.” As a handbag maker, she expresses particular frustration over the abundance of shops that sell pages of “handmade” leather handbags, believing (perhaps with good cause) that it is impossible for one person to be crafting all of those handbags. Perhaps the only thing Roberta was more passionate about than her dislike of “imposters” was her own love of craft. Her connection to sewing fit well with what I had read on her profile, where she writes,

“my mom taught me to sew when I was 11 years old. She had very high standards which I did not always appreciate when I was a beginner, but have been ever grateful to her for teaching me excellent work habits. As a teenager (and beyond), I designed and made most of my own outfits.

105 Ibid., 68.
including later on my daughter’s clothes and my grand-daughter’s. They now are all grown up, however, I still love to sew and now make handbags for women and girls.”

Clearly there is a connection between the act of sewing and the family unit, one that she reiterated in our interview. Furthermore, Roberta indicated that it was this quality, and its incongruity with the “commercialized” nature of a lot of the products she saw on Etsy, that made the situation particularly frustrating. The issue however, is not just relegated to Etsy; she describes a time when she was younger and used to sell her handbags at craft fairs, she got placed next to a Tupperware salesman. She said, “when you make something it’s a part of you, now don’t tell me that Tupperware is a part of you.”

The distinction here is one of alienability; Roberta sees the hand crafted items as fundamentally different from the mass-produced Tupperware or Etsy handbags, objects whose production and distribution process appear fragmented. The Tupperware, in her opinion, cannot be “a part of” the salesman in the same way her craft is “a part of” her.

Unfortunately, Roberta has barely sold anything on Etsy. Her bags, made out of a patchwork of outdated fabrics and in untrendy shapes. Her presentation suffers from pre-Y2K point and shoot camera syndrome. Finally, due mostly likely to her age, Roberta has little knowledge of Search Engine Optimization and other digital marketing tools sellers much use to drive commerce. Roberta is retired, and expressed no “need” to make money on Etsy. If that was ever her intention, she has largely given up on it. In some ways Roberta is illustrative of the problems with turning something you love into work. Suddenly, you are beholden to the tastes of your customers, and need to take into account marketing and branding in a way that you obviously did not do before. There

107 Ibid.
108 Interestingly, the appearance of the Tupperware salesman at the craft fair reinforces craft’s gendered and domestic history.
are compromises that need to be made when an activity that used to be ones recourse from the banality of work suddenly becomes work.

In contrast to Roberta is Annie, another bag maker. I met Annie at a coffee shop near her Park Slope apartment. Annie found Etsy while making preparations for her wedding; “planning the wedding was like my second job for a while, and made me think about how I could actually pursue a career on the side.” Her and her husband met while working at a fashion design company together, where Annie was an intermediary between the artists that designed the graphics that go on children’s t-shirts and the factories that produce the shirts. Shortly after getting married, Annie quit her job and began thinking about starting up an entrepreneurial career on Etsy. Her husband encouraged her to quit, knowing how much she hated it. Given the fact that they worked at the same company, I found this logic curious. If the working environment was so terrible, why didn’t both of them quit? The answer lies at least partially in the fact that women’s labor has traditionally been viewed as meaningful, loving etc. Therefore, to pursue a career that does not provide these things is somehow more unnatural for women than it is for men. This notion that women, especially those of the middle class, should be employed in labor they find enjoyable was reflected again later. Early on in Annie’s time on Etsy, she accepted a few bulk orders where the workload became unjustifiable given the reduced costs she was offering. Her husband once again saw her struggling encouraged her to slow things down.

Given the real estate in this area of New York, and the fact that Annie mentioned her apartment was recently acquired, it is safe to assume Annie is at least upper middle class, probably more so than her young Bushwick-dwelling counterpart, Jessie. These attitudes come out in Annie’s relative lack of insecurity regarding the lack of monetary success she seems to be having on Etsy.

Annie was more reluctant than other sellers to share her Etsy income, skirting the question by saying that, as she opened up the store only a year and a half ago, “it is really too soon to tell.” However, she intimated that she “isn’t really making anything right now.” However, like Jessie, Annie is hopeful that her career on Etsy will continue to flourish. This summer she plans on having her younger sister, a recent college grad, stay with her as her “intern.” Annie believes that when she has someone helping her run the sales and customer service end of the operation she’ll have more time to focus on making handbags; “switching between the crafting part and the emailing and communicating part can be hard in a lot of ways. The constant interruption is hard. You start loosing sense of your schedule.”

When asked if they had friends that craft, I got mixed answers. In the past the communal craft circle has been characterized by its “ability to produce a community through production and distribution of the object.” (234, fabricating activism) The younger set, (Annie and Jessie) met the question with some frustration; Etsy’s popularity amongst their respective friend groups means “everyone and their mother has an Etsy store,” diluting the legitimacy of their own fulltime commitment to their personal stores Other crafters seemed to mix up my question, confusing the relationships and community Etsy purports to offer for a question regarding their “competition” on Etsy. Connie, the retired soap maker, answered that there were “a few stores [she keeps her eyes on],” an ironic twist that speaks to the tensions between promoting community and competition at the same time.

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111 Ibid.
112 Ibid.
113 Jessie
V. Conclusion

Emerging on Etsy is a nuanced form of trade, one that fluctuates between the social relations of the gift and those of the commodity. The multifarious ways in which gift and commodity intermingle on Etsy provide a kind of analogy for the relationship between community and capital in neoliberalism. Though parties (Etsy Inc., buyers, sellers) have no obligation to one and other once transactions are completed, the community operates in such a way that it is in everyone’s self-interest to see to its cultivation. Community—which we consider to be an extension and reflection of our relationships—has been co-opted into the creation of capital. Hence, the gift (that which is endowed with the characteristics of the giver and serves to create and recreate social ties) is layered over the commodity form of disinterested exchange. Etsy’s community-oriented culture counteracts the negative forces associated with conspicuous consumption while at the same time perpetuating a romantic conception of consumerism that promotes specific forms of well-informed consumption. In their own words Etsy is “bringing heart to commerce and making the world more fair, more sustainable, and more fun.”

Etsy’s ability to pair the values of community and relationships with a free-market model, in fact, its proposal that the free-market model is the correct “medicine” for our present problems of inequality, un-sustainability and corporate drudgery implicates Etsy in a broad neoliberal narrative. The core values of autonomy, choice, and self-improvement encoded in the language of Etsy as well as the larger Do-It-Yourself movement are also the central values of neoliberalism. As David Harvey defines it in *A Brief Introduction to Neoliberalism* “neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political
economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.”

Though Etsy promotes interaction between buyers and sellers, it is Etsy that mediates these interactions, and arguably Etsy that these parties develop strongest relationship to. Etsy carefully navigates its position as mediator between the relationships established on the site, sliding into the background when wanting to emphasize the direct connection between buyers and sellers, and pushing into more visible terrain at other times in order to highlight the feeling of digital community and consumption as a privileged entry-point for thinking about political and ethical responsibility amongst buyers and sellers.

There are also complicated relationships between the romanticized portrayal of the Etsy crafter or entrepreneurial seller and the realities of pursuing work that is independent, precarious, and often leaves no separation between work and the home. To be sure, Etsy offers a low-cost, egalitarian entry point into the marketplace, but it is also inadvertently reproducing a history of undervaluing female labor, and favoring those that have the time and economic capital to sell on Etsy as a part-time job. While a luxury only endowed to a few, the position of Etsy seller is double-edged sword. The work is “rewarding” insofar as it is a continuation of the same historical trends keeping women employed in “rewarding” care industries that require attention to customers, are general extensions of their domestic role and offer little opportunity for upward mobility.

115 One need only ask an Etsy consumer where they got their ironic set of Jane Austen novel themed shot glasses and they will tell you “Etsy,” without mention of the individual online crafter or seller that they bought from.
Furthermore, due to Neoliberalism’s emphasis on information technology, market efficiency and globalism, our relationship with time and space have undergone profound change. Through the compression of time and space accomplished through the elision of difference between labor and leisure, public and private, Etsy offers itself as a subtle microcosm of the greater neoliberal imaginary. Through a scale of overabundance and the re-enchantment of material culture, Etsy commodifies and conquers the domestic with an elite bricolage, thick with neoliberal “values,” such as self-sufficiency, ceaseless work, and self-expressivity.

While Etsy does not explicitly condemn more conventional material cultures, its willful anachronism and promotion of individualism, cultivation, and self-sufficiency can be seen in some ways as a rejection of the rhetoric of access to modernity and efficiency through mass consumption. The notion that good taste can be mass-produced is the tacit target of Etsy’s rusticated and antiquated mode of domestic display. By circumventing the rhetoric of industrially or mass produced taste, expertise, access, and leveling, Etsy consumers espouse the primacy of self-sufficiency, distinction, and cultivation over the promotion of good living through good citizenship, conformity, and consumption.

Etsy’s veneration of sellers who opt out of the drudgery of working a “day job” in favor of pursuing a career on Etsy glorifies the entrepreneurial excitement of striking out on one’s own. Further, Etsy’s home-based enterprise reflects the ubiquity of the home-office or the “work from home” freelance labor model. Its spatial and entrepreneurial practices inflect contemporary understandings of work and leisure—in and out of the domestic context.

Appendix

Figure 1: Uterus Wall Hanging

Figure 2: Uterus Panties
Figure 3: Watch Key Earrings

Figure 4: Etsy Facebook Application
Figure 5: A typical Etsy Treasury, titled Sunny Excursion, featuring gold and amber hues

Figure 6: Etsy Color Shopper, one of many ways to shop on Etsy
Figure 7: An Etsy News Feed Similar to A Facebook Newsfeed

Figure 8: Etsy’s homepage draws a customer in by displaying groups of items (Treasuries) in aesthetically appealing combinations


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