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Recent Trends in the Knitting World: Impact of the Internet, Feminism and Other Social Forces

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Recent Trends in the Knitting World: Impact of the Internet, Feminism and Other Social Forces

Disciplines

Anthropology

Recent Trends in the Knitting World:
Impact of the Internet, Feminism, and Other Social Forces

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University of Pennsylvania

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Abstract

Recent years has seen an increase in young knitters and male knitters, as well as an expansion in the types of projects undertaken and materials used. The aim of this project is to determine whether knitters of different age groups differ significantly in their experiences and motivations.

I tested whether there had been observable change since the 1960s in five areas: community, productivity, creativity, health benefits, and gender. Drawing on anthropological tradition, I collected data via three different methods: searching historical sources, conducting personal interviews and surveys, and engaging in participant observation.

The two most significant influences in the world of knitting between the 1960s and today have been the creation of the internet and the ebb and flow of feminism. These influences have been important, but as a whole, I found knitters to be more similar across age and gender categories than different.

Thank you!

I am indebted to an unknown number of people, without whom I would never have been able to complete this thesis....

To all the knitters out there, who helped me by answering my questions, passing around my survey, recommending friends for interviews, suggesting books, and of course, giving me all sorts of interesting pattern ideas to boot. I hope that I've been able to accurately represent all of our experiences as knitters!

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Huzzah!

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Introduction

Today, when people think of knitting, any number of pictures may pop into their heads. They may think of a wizened old woman in a skirt, sitting in a rocking chair next to a fireplace with knitting in her hands, a cat in her lap, and a basket of perfect balls of yarn sitting next to her. Or, they may think of walking into a small store, its walls covered with shelves and cubbyholes of riotous color, with every variety of softness available to touch. They might think of a young or middle-aged woman sitting on the commuter train, a small sock or mitten in her hands, and a ball of yarn peeking out from her briefcase. Or they might think of cuddly baby hats, elementary school art projects, “underground” knitting projects (sculptures, really), or fashionable sweaters. They may think of kindly mothers, such as Mrs. Weasley (Rowling 200-2) or popular celebrities, such as Julia Roberts. Sometimes, they may think of men: unflappable, unconventional men who are willing to defy social expectations.

There are so many possible associations with knitting because our society has gone through several important transformations in the past century, and because the United States is a diverse country (geographically, culturally, economically) to begin with. Today’s knitters also invite conflicting associations; rather than reserving knitting for only one time, place, project, and age, they carry their knitting with them everywhere, encourage all sorts of people to join their ranks, and create all sorts of traditional and unexpected objects with their yarn (or string, or plastic bags, or strips of fabric...).

What was once a necessary skill for a family’s clothing producer is now an unnecessary hobby or art. In the United States, in 2007, all forms of clothing, from socks to blouses to winter jackets, are readily available in stores at a range of prices. If a person

today knits and sews a significant portion of his or her family's clothing, it is usually assumed that they do so by choice, rather than out of economic necessity or social expectation. It is also easy to guess that elderly knitters learned to knit because they were supposed to, and young knitters learned because they wanted to, but whether this is actually the case is not so clear.

The aim of this project was to determine whether knitters of different age groups differed significantly in their reasons for knitting, their perspectives on knitting, and their understanding of its purpose. Although nobody interviewed for this project was truly "elderly" (a redefinition of "elderly" being just one of the changes our society has experienced in the past century), it seemed possible that knitters in their fifties or sixties might be better able to remember a time in which knitting was practical or economical, and might remember having been taught because it was the normal thing for a girl to learn. It also seemed possible that young knitters (in their twenties or thirties) might be more conscious of knitting's "coolness," and more likely to seek out trendy relaxation techniques to help them unwind from long days of going out and achieving in all the areas that were opened to them by women's liberation: the university, the boardroom, and the homes they haven't quite rejected. In this scenario, young knitters might be more likely to talk about knitting's importance in their lives as a stress-reliever, like yoga or exercise. They may also talk about creating communities for themselves in a world that seems increasingly impersonal or hostile.

Equally possible is that knitters of different age groups aren't so different from each other after all. It could be that the industrialization of clothing manufacture had already made hand-knitted clothing obsolete by the 1960s, when the oldest knitters

interviewed were beginning to knit. It could be that knitters throughout the ages have found knitting a welcome opportunity to socialize and network with community members and friends. Perhaps they all find knitting calming, even while it masquerades as productive labor. Five topic areas seemed worthy of investigation: community-building, productivity, creativity, health benefits (mental and physical) and gender associations. Before embarking on this project, I hypothesized that knitting has been an opportunity for creativity and fellowship for all generations represented, despite different social atmospheres. I expected that younger knitters would be more likely to compare knitting to other activities that are touted as stress relief, because it seems that Americans are increasingly preoccupied with trying to balance their lifestyles. I also expected to find that knitting has been considered feminine for all generations represented, but that younger knitters would have had more awareness and acceptance of male knitters, because alternatives to traditional gender roles have become more acceptable in recent years. Finally, I expected that the middle generations would be more likely than the oldest or youngest generations to associate knitting with unfashionable women and anti-feminism. I did not expect the youngest ages to make any connection between knitting and female identity, in a large part because the feminism of the 1960s and 1970s does not appear to be a significant factor in current events today.

Chapter 1: Background History

“Information about the history of hand knitting in the United States is hard to find.” So says Englishman Richard Rutt (203) in 1987, writing one of the few detailed histories of knitting available. Having noted this difficulty, he proceeds to write only a few pages about knitting in the United States, and focuses his attention instead on England and Europe. Anne L. Macdonald, publishing *No Idle Hands: The social history of American knitting* in 1987 does much to remedy this dearth of serious scholarship, tracing developments in fashion, technology and society from Colonial America into the 1980s. Sadly, neither her book nor Richard Rutt’s continue the story of knitting into the 1990s. A great deal of newspaper articles and marketing information is available for the years 2000-2007, inspired by the perceived increase in knitting’s popularity, but it is difficult to find information about the state of the knitting world immediately prior to the “craze.” Thus, the following background on knitting from the 1960s until today is more complete for some decades than for others.

Although it was popular in the 1960s for knitters to create mini-dresses with giant needles and chunky yarn, knitting in general began to decline at this time, for various reasons. Richard Rutt does not mention the sixties in his brief summary of knitting at all, skipping ahead to the publication of books by knitting legends Elizabeth Zimmermann and Barbara Walker, from 1968 onwards. Anne Macdonald describes the decade in more depth:

“Some knitters refused to succumb, not only to the ‘knit-kwik’ fever but to any interest in knitting at all, causing such a marked decline that *Vogue* discontinued its handsome knitting book inaugurated in 1932. So few young people knit in the sixties that one who persevered recalled, ‘Sometimes I felt I was the only young knitter in the world. For a while in high school I never even picked up my knitting needles because absolutely no one else did and only resumed in college when I wanted knits for myself and didn’t care what others did...’ (332)”

Although older knitters continued to knit, there were many reasons for young people to avoid taking up needles. In addition to their busy schedules as students and employees, and the ready availability of manufactured clothing, many would-be knitters came under the spell of the women's liberation movement at this time, which is now perceived as having valued men's work over women's.

Whether women were taking jobs outside the home because they wanted to reject the traditionally female role or whether they were simply being pushed into the marketplace for practical reasons is open to debate. Gloria Steinem, a leading feminist author, wrote in 1983 that:

"Economic need is the most consistent work motive – for women as well as men. In 1976, for instance, 43 percent of all women in the paid-labor force were single, widowed, separated, or divorced, and working to support themselves and their dependents. An additional 21 percent were married to men who had earned less than ten thousand dollars in the previous year, the minimum then required to support a family of four (191)."

Such statistics do not tell the whole story, however, as Steinem goes on to explain that "the greatest proportion of employed wives is found among families with a total household income of twenty-five to fifty thousand dollars a year," and that women gain greater personal satisfaction and contribute important talents to society at large by working outside the home, in salaried positions (192). She finishes her essay *The Importance of Work* by saying that if women do not fight for the right to join the workforce:

"...we may never learn to find productive, honored work as a natural part of ourselves and as one of life's basic pleasures (195)."

Noticeably, this statement does not directly *say* that domestic labor or handcrafts are *not* productive or honored work, but it sets up a conflict between the need to seize traditionally male rights and the desire some might have to continue traditional female

activities. Debbie Stoller, a “third-wave” feminist of the 1990s and today, argues that a significant amount of feminist writing of this time period was either explicitly or implicitly discouraging of handcrafts (see discussion of *Stitch 'N Bitch* below). Despite these setbacks to the knitting population, two notable authors published their first books during this period: Barbara Walker and Elizabeth Zimmermann.

Barbara Walker compiled *A Treasury of Knitting Patterns* in 1968, after meticulously collecting hundreds of stitch patterns from pamphlets and magazines in the Library of Congress (Macdonald 336). Richard Rutt describes her effort as “the finest collection of fabric recipes thus far produced (205).”¹ Knitters then and now seem to agree; after her first *Treasury*, Walker published a second (1970), and a third (1972: *Charted Knitting Designs*), as well as other well-received books such as *Knitting From the Top* (1972). The first *Treasury* gets right down to business, and after only a brief Introduction (3-6), the author dives into eleven chapters of patterns without the basic knitting tutorial that many of today’s pattern book authors include.

Elizabeth Zimmermann published *Knitting Without Tears* in 1971, and has been the author and creator of a number of other books and televised segments since that time. Anne Macdonald writes that “she is the one knitter most often cited by current knitters as their paragon and savior, their light at the end of the tunnel, their intellectually stimulating, delightfully amusing and proudly opinionated mentor...(336).” *Knitting Without Tears* contains patterns, but can be more properly called an instruction book. The patterns she presents are supplemental to her advice on fiber selection, the tools available to knitters, and customizing patterns. These instructions are often quite cheeky, and

¹ “Recipes” being another term for “patterns” or instructions.

usually directed at the knitter as though the knitter and Elizabeth were engaged in a private chat about their knitting; for example, the following advice:

“Before long the two wools were in a terrible tangle, because I kept picking up the ‘new’ wool from under the ‘old’ one, as all knitting directions admonish one to do. Thinking to myself that a Norwegian would have given up knitting after the first mitten under such conditions, I tried *not* twisting the wools, but taking them from over and under each other alternately. This worked.

All knitting books may now sue me, but I am convinced the injunction to twist yarns is totally redundant. (51)”

It is quite possible that even non-knitters would find her explanations interesting and entertaining to read. Macdonald describes how the popularity of her books inspired other projects, such as knitting camps (337) and television shows (339). The 1980s “Wool Gathering” video series in turn led to the creation of a companion book, *Knitting Around, or Knitting Without a License* by Elizabeth and her daughter, Meg Swansen. This book is a compilation both of patterns and of “Digressions”: sections of autobiographical information about Elizabeth and her ancestors. The “Forward” (xi-xii) describes how Zimmermann and Swansen were able to reach potential knitters through television, despite geographical distance:

“Like many, I’m a first generation knitter. My mother knit a bit in college, but not after; my grandmother didn’t. No one I knew knitted except a far-away aunt. So I tried too hard, made it complicated, was frustrated, criticized, and stymied. Yarn, needles, and books disappeared into a bottom drawer with my other great undones.

Then one fall while at home on the farm, I found Elizabeth Zimmermann’s *The Busy Knitter*² on TV (xi).”

Elizabeth Zimmermann’s influence extended from the late 1960s, when she first produced *The Busy Knitter* into the 1980s and into the present day. Her passing in 1999 was marked in the New York Times by an obituary (Martin), an uncommon honor for a knitter. In the obituary, Linda Ligon is quoted as saying Elizabeth “brought intelligence and validity to a craft that had been trivialized as women’s work,” an accomplishment that transcended the period in which she wrote.

² *The Busy Knitter I* was produced in 1965 by PBS, and *II* was produced in 1968, also by PBS.

The 1980s appear to have been a period of maintenance, rather than of growth or severe decline. A core group of knitters kept knitting, but busy lifestyles may have prevented meaningful increases in the knitting population. Those who were knitting were either doing so purely for recreation, as there were no longer economical incentives to make items by hand (MacDonald 341), or for therapeutic reasons. Returning to ideas that had been voiced as early as the nineteenth century at least, patients struggling with psychological conditions and certain physical conditions, ranging from agoraphobia to rheumatism (342-3) were encouraged to knit. However, would-be knitters had various obstacles to overcome. In this decade, with senior citizens leading more active lifestyles, the worry developed that older knitters were no longer passing down traditional patterns orally, and *Fox and Geese and Fences* (Hansen) was published as a written collection of formerly oral patterns (344).

According to Macdonald, this turn to the written word had parallels in the methods by which knitters were learning:

“With fewer grandmothers, aunts and mothers bequeathing their skills to the next generation, prospective knitters, thrown upon their own resources, converged upon knitting classes at local shops, adult education programs, regional workshops, camps and conventions (344).”

Not surprisingly, this became a period of professional consolidation. The Craft Yarn Council of America was founded in 1981, “to raise awareness of yarns” (CYCA website). It is a trade organization consisting of many leading yarn companies in the United States, and organizes the training of knitting and crochet instructors, two charity knitting projects, and various other knitting or crochet events. The Knitting Guild of America was also founded, in 1985, “as an umbrella organization for the rapidly growing number of groups open to anyone interested in sharing fellowship and knowledge with other knitters (345).” Writing in 1988, Macdonald observes:

“Knitting clubs and guild proliferate, and though members thirst for new designs and methods, they also act as preservers of an earlier culture, curators of old techniques, safeguards of bygone styles and protectors of traditional patterns. Publishers respond to this lingering backward look by including the word *traditional* in many book titles...(348).”

Many of these guilds and organizations are still in existence today and are responsible for organizing regional and local knitting groups, hosting large regional events, and educating crafters via informative websites.

Also in the 1980s, one can see the beginnings of a change in the perception that knitting was for women only. Says Macdonald:

“...the increasing number of male knitters can be traced to the gradual blurring of gender roles as men tend babies, cook, clean and perform duties once deemed exclusively feminine. Knitting men who produce as prodigiously as women expect more deference from designers, and one, noting that of the forty-five patterns in a recent issue of *Vogue Knitting* only three were for men, importuned the editors...Editors, hoping to placate everyone, soothingly indicated that male readers were a very small segment of their audience...and directed the complainant to *Vogue*’s his/her sweaters... (351-2).”

This increase in male knitters was to become far more noticeable in the early years of the twenty-first century, as my research will demonstrate.

Unfortunately, as previously noted, information about knitting in the 1990s is almost impossible to find. One imagines that trends begun in the 1980s were continued, such as the consolidation of knitting guilds and trade organizations, the collection of knowledge into printed material, and the maintenance of a small but stable crafting population. Many present-day knitters and yarn store owners refer to the 1980s and the 1990s as “dark ages” of knitting. An article in *Knitty* (Krementz), discussing current forecasts for knitting, states that “...there are many differences between the knit-times in which we live *and the last time stitching went south, in the late ‘80s* (italics mine).” It is pointed out that when Debbie Stoller took up knitting in 1999, “knitting shops in New York were few and far between (Méndez).”

One notable event was the creation of “KnitList” in 1994 (Moss). It was “originally composed mostly of academics who had computers with internet access at work,” but has expanded since its creation to include approximately 10,200 members today (Moss) (see Section 3.4 for further description). This can be seen as an early foray by knitters into the internet world; the KnitList and similar endeavors were to become an extremely important part of the knitting experience for knitters in the early twenty-first century, as we shall see.

The beginning of the “knitting craze” is variously described as 2002, 2003, and even later. Its purported origins are as variable as its date. Explanations for the sudden popularity of knitting range from the desire to focus on family and home after September 11, 2001 (Schickli) to the publication of *Stitch 'N Bitch* (Stoller) in 2003. Some news articles emphasize that new knitters are creating bonds with past generations and strengthen present-day communities. For example, Anna Beall, quoted in “Not Your Bubbe’s Yarn” (Palevsky) explains that knitting helps her feel connected to both her family and Judaism:

“‘My grandmother, her mother, and so on were knitters and crocheters,’ she said. ‘Knitting gives me a real connection with my ancestors. I think both [knitters and Jews] create very strong communities. And Jews attract each other like knitters attract each other. It’s really amazing.’”

The article goes on to describe the development (or continuation, or revival) of knitting and crocheting groups at synagogues and Hillel organizations, which is seen as a way to encourage participation in the communities. Knitting groups can be found in other religious communities as well, and are sometimes associated with a particular charitable or fundraising effort. Many knitters associate the new popularity of knitting with the marketing of new and interesting types of yarn; one assumes that yarn companies started expanding their product lines because they saw potential market, but it is likely that

consumers and marketers have supported each other. Whatever their reasons, the Craft Yarn Council found that by 2002, the number of knitters under the age of 45 had doubled from its 1996 estimates (Méndez).

Stitch 'n Bitch, with more than 400,000 copies in print (Danford), is widely credited with welcoming young knitters to the fold by providing “hip” and unique patterns that appealed especially to them. It is also a prime example of shifting trends in feminism, as this book proclaims that if a woman wants to knit, feminism should support that desire. Explains Stoller:

“But unlike my grandmother, I didn’t *need* to know how to knit. And soon the world began telling me that I’d be better off not knowing how. I was only ten years old when I first became aware of ‘women’s libbers,’ but as Helen Reddy’s ‘I Am Woman’ blared from my transistor radio, I became completely swept up in the ideas of the women’s movement. Taking their cue from Betty Friedan’s influential book *The Feminine Mystique*, feminists were claiming that anyone who spent her days cooking and cleaning and her nights knitting and sewing, all in an effort to please her husband and children, was frittering her life away.” (6)

The important difference between those knitters of yesteryear and the shiny new liberated knitters was presumably that today’s knitters were pleasing themselves with their craft. Furthermore, Stoller explains, it is not necessarily liberating to women to denigrate the work generations have done:

“It seemed to me that the main difference between knitting and, say, fishing or woodworking or basketball, was that knitting had traditionally been done by women. As far as I could tell, that was the only reason it had gotten such a bad rap. And that’s when it dawned on me: All those people who looked down on knitting – and housework, and housewives – were not being feminist at all. In fact, they were being anti-feminist, since they seemed to think that only those things that men did, or had done, were worthwhile. Sure, feminism had changed the world, and young girls all across the country had formed soccer leagues, and were growing up to become doctors and astronauts and senators. But why weren’t boys learning to knit and sew?” (7)

This shift in her feminist philosophy, combined with her interest in knitting, led Debbie Stoller to “raise knitting’s visibility and value in the culture (9).” *Stitch 'N Bitch*, as well as its follow-up, *Stitch 'N Bitch Nation* and *The Happy Hooker* (a book about crochet) have been extremely popular with knitters of various ages, and have also inspired the

creation of many “Stitch ‘n Bitch” knitting circles, with helpful advice on starting a group or finding online communities if that is impossible (114-116).

It is easy to overestimate the influence of *Stitch ‘n Bitch* on the 20-somethings and 30-somethings knitting today. Although “SnB” books have sold many copies, inspired many knitting groups, and put a lot of new patterns into the world, many of the younger knitters I spoke to or surveyed (see Chapters 2 and 3) seem to have been inspired to learn to knit by watching another knitter, such as a family member or friend. Many knitters were aware of the *Stitch ‘N Bitch* books and described them as being tremendously influential and helpful in encouraging younger people to knit, but many had not actually read them, and not all liked the books’ attempts at trendy lingo or “hip” patterns.³ A few knitters feel that *Stitch ‘n Bitch*, and other books that were published in its wake, focus too much on separating “new” knitting from previous knitting. It seems to some as though everybody is proudly proclaiming that it’s “not your grandma’s knitting” anymore.⁴ “What’s wrong with Grandma’s knitting?” they wonder. After all, some grandmothers or grandmotherly figures were knitting beautiful items before knitting became “hip.”

Despite doubts about “fad” knitting, most agree that Stoller’s *Stitch ‘N Bitch* books have encouraged and supported many new knitters in their attempts to learn. Her books began to fill an important niche that many feel was previously ignored: patterns and books that would interest younger people. Not just knitting cardigans, baby booties,

³ Use of the term “hip” is quite possibly one of the things that leave some knitters out in the cold. In visiting knitting circles and speaking to knitters, I found them referring to their own or their friend’s projects as “cool,” “interesting,” “beautiful,” and any number of other terms, but people rarely said “hip” unless self-consciously referring to projects, books, and materials that were heavily marketed as new during the recent knitting craze.

⁴ This sort of description is so common as to be difficult to cite.

and boxy sweaters for husbands, new knitters needed to feel reassured that it was possible to knit youthful fashions, create whimsical objects, and design their own innovative patterns without being overwhelmed. The original *Stitch 'N Bitch* book contained many patterns that were small and thus quickly completed – giving the new knitter a morale boost – and that were easily adapted to suit individual fancies. It also suggests projects that fit knitting into the modern lifestyle in areas outside the wardrobe: the cell phone cozy (178: easily adapted to cover iPods, PDAs, GPS units, etc.), the cat bed, and an assortment of purses and bags encourage knitters to integrate their hobby into non-traditional realms.

Other efforts to expand the possibilities of knitting have led to sexy knitting. Although undergarments, such as thermal underwear or bathing suits, were knitted earlier in the century (Rutt 141-3), recently published patterns prize fun and youthfulness over practicality, the way *Victoria's Secret* might differ from *Hanes Her Way*. One could maybe imagine wearing “Bond Girl” (Lohr 37) as a dressy tank top, or “Hush-hush” (Knitty) as a cozy nightgown, but other patterns such as the “Siren” mermaid costume (Lohr 114) and the “Hootchie Kootchie” pasties (Lohr 84), as well as the “302 calories” edible thong (Knitty) are for other sorts of occasions entirely.

Debbie Stoller identified a need for pattern books that would appeal to modern young people in 2003; in 2006, Michael del Vecchio identified a need for pattern books designed for male knitters. It is widely believed that there has been an increase in the number of men knitting, as well as more openness on their part and acceptance in society at large. Natalie Danford, in her article about the future of knitting, writes that “about 3% of knitters are male – a large enough group to merit their own books...” However, the

vast majority of pattern books and websites are explicitly or implicitly designed for women to use. They often have pastel covers, use feminine pronouns, contain innumerable patterns for women's and children's clothing, and feature women on their covers. Even though many of them contain sections of patterns designed for men (to wear, if not to knit), it would take a brave man to be seen carrying the books around in public because of their overt femininity. Michael del Vecchio, himself a male knitter and the co-founder of the internet site "MenKnit," presents *Knitting With Balls*: not pastel colored at all, it contains patterns for men such as men's sweaters, hats, a wallet, and a laptop cover, as well as clear instructions in all the basics of knitting: the stitches, planning a project, and understanding yarn types. He also has a section at the end of the book (151) on starting a men's knitting group, and a directory (152) of useful knitting sources (websites and books), both for general audiences and for men specifically. A description of a few of these internet resources (such as the MenKnit and MenWhoKnit pages) follows in the Results and Discussion sections.

While *Stitch 'N Bitch* and *Knitting With Balls* have provided pattern books for underserved demographics, *Knitty*, a free online knitting magazine, has been a part of the move to make contemporary and interesting patterns available for free on the internet to a broad international community. Linked to a forum in which readers communicate with each other about myriad topics (ranging from knitting to spinning to personal and non-craft related), the site has become a major hub for internet-savvy knitters. It was first published in June of 2002, indicating that demand for such sources existed even before the publication of *Stitch 'N Bitch*. Their 2005 study indicated that their site receives an

Chapter 2: Methods

There were three broad ways in which I collected information about today's knitters. I sought out literature about knitting: historical books and scholarly works, essays, and newspaper articles. I visited virtual and local communities of knitters: dropping in on 5 knitting circles in the Philadelphia area for participant observation, and visiting websites containing knitting forums or that were otherwise hubs for online knitting communities. Finally, I sought out individuals to learn about personal experiences: conducting a large survey, conducting a limited number of semi-formal phone interviews and engaging in many less formal conversations, and viewing blogs that were published by knitters (several of which are quite popular, and a few of which were repeatedly recommended to me by other knitters).

Information gained from the books and articles I consulted is presented in Chapters 1 and 4. What follows in Chapter 2 is a more in-depth description of each area of data collection: specific methods I used, and the advantages or disadvantages of these methods, as well as discussion of how I decided to include or exclude certain types of data. The data I collected via surveys, interviews, and participant observation is presented in Chapter 3.

2.1 The Survey

The survey was conducted on the internet through the website SurveyMonkey, between January 29, 2007 and February 5, 2007. A printed version of the survey was also

distributed at knitting circles or community groups and via emails during the month of February (See Appendix A for copy of survey). During the eight days that the online survey was available to the public, 1500 distinct responses were entered. Nineteen completed paper copies were eventually collected (several incomplete surveys were excluded).

The internet version of the survey was advertised via word of mouth (by sending emails with a link to knitting acquaintances and encouraging them to pass it on), by posting notes about it with a link on knitting forums (such as the forums attached to the Knitty and MenWhoKnit sites), emailing listservs, and by encouraging friends to post information about the survey on their blogs or listservs. This appears to have been an effective advertising strategy, given the large number of respondents within only 8 days. After 1500 responses were submitted, I chose to close the survey to the public and begin analysis.

Usage of the internet as my primary method of survey distribution had advantages and disadvantages. It was very easy to quickly and inexpensively reach a very large number of people, and I obtained more data than I could have otherwise. However, certain groups of people had better access to this survey than others. In order to reach this survey, a knitter needed at the minimum to have access to a computer with internet, feel comfortable using it, speak English, and somehow be connected to either one of the social knitting websites on which I advertised, or be connected in some way to a chain of acquaintances that eventually led back to my word-of-mouth efforts. Stephanie Pearl-McPhee jokes (*The Secret Life*... 162) that there are “knitters” and then there are “Knitters,” the difference being that knitters are people who happen to knit, and Knitters

are passionate enough about knitting to make it a lifestyle and spend significant amounts of time pursuing knowledge of their craft in as many ways as possible. “Knitters,” therefore, were far more likely to come into contact with my notes requesting participation in the survey or interviews, because they were more likely to be regularly participating in internet groups dedicated to communication of knitting information.

Ideally, this survey would have been a representative sample of all the types of knitters in the USA, and one type of knitter would be no more likely to have been included in the survey than another. It would be relatively straightforward to extrapolate from such a survey, and claim that measured traits apply to knitters at large, rather than just the survey group. Creating a representative sample would necessarily involve identifying (or estimating) the true number of people who knit in the United States, and then using perhaps a stratified random sampling technique to evenly spread my measurements across the entire population. After much thought, I decided that a truly representative sample was beyond the scope of my abilities, given my time frame and budget. Therefore, these results *may* apply to knitters at large, but they may not. They do apply to the group of people taking my survey, and so by carefully considering who my respondents were (computer literate American knitting enthusiasts), it is possible to learn something about that particular subset of the knitting population. Additionally, this survey, when compared to larger surveys conducted by other groups (such as the Craft Council of America) may be applicable to a wider population. Survey data from other researchers is considered alongside my data in the Results section.

Unfortunately, I underestimated the global nature of the knitting sites on which I advertised, and failed to put a question on the survey asking for respondents to identify

their country of residence. I came to regret this almost immediately, but did not want to change the survey in the middle of data collection. Instead, I addressed this problem retroactively, using the IP addresses that were attached to each response to identify the countries in which respondents were accessing my survey. For a detailed description of the methods by which this was done, see Appendix B. This is an imperfect measure, as I have reason to believe that a few Americans may have been traveling or studying abroad while answering my survey, and it is also possible that non-US residents were visiting the US while accessing the survey. Nevertheless, I used this method to distinguish between domestic and foreign respondents, and feel confident that it was a reasonable way to separate the two groups.

I suspect that Canadian knitters, in particular, can be said to share a common cultural milieu with knitters from the United States, and I considered combining American and Canadian responses to form one data pool. I did not know for certain, however, how the two groups might differ, and since I had such a small number of Canadian responses (80) in comparison to the overall pool, I decided to exclude them for simplicity's sake. Further removed, but still sharing a good deal of cultural history (industrialization, world wars, feminist movements, English language, pattern books, websites, and/or other experiences) were British, Irish, Australian, and New Zealand knitters. Because these knitters were more geographically remote from North America, the likelihood of different experiences, even different perspectives on similar experiences, was increased, and I excluded them. Finally, although the other international responses (ex: Cyprus, Hong Kong, Finland) were interesting to look at, and a comparison of the American knitting experience with the history of knitting in other parts

of the world could be a future area of research, I excluded these responses simply because they were outside the scope of my project. Ultimately, I only used responses that came from IP addresses that originated in the United States.

Of course, given the history of the United States, it is quite possible and likely that some of the knitters answering my survey with American IP addresses may have been born or raised in other countries before relocating to the US. Rather than try to distinguish between the knitters that were born and raised in the US, and knitters who were not but who later joined the American knitting community, I did not ask any questions about origin or childhood. Instead, I treated these knitters as a single cultural group, in recognition that “American culture” is not isolated or static. Instead, all aspects of American culture, including the knitting world, are influenced by long term residents of the United States and by new arrivals, in a give and take relationship. This concept became particularly important in my interviews with knitters, as knitters talked to me about learning from immigrant knitters, communicating with knitting family members in other countries of origin, and communicating via the internet with knitters worldwide.

Because the internet survey was only likely to be filled out by knitters with internet access and a certain level of comfort with computer technology, it is likely that the survey underestimates diversity of experience, particularly for older knitters. The first question on the survey asked knitters to describe their age by selecting an age category, and the “Older than 60 years old” category was selected by the smallest number of respondents (172). I expected this; in fact, I was surprised to have gotten as many as 172 responses in this category. I hoped to compensate for this bias by making paper surveys available to knitters, particularly older knitters in my local area. I made these paper

copies available by emailing them to people who offered to print them and give them to a knitter without internet, leaving some at a public library, carrying them with me while I visited knitting circles, and by bringing them to a group that met at a senior center. I soon began to see problems with this methodology. Firstly, because I was limited to dropping surveys off in places to which I could travel, I was restricted to the Philadelphia area, while my survey was available to knitters across the United States. Secondly, my response rate was not very high for the effort I put in: I would typically only get back a few surveys from a particular drop point, and of these, several were only half-completed. The largest number of surveys I received was from the senior center I visited, but I was uncertain about whether to include these responses because of a question that had been raised about crochet.

When I visited that group, the majority of people present were crocheting, rather than knitting. I welcomed them to fill out surveys anyway, because at the time I was not sure whether knitting and crochet were similar enough to study as one subject or not. Without further evidence that they are “the same thing” in terms of participants, motivations, and social influences, I have decided that it is best to keep them separate. I have no way of knowing whether internet participants answered my knitting questions about their crochet, but because I do know that many of my paper participants were doing so, I decided to exclude them.

2.2 The Interviews

Looking for a more detailed understanding of the knitting world, I conducted semi-structured interviews with twenty knitters. I chose to do twenty as a compromise between interviewing as many people as I could, and doing so in a reasonable period of time. I used the same age categories as I had set up in my survey (under 30, 30-40, 40-50, 50-60, and over 60), and completed four interviews in each category, interviewing each participant once. Almost all interviews were conducted by telephone; one interview was conducted via an internet instant messaging program (AOL Instant Messenger), because the participant felt comfortable with that method of communication and it seemed as though it might offer advantages. The discussion was easy to save, verbatim, and while the respondent was typing her answers, I could plan my next questions. The drawback to this method, I discovered, was that it took a lot longer than a phone conversation. Almost all of my phone conversations lasted between thirty minutes and one hour, but after two hours of online conversation with the respondent, I had only gotten through half the questions I wanted to ask. For this reason, I did not use this method with any other participants.

The interviews were semi-structured, in that I had a list of questions that I tried to ask each participant (see Appendix C for the list of questions). However, I varied the order and wording of my questions so as to maintain the flow of conversation and be flexible enough to pursue subjects as they came up. If it became apparent that a certain question was irrelevant, I might omit it, and if the respondent talked about a less common topic (ex: teaching a knitting class, or acting as a vendor in a craft show), I would ask further questions about that topic.

At the start of each conversation, I explained that I wished to record the conversation, and after the participant consented, I turned on my voice recorder and informed them that recording had begun. I used a cell phone wiretap device, coupled with a voice recorder and headset, which allowed me to record both sides of the conversation and use my hands to take notes. Three interviews were not recorded in this way: one because I had not yet gotten the recorder, another because the recorder's memory filled up and caught me by surprise, and the third because it took place through instant messaging instead of the phone. For these, I made my best efforts to type notes as quickly as possible and save as much information as possible.

Several of my respondents were from Pennsylvania, but there were also respondents from several other states, such as Illinois, Arizona, Rhode Island, Maine, and Nevada. The bulk of them were unrelated to each other, but two family groups were also represented. One set of three consisted of a mother and two of her daughters, and another set of two consisted of a mother and daughter. These clusters of related knitters allowed me to hear different perspectives on how the interest of knitting was shared in the family.

Although it was far more challenging to perform a quality interview, due to the experience it takes to eliminate bias in question phrasing and voice tone, the interviews provided valuable information that served to explain the survey data, and gave me information about topics that I did not measure with the survey.

2.3 Visiting Knitting Circles

Between January and March of 2007, I visited five different community knitting groups on seven different occasions for the purpose of observing the group dynamics and meeting knitters in the Philadelphia area. One group took place in a yarn store, one at a university, one in a public library, one in a private home, and one in a senior center. Two were in Philadelphia itself and three were in the suburbs.

Visiting these groups allowed me to see various manifestations of the much touted community-building aspect of knitting, as well as meet knitters. At the same time, I was participating in knitting, observing knitters, and receiving help from them with my project. Several people that I met completed a survey or did an interview, introduced me to knitting friends, recommended books, websites, or blogs that they thought would help me along, and told me about other yarn-related events in the area. I made notes about the number of people present, their gender, estimated their ages, and noted conversational topics (in a general way, so as to protect privacy) and other aspects of the way in which knitters interacted with each other.

Chapter 3: Results

3.1: Survey Results

As mentioned previously, I received 1500 internet responses to my survey. I excluded nineteen paper responses, and of the 1500 electronic responses, excluded 199 international responses. The international responses reflected a surprising amount of regional diversity, coming from the following regions:

Armenia	1	
Australia	15	
Austria	1	
Canada	80	
Cyprus	1	
Denmark	2	
European Union	13 ⁵	
Finland	2	
Germany	7	
Hong Kong	2	
Ireland	1	
Israel	4	
Japan	1	
Luxembourg	1	
Mexico	1	
Netherlands	2	
New Zealand	3	
Norway	4	
South Africa	1	
Spain	1	
Sweden	3	
Taiwan	1	
UK	51	
Vietnam	1	

⁵ Some IP addresses could only be traced to the region of the European Union, rather than to a specific country.

This gives some measure of the international quality of the online knitting community, although that was not the focus of my research.

After excluding the international responses and the paper responses, I was left with 1297 responses, all from United States IP addresses. These were spread over the following age and sex groups:

Total Respondents:	1297	
Younger than 30:	243	18.7%
Between 30 – 40:	239	18.4%
Between 40 – 50:	295	22.7%
Between 50 – 60:	349	26.9%
Older than 60:	172	13.3%
Male:	62	4.8%
<i>Younger than 30:</i>	16	25.8%
<i>Between 30 – 40:</i>	17	27.4%
<i>Between 40 – 50:</i>	11	17.7%
<i>Between 50 – 60:</i>	13	21.0%
<i>Older than 60:</i>	5	8.1%
Female:	1234	95.1%
<i>Younger than 30:</i>	227	18.4%
<i>Between 30 – 40:</i>	222	18.0%
<i>Between 40 – 50:</i>	283	22.9%
<i>Between 50 – 60:</i>	336	27.2%
<i>Older than 60:</i>	166	13.5%
Prefer not to answer:	2	0.2% ⁶

Most survey participants completed all of the questions I marked as obligatory, although 10.6% did drop out at some point before finishing. Everyone completed the first two questions (see Appendix B for copy of survey), but by question #5, 19 had dropped out. Question #6 (“Do you knit at the present time?”) was designed to separate out those who had previously been knitters and direct them to a question (#20) about why they no

⁶ Neither of the two respondents that selected “other/prefer not to answer” completed all of the survey questions, and for this reason, I did not include them as a sex group for analysis in the following summary of results. For questions that they answered, they are included with their age group, but not included in either the “male” or “female” group.

longer knit, but skipping all of the questions in between about current knitting habits. Nineteen answered “no” and therefore missed questions #7-19. Thirty-eight skipped or missed #7-8, 113 skipped or missed #9-13, 136 missed or skipped #15-17, and the other questions were voluntary essay-style responses (which were typically answered by a third or a half of respondents). I did not exclude the respondents that had only answered a portion of the survey; rather, the answers they gave were part of the data pools for those questions, but they were not part of the data pools for questions they left blank. Thus question #7 had 1259 responses that were considered, but question #16 had only 1162.

In the pages that follow, I will present the results for each question.

Questions

3) I first started to learn how to knit by (please choose the one that best describes your very first exposure):

<i>Groups:</i>	<30	30-40	40-50	50-60	>60	Male	Female
Reading a book or magazine	23.3%	23.5	16.8	15.2	16.7	18	18.8
A family member taught me	36.2	36.1	47.1	52.6	53.0	50.8	45.0
Reading a website	9.2	2.9	3.4	1.5	0.6	4.9	3.5
In school (ex: a home-ec or art class, or classroom activity)	3.3	1.7	5.2	3.8	4.8	4.9	3.7
I figured it out myself, without any of the teaching aids listed	3.3	2.9	4.1	6.7	3.6	1.6	4.5
Other (please describe)	24.6	32.8	23.4	20.2	21.4	19.7	24.5

Although not very many knitters in any age or sex category cited “reading a website” as their first teaching aid, it is clear that knitters were less likely to cite it with age: 9.2% of under-30 knitters listed it, while only 1.5% of 50-60 knitters did, and unsurprisingly, 0.6% of over-60 knitters. Considered alongside data gained from interviewing knitters (see Section 3.2), it would appear that internet sources are beginning to play a very important role in the sharing of knowledge about knitting. Even though

only 9.2% of under-30s cited this as their primary learning method, those I interviewed emphasized the many ways in which web resources helped them to expand their skills: learning techniques, finding answers to questions (posing questions to online communities if the answer was not already available), and reading about the projects with which other knitters were experimenting.

The most popular answer for every age and sex category (highlighted in red) was “a family member taught me.” Tendency to cite this increased with age, ranging from 36.2% (under 30) to 53.0% (over 60). Although younger knitters were more likely to rely on other methods of learning, such as books and the internet, the role of the family in introducing the craft was still very significant, and may continue to be, as the responses to question #16 suggest (see below).

4) I was ____ years old when I first started learning (please estimate).

<i>Groups</i>	Total	<30	30-40	40-50	50-60	>60	Male	Female
Average	18.06 years	17.65	21.89	18.91	15.42	17.16	21.34	17.89
Median	13	19	25	12	10	12	18	13
Standard Deviation	12.27	6.30	11.15	13.80	12.70	14.88	14.69	12.12
Minimum age	3	3	3	4	4	3	5	3
Maximum age	71	29	39	50	55	71	65	71

It should be no surprise that the maximum age reported increases with age, because older groups had opportunities to learn at higher ages that younger groups have not yet reached. In each age group, the maximum age of learning seems to coincide with the second half of the decade represented, indicating that there are new learners of every age, and there is not a strongly defined *young learning* group versus *old experienced* group dichotomy. This is supported by the fact that for most age groups, and both sex groups,

the standard deviation was quite high – almost 15 years for both the over-60 group and the male group – and represents a spread of anywhere from 12.60 years (the under-30s) to 29.76 years (the over-60s). Put into the context of the ages represented, these are spreads of anywhere from almost a half to three-quarters of the lifetimes of the respondents in each group.

That said, the age and sex groups seemed to have fairly similar average ages of learning. For most groups, the average age was in the late teens. The lowest average came from the 50-60 group (15.42 years) and the highest came from the 30-40 group (21.89 years). Men (21.34 years) differed from women (17.89 years) only by 3.45 years but had a higher median (18 years, compared to 13) and standard deviation (14.69, compared to 12.12). This suggests that there may be a little more variability for men in terms of the age at which they first learn to knit.

It is important to note that the median ages for knitters over forty were approximately twice those for younger knitters. This suggests that more of the older knitters learned in childhood, but given the standard deviations and averages, plenty learned later in life.

5) I first learned or was taught to knit because: (choose as many answers as apply)

<i>Groups</i>	<30	30-40	40-50	50-60	>60	Male	Female
It was practical	19.2%	14.3	9.3	9.1	16.1	16.4	12.7
Somebody suggested or required that I learn	15.8	12.6	11.7	12.9	11.3	11.5	12.9
It looked like fun	65.4	52.1	46.7	46.3	47.0	49.2	51.3
Everybody else knew how to do it	1.7	1.3	2.7	3.2	5.4	1.6	2.8
It was unique (not many other people were doing it)	20.4	10.9	7.6	5.3	8.3	11.5	10
I saw somebody I knew well doing it, and was curious	43.3	36.6	44.0	43.4	39.3	42.6	41.7
It was an artistic medium	32.1	23.5	18.2	14.7	20.2	32.8	20.6
Other (please specify)	25.0	35.7	33.7	27.6	25.0	34.4	29.4

Responses to this question indicate that while a sizeable number of people learned to knit at another person's suggestion (or requirement), the vast majority of knitters took up the craft for their own reasons. In this question, respondents could select as many answers as applied to them, yet only 15.8% of under-30s said that "someone suggested or required that I learn" and the percentages were smaller for the older age categories. Men (11.5%) were not much less likely than women (12.9%) to have been taught for this reason. No age category or sex was very likely to state that "everybody else was doing it," even given the modern young person's perception that knitting was somehow more common or more practical in their grandparents' youth. In fact, although the over-60s were the most likely to cite this as a motivating factor (5.4%), they were marginally more likely to state that "it was unique" (8.3%), and this tendency holds true for the younger groups (20.4% of under-30s felt this way).

Interestingly, the two groups that selected "it was practical" the most were the under-30s (19.2%) and the over-60s (16.1%). The middle age groups were less likely to agree with this statement, and it was least popular with people in their forties and fifties

(9.3% and 9.1%, respectively). Important to consider when interpreting this information is that knitters may consider knitting “practical” for different reasons. Certainly in pre-Industrial times, knitting socks was practical because purchasing socks was expensive and difficult. This meaning of practicality may have carried on into the Depression and even the World Wars, depending on various shortages and needs. Alternatively, knitting may be practical even if it’s ostensibly a longer, more expensive way to produce an item easily purchased in the store, because hand-knitting allows the knitter to create a custom garment to fit size and taste. Above all, a knitter may describe knitting as “practical” not for the item that is being made, but because of the way he or she converts otherwise wasted time into productive time. It became clear to me while reading comments from the surveys, interviewing knitters, reading books, websites, and blogs, and attending knitting circles that many knitters feel less like they are “wasting time” by waiting in a waiting room, commuting on a bus or train, or watching television if they are also using their hands to create something interesting. Question #9 (see below) addressed the tendency of knitters to multi-task, although conducting the survey and interviews showed me that I could have put many more options as possible answers.

7) The items I knit most often are (please choose up to three):

<i>Groups</i>	<30	30-40	40-50	50-60	>60	Male	Female
Hats	50.2%	43.8	35.6	34.1	34.9	50.9	38.8
Scarves	64.2	45.1	40.5	39.7	44.0	50.9	45.7
Sweaters, pullovers, or cardigans	29.7	43.0	46.7	48.5	63.3	42.1	45.8
Baby clothing	11.8	26.4	18.3	25.6	28.3	12.3	22.4
Toys	7.9	6.0	3.5	2.1	4.2	10.5	4.2
Blankets	15.3	16.6	15.2	23.5	27.7	14.0	19.6
Socks, gloves, or mittens	55.5	65.5	68.5	69.1	66.3	57.9	65.8
Other (tea cozies, purses, objects that defy classification) (please describe)	29.7	30.2	32.9	25.9	22.3	22.8	28.8

The two most popular choices for each group are highlighted above in red. Socks, gloves, and mittens are extremely popular with all age and sex groups. Knitters explain that they are portable because of their small size, can be finished relatively quickly (faster gratification), and can include many interesting types of stitches or colors. Scarves are also popular, but are most popular with the youngest age group. Finally, although listening to knitters would cause one to believe that sweaters are a rare endeavor (because of their size, the care one must take in getting the correct fit, etc.), they seem to be fairly popular, especially with older knitters (40 and older). Baby items peak once for knitters in their thirties and again for over-50. This is a little surprising. It seems plausible that people in their thirties are having babies or know others with babies, but one would think that would be true of knitters in their twenties as well. The older knitters of baby items might seem to fit the image of the kindly grandmother knitter, but many of the knitters I interviewed spoke of knitting large numbers of baby items for charitable causes, such as hats for premature babies in the local hospital, in addition to knitting for their grandchildren. One would need to ask more questions about the relationships between knitters and the infant recipients to determine whether there is any explanation for this pattern.

8) The types of yarn I work with most often are (please choose up to two):

<i>Groups</i>	<30	30-40	40-50	50-60	>60	Male	Female
Acrylic (ex: Red Heart)	38.9%	19.6	19.4	21.8	25.3	19.3	24.6
Wool or wool blends	82.1	91.1	89.6	88.8	88.6	86.0	88.3
Luxury fibers (ex: cashmere, silk, angora)	26.2	31.1	26.0	25.0	24.1	22.8	26.6
Novelty yarns (ex: eyelash yarn, ribbon yarn, etc.)	7.9	5.5	6.9	8.5	11.4	5.3	8.0
Cotton	31.4	34.9	31.8	25.9	27.1	24.6	30.4
Vegetable fibers (hemp, corn silk, bamboo, etc.)	5.2	3.4	3.5	4.1	2.4	12.3	3.4
Other (please specify)	5.2	3.8	5.5	6.2	9.0	8.8	5.7

Knitters appeared to have very similar tastes in fiber type, with wool being a clear favorite across all ages and both sexes. Young knitters (the under-30s) listed acrylic yarn more often than other knitters (38.9%, with the next largest group being the over-60s at 25.3%). In the comments attached to the questions about price and cost, many knitters mentioned that when they first started to knit, they used less expensive, lower quality yarns because they didn't feel that their skill level would do justice to nicer yarns. Therefore, it could be possible that the under-30s group contained more new knitters than the other groups, although I did not directly measure how long respondents had been knitting. Several of the knitters I interviewed observed that acrylic yarns had improved somewhat in quality since the 1980s, which could encourage younger knitters to use it more often. Finally, many knitters pointed out to me that when knitting baby clothing, it was best to use a washable yarn, and preferably an inexpensive one, because of the abuse the garment was likely to take and the short time it was likely to fit any given child. However, all age groups seemed to be knitting baby items, as question #7 demonstrated, and the over-60 knitters were almost three times as likely to be making baby items as under-30s.

In recent years, a host of vegetable fibers have been made available to knitters (and spinners), including yarn made out of bamboo, corn silk, and other materials. These yarns are often marketed as vegan alternatives to animal fiber, as environmentally friendly or organic fibers, or in some cases as less expensive luxury fibers. Corn silk, for example, feels a good deal like silk to the touch, but is much less expensive (citation). Relatively small numbers of knitters in each group listed it as a yarn they used often, but interestingly, men (12.3%) were more than three times as likely as women (3.4%) to choose this response option.

9) When knitting, are you doing any of the following activities at the same time (check all that you have done)?

<i>Groups</i>	<30	30-40	40-50	50-60	>60	Male	Female
Talking	87.5%	84.5	83.8	78.3	69.7	66.7	82.2
Watching a movie or TV show	98.2	96.1	93.4	96.2	89.4	98.1	95.0
Listening to music	79.0	69.8	70.6	64.3	64.1	81.5	69.0
Listening to a book on tape, or hearing a story read out loud	31.7	41.4	37.1	34.1	37.3	33.3	36.3
Other (please specify)	32.6	37.1	36.8	35.4	29.6	29.6	35.0

Knitters are certainly multi-taskers, a topic which I will take up further in my discussion of productivity. Almost all of the knitters I spoke to at knitting circles or in interviews stated that they knit while watching television, unless they were beginners that were not yet comfortable enough with knitting to do with without watching their hands, or unless a project involved a good deal of counting and pattern-reading. This was confirmed by the survey results, which show that 98.2% of under-30s knit while watching television, and even 89.4% (the lowest percentage) of over-60s did so. Some knitters are capable of knitting without looking at their hands at all, especially if the project involves long stretches of knit stitch or long stretches of purl stitch. Others look down at their hands

occasionally to make sure that they are still on track or to fix a mistake, and some watch their hands while listening to a television program or movie and only looking at it occasionally (a habit which sometimes bothers non-knitters!).

Talking while knitting was also universal, and my other research suggests that this is talking at knitting circles, talking while knitting at home with family or friends, and even knitting while talking on the phone (made easier with headsets). When not listening to conversational partners or the television, many knitters are listening to music.

Reading the write-in “other” responses and talking to interviewees, I found that knitters also knit while riding in the car or on public transit, sitting in waiting rooms, standing in line, participating in meetings at work or classes at school, reading books (several knitters told me that they wished they could find a way to do this; the desperate and inventive have found ways to prop books open with their feet and paperweights), listening to Podcasts, and even exercising (a few knitters told me that it was possible to sit on a stationary bicycle and knit, and that they used this knitting time as encouragement to go to the gym). They also browse the internet, walk around (perhaps like knitters from past centuries, who would keep yarn in a bag attached at the waist), and attend sporting events. One knitter wrote in that she knits while riding on the back of her husband’s motorcycle, and another actually confessed to knitting while driving (“OK - mostly while stopped in traffic, but sometimes, on a dry straight road with little or no traffic...”), while a few noted that they sometimes pick up their knitting at stop lights. Others think about things (“thinking about plot points for the books I write”) or just sit quietly, relaxing or perhaps trying to concentrate on a frustrating pattern.

Knitters (both online and in person) frequently complain about some airlines that attempt to prohibit or restrict bringing knitting needles into the cabins of planes. Entire forum threads are dedicated to these complaints and advice from travelers that have somehow gotten away with knitting on one airline or another.

Knitters usually try to be respectful of others while knitting during classes, lectures, presentations, conferences, and meetings. Many distinguish between in-house meetings and outside-presentations, or ask for permission to knit from a professor or boss. Others wait until they have been asked to put away their knitting. It is not uncommon for a supervisor or professor to do this, and having spoken to a few professors informally, I suspect that there are many that would be somewhat uncomfortable or skeptical about students knitting. The main concerns are threefold: whether the knitter is actually paying attention, whether the speaker feels disrespected, and whether the knitter is distracting other listeners. The knitters that admitted to knitting in these contexts told me that they find it easier to pay attention to speakers while using their hands in this way, and felt that by making an effort to focus better or stay awake, they were being at least as respectful to speakers as other listeners, if not more so. They do not mean any disrespect, and usually say that they try to be discrete so as not to disrupt other listeners.

10) I most often knit (select up to two answers):

<i>Groups</i>	<30	30-40	40-50	50-60	>60	Male	Female
Alone	58.0	37.9	38.2	45.5	46.5	57.4	44.2
When I'm at home with my family (either knitters or non-knitters)	67.4	77.6	76.5	71.0	64.1	57.4	72.7
When I'm with friends who are also knitting	17.9	12.9	9.6	14.6	15.5	14.8	13.8
While at a knitting circle or community group	10.7	16.4	11.8	13.1	20.4	14.8	13.8
In public but alone (ex: waiting rooms, on the train, in the park)	37.9	39.7	45.2	36.9	35.9	40.7	39.4
Other (please specify)	9.4	9.1	11.0	12.4	14.1	5.6	11.3

One important thing becomes apparent from these results. Men who responded to this survey were no less likely to knit in public than women, with 40.7% of them listing it as one of the settings in which they knit most (compared to 39.4% of women, a very similar percentage). They also listed knitting circles and community groups about as often as women, and “with friends who are also knitting.” They were, however, 13.2% more men that listed knitting alone, and 15.3% fewer that listed knitting with their family as significant. This suggests that although they may be learning to knit from family members (see above, question 3), they are not necessarily knitting in front of family members as often as women. Of course, this is not to suggest that male knitters hide their knitting from their families, either (something which may have been desirable in previous eras): 57.4% claim to do much of their knitting in this setting.

11) Approximately how much do you knit for yourself, and how much do you knit for other people? Please try to estimate the percentage (%) of items that you knit for the following categories. If the answer is “none”, please enter either “0” or “none” in the space provided:

For myself:

<i>Groups</i>	Total	<30	30-40	40-50	50-60	>60	Male	Female
Average	36.92%	44.36	37.28	34.84	34.85	33.15	37.41	36.90
Median	30.00	50.00	30.00	30.00	30.00	25.00	27.50	30.00
Standard deviation	26.96	27.75	27.31	26.54	25.84	26.46	29.56	26.84
Maximum	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	99.00	98.00	100.00	100.00
Minimum	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00

There is a correlation between age and how much knitters reported knitting for themselves, with the youngest knitters reporting the most (44.36%) and the oldest knitters reporting the least (33.15%). Men reported more than women (37.41%, compared to 36.90%), but not a lot more. In general, all age and gender groups had averages between 33-45%, and the standard deviations were quite high (as high as 29.56% for males). Because of these high standard deviations, it is not possible to say that these variations in average are very meaningful.

For my family members:

<i>Groups</i>	Total	<30	30-40	40-50	50-60	>60	Male	Female
Average	36.89	30.63	40.90	37.83	36.45	39.41	37.17	36.88
Median	30.00	25.00	40.00	30.00	30.00	40.00	30.00	30.00
Standard Deviation	24.60	21.21	24.91	23.92	25.19	27.32	25.04	24.59
Maximum	100.00	100.00	100.00	96.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00
Minimum	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00

Like the “for myself” category, it appears that knitting for family members is common, that there are some variations in average percentages per group, but that there are also high standard deviations that preclude drawing any conclusions about this.

For friends, coworkers, or acquaintances:

<i>Groups</i>	Total	<30	30-40	40-50	50-60	>60	Male	Female
Average	13.62	17.97	12.37	13.63	13.13	9.72	14.24	13.59
Median	10.00	10.00	10.00	10.00	10.00	10.00	10.00	10.00
Standard Deviation	15.76	18.27	14.56	16.97	14.72	11.10	17.50	15.68
Maximum	100.00	95.00	80.00	100.00	75.00	50.00	60.00	100.00
Minimum	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00

Knitting for friends, coworkers, and other acquaintances is less common than knitting for oneself or one's family, by approximately half. There are only minor variations in averages across groups, and still relatively high standard deviations (the standard deviations being higher than the actual averages in every case), so it cannot be said that the groups differ much from each other.

For charitable organizations:

<i>Groups</i>	Total	<30	30-40	40-50	50-60	>60	Male	Female
Average	9.29	4.27	5.77	10.75	12.99	12.01	7.60	9.37
Median	4.00	0.00	2.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	0.00	5.00
Standard Deviation	16.02	9.24	9.34	17.79	19.58	17.69	17.57	15.95
Maximum	100.00	75.00	75.00	95.00	100.00	98.00	90.00	100.00
Minimum	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00

Knitting for charitable organizations is still less common, but for some groups it is more common than for others (averaging 12.99% for knitters in their fifties, but only 4.27% for knitters in their twenties). Again, the high standard deviations make these variations inconclusive, and so one must conclude that the groups are more similar than they are different.

For commission or sale:

<i>Groups</i>	Total	<30	30-40	40-50	50-60	>60	Male	Female
Average	3.28	2.26	3.69	3.61	2.72	4.90	3.42	3.28
Median	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Standard Deviation	11.60	9.72	11.69	13.64	9.70	13.56	10.32	11.66
Maximum	99.00	75.00	75.00	99.00	70.00	80.00	50.00	99.00
Minimum	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00

Knitting to sell items is clearly not very common. Looking at the maximum percentages in each group, compared to the average and taking into account the standard deviation, it appears that a few people sell a lot of knitted items, a few sell the occasional item, and most sell none. Talking to knitters, I found this to be the case; a few knitted lots

of items, stockpiling them and then selling them at a craft show or online (for supplemental income, or simply to make the hobby pay for itself). Many people said that they had once or twice agreed to knit something specific for somebody that they'd met or known who suggested it, and many people told me that they had never sold anything. A few people, especially around holiday times, make it known among their friends or people at work that they are willing to knit holiday gifts on commission. Because of the hours spent making a project, knitters unanimously feel that knitting saleable items is not an ideal way to make an income: it is unheard of to receive anything close to minimum wage (\$5/hr), and so it is easier to make a living by working at other jobs. However, knitting becomes profitable in certain circumstances: when one wants to knit, but wants to reduce the cost of the hobby by selling a portion of the materials (for "yarn money"), when one wants to make use of hours outside of another job to earn a little money (such as evening times, or if one is retired), and maybe if one can think of a unique product that will have more demand than usual (such as hand-crocheted kippot⁷). Knitting to sell items is therefore best if one can accept unpredictable earnings and has a lot of opportunities to fit knitting into the day.

12) When you knit an object, is it usually more or less expensive than buying a similar item in the store? For example, how does the cost of knitting a scarf compare to the cost of buying a scarf made out of the same type of fiber?

<i>Groups</i>	<30	30-40	40-50	50-60	>60	Male	Female
Less expensive	20.1%	9.5	7.7	15.3	15.5	27.8	12.7
More expensive	43.3	64.7	65.8	67.2	66.2	53.7	62.1
Same cost	12.5	6.5	7.0	1.9	2.8	3.7	6.2
Don't know	24.1	19.4	19.5	15.6	15.5	14.8	19.0

⁷ The small skullcaps worn by observant Jewish men.

There is not a lot of agreement about whether it is more expensive to knit an item or buy it. Large percentages of people in each category chose “don’t know” as their answer. In each category, it was more common to choose “more expensive,” but sizeable numbers of people, especially men, chose “less expensive.” Although I specified that knitters should think about knitting an item versus purchasing an item *out of the same material* (ex: a cashmere sweater at the store versus knitted cashmere sweater, or woolen mittens), this is a somewhat implausible scenario and is a little difficult to imagine. The sorts of yarns available do not always match the types of sweaters or gloves available, and knitters may buy items made of one material but knit with another. Some knitters may not consider the total cost of a project (instead thinking about the cost per ball of yarn) and both yarns and manufactured items vary widely in price.

All things considered, however, all groups chose “more expensive” the most, and did so at similar rates, with the exceptions of under-30s (21.4% less chose “more expensive” than other ages) and men (8.4% less chose “more expensive” than women). Possible reasons for this are considered in question #14, where respondents had the option to write explanations for their answers.

13) Is this cost relationship the same as it was when you first started knitting?

<i>Groups</i>	<30	30-40	40-50	50-60	>60	Male	Female
Yes	28.6	32.8	29.8	20.1	13.4	42.6	24.8
No	27.7	28.9	29.4	38.9	38.7	22.2	33.1
Don’t know	43.8	38.4	40.8	41.1	47.9	35.2	42.1

There was not a lot of agreement among knitters of any age or sex category about this question. Several groups (under-30s, 40-50, etc) selected “yes” and “no” in almost equal percentages. “Don’t know” was the most common answer for all groups except for

men, who selected “yes” 42.6% of the time, twice as often as selecting “no” (22.2%).

Several factors may be confounded in these results, and these are discussed under question #14, which invited knitters to explain their answers to #12-13.

14) If you answered that the cost relationship was different, please describe the difference:

Those who have been knitting for many years may have seen actual price changes in yarn or manufactured items. Additionally, it is quite common for people to learn to knit with less expensive yarn because they may want to develop their skills before investing in expensive materials. For example, one knitter writes:

“When I first started, I didn't think I was skilled enough to use really expensive yarns, so I used relatively cheap yarns. Once I felt I was advanced enough, I moved on to using 2 different yarns in the same scarf, which led to the scarf being more expensive.”

Another writes:

“I spend more on yarn now as a more experienced knitter than I did when I first began.”

Others suggest that their tastes have changed between when they started knitting and the present time, perhaps as they've become more familiar with the types of yarns on the market:

“I worked more with synthetic yarn when I started knitting, which was cheaper. After knitting for awhile, I discovered how much more I enjoyed working with natural fibers, so now I mainly knit natural fibers, which typically cost more.”

In contrast, some wrote in that over time they learned how to find the yarns they wanted at less expensive prices. Knitters have also found the cost relationship to change with their budgets: some explained that after graduating from college and getting full-time jobs, they were able to afford more expensive yarn, while others wrote in that when they moved away from home and had to become financially independent, or suffered hardships related to divorce or other events, they began to look for less expensive

materials. For many, spending money on yarn they like (whether acrylic or cashmere) is part of the hobby: knitters want to feel textures that they like and use pretty colors, and are willing to spend money to get them. Many state that if they are going to put weeks or months of their time into the project, it deserves a nice yarn. Finally, for some knitters, particularly those with disposable income, experimenting with different yarn is part of the fun, and they might spend \$75 on 50g of qiviut (musk ox) wool just for the experience of knitting with it.

I was interested in whether knitters had observed an increase in the actual materials, and a few respondents did comment on this in their responses. Almost anybody that chose to talk about the cost of yarn (rather than the type of yarn they were buying) stated that they felt that it had grown more expensive, particularly for “quality” fiber, and particularly in comparison to manufactured goods, which they felt had come down in price. These comments came from all age groups.

15) Have you taught others to knit? Please check off any of the following types of people you have taught:

<i>Groups</i>	<30	30-40	40-50	50-60	>60	Male	Female
I have never taught anyone to knit	26.5%	19.9	11.7	17.0	15.8	32.7	17.3
Family members (younger than me)	24.2	37.7	58.6	52.3	62.6	23.1	47.9
Family members (older than me)	12.3	17.7	13.2	5.6	6.5	11.5	11.1
Family members (about the same age as me)	15.5	17.7	11.3	11.4	14.4	13.5	13.8
Friends, coworkers, or classmates	58.9	59.3	58.6	55.2	54.0	50.0	57.7
Students in a knitting class	7.8	17.7	23.3	24.5	23.7	13.5	19.9
Community members or strangers	9.1	18.6	19.2	25.5	24.5	21.2	19.4
Visitors to a knitting circle or craft group	13.7	27.3	25.6	25.8	31.7	25.0	24.4
Other (please specify)	4.1	4.3	7.1	6.9	2.9	9.6	5.2

Apparently most knitters end up passing on knowledge of the craft to someone else along the way. The most common recipients of this knowledge from most groups of knitters were “friends, coworkers, and acquaintances” and “family members (younger than me), although the under-30s and males selected “I have never taught anyone to knit” more frequently than “family members (younger).” Knitters under the age of 50 were twice as likely or more to have taught older family members than knitters over the age of 50, suggesting that it has become more common for knowledge to be handed up in addition to being handed down. Under-30s knitters were somewhat less likely to have taught community members or strangers, students in a knitting class, or visitors to a knitting circle.

16) If you have children, have you taught any of them to knit? If you do not have children, would you teach children to knit if you were to have them?

<i>Groups</i>	<30	30-40	40-50	50-60	>60	Male	Female
Yes	84.9	76.6	76.7	70.4	66.2	75.0	75.3
No	7.8	17.3	17.7	26.4	28.8	17.3	19.5
Not sure	7.3	6.1	5.6	3.3	5.0	7.7	5.2

Answers to this question are not at all surprising given the number of knitters that reported learning from a family member or teaching a family member, particularly teaching a younger family member. “Yes” responses were chosen less with age, decreasing from a high of 84.9% (under-30) to 66.2% (over-60). This could be because younger knitters, who have not yet had children, may be overly optimistic about their children’s interest, while older knitters found that some children grew up and never expressed a desire to knit, despite the knitter’s wishes. Older knitters may have been less likely to teach male children, as anecdotal evidence suggests. Finally, older knitters, having experienced the feminist movement, may have assumed younger women were not

interested in knitting because they were getting jobs outside the home, or they themselves may have felt discouraged from knitting and teaching others to knit. I discussed the role of feminism in more depth with knitters while completing my interviews.

17) How many of today's knitters would you estimate are (give a percentage %):

Male:

Groups	<30	30-40	40-50	50-60	>60	Male	Female
Average	17.59	17.39	15.43	15.97	14.74	14.84	16.36
Median	15.00	15.00	15.00	15.00	10.00	10.00	15.00
Standard Deviation	9.54	9.58	9.74	9.63	9.50	9.81	9.64
Maximum	50.00	58.00	50.00	50.00	50.00	45.00	58.00
Minimum	1.00	1.00	0.00	0.00	1.00	2.00	0.00

NB: A few responses were as high as 75% or even 96%. Because these were so far from all of the other responses, and I consider it unlikely that anybody would estimate that more than 70% of knitters are male, I determined that these must be outliers (perhaps people that mixed up the male/female columns) and deleted any responses greater than 70%. I deleted correspondingly low (lower than 30%) responses from the female estimates below. There were 12 such outliers deleted in each dataset, which represent 1.03% of the people that answered the question.

Female:

Groups	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Average	82.26	82.64	84.57	83.88	84.99	85.10	83.54
Median	80.00	85.00	85.00	85.00	90.00	90.00	85.00
Standard Deviation	9.64	9.66	9.74	9.54	10.25	9.19	9.78
Maximum	99.00	99.50	100.00	99.90	99.00	98.00	100.00
Minimum	50.00	42.00	50.00	50.00	40.00	65.00	40.00

Most survey respondents agreed that the majority of knitters were female (even before I deleted 12 outliers). Across age groups and sex groups, average estimates were similar, ranging from 82.26%-85.10% female and 14.74%-17.59% male. The highest estimates of male knitters (on average) came from the younger age groups and females, and the lowest estimates came from the oldest groups and (unexpectedly) males. A male I

discussed this finding with suggested that often, those in a majority are not fully aware of their majority status and will exaggerate the number of minority members they see, while minority members are acutely aware of their status and note the rarity of encounters with one another.

3.2: Interview Results

In analyzing the data gained from interviews, I have divided the interviews into age groups and combined data to form five pools. In the following descriptions, names have been changed so as to mask the identities of individuals. As mentioned previously, a sample of the questions I tried to ask each participant can be found in Appendix C, and in the following analyses, I have divided the questions up for discussion according to topic area. These eight topics, subtitled below, are “Learning,” “Internet,” “Other materials,” “Their projects,” “Spending time with other knitters,” “Male knitters,” “Feminism,” and “Generational differences.”

3.2.1: Interviews with knitters under 30 years of age

The four interviews with knitters under thirty were with knitters that were 22 (“Sadie”), 25 (“Pam”), 25 (“Elaine”), and 29 (“Olivia”). The interview with Elaine was the one that was conducted through AOL Instant Messenger, and because of the problems

already mentioned regarding the duration of the interview, I do not necessarily have answers from Elaine to all the same questions.

Learning

Two of these knitters (Olivia and Elaine) learned to knit from coworkers or at knitting circles held near their place of employment. The other two learned from their mothers, one as a child (Pam) and one as a young woman (Sadie). Sadie learned after she had moved away from home (age 19 or 20), in part because she and her mother were looking for things to do and ways to spend time together. None of the knitters mentioned attending classes to learn knitting techniques, although Olivia expressed an interest in doing so, and expected that it would be a good way to learn because of the chance to see an instructor's demonstrations.

Internet

Olivia also said that she was less likely to use the internet to get questions answered about knitting than to take her knitting questions to a person she knows in her local community. The other three respondents said that they use the internet heavily for learning about techniques, answering questions, and communicating with other knitters. Three of the knitters mentioned reading blogs, and the fourth said that her mother and her mother's friends kept blogs. She felt that the blogs were helping to forge connections between knitters, and noted that her mother's site tracked countries of origin of its readers, and showed that there were many readers in other countries. Two of the knitters (Olivia and Elaine) said that they used the internet to buy yarn, Olivia because she knits

to sell items at a craft fair and tries to buy yarn in bulk to get discounts, and Elaine because she can find a wider variety of yarns at more affordable prices online than in her local area. Of the other two, Sadie mentioned that she prefers to feel and see yarn before buying it, so she does most of her shopping at a local yarn store. Overall, these four knitters felt that the internet was having a big impact on the knitting world (“revolutionizing” it, in the words of Sadie), in that it provides more opportunities for knitters in different areas to build relationships, and increases access to information, materials, patterns, and project ideas.

Other materials

Pam subscribes to knitting magazines and also keeps an assortment of knitting books, but feels that the internet has an advantage over books in that it makes so many more patterns available. Sadie says that she frequently uses knitting books that she finds through her job at a bookstore, but also uses magazine and online patterns, and gets patterns from other knitters. She feels that magazines and online sources can provide more contemporary patterns. The other knitters did not talk about whether they used printed materials very often.

Their projects

Olivia was unique in that almost all of her knitting is for sale. She has gone into business for herself, knitting and stockpiling items, and then setting up displays at craft shows to sell them. She enjoys doing this as a job, but admitted that it probably wouldn't be possible except that she is in a position to handle unpredictable income. In order to

maximize profits, she has found ways to buy yarn in bulk through the internet for lower prices, although she also loves shopping at a local yarn store near her home. She enjoys seeing others use things that she has knitted, and when explaining her choice to make knitting a business explains that she would be knitting anyway. Other knitters that told me about selling items said similar things to me: they first recognize that they will do a lot of knitting whether getting paid for it or not, and then decide to try to get paid for at least a portion of that knitting.

The other knitters seemed to keep their projects or give them away as gifts to friends and family, although Pam says that she only knits gifts sometimes and Sadie states that because she is still learning, she is keeping her projects until she develops her skills. All four explained that they knit a variety of things and like the challenge of trying out new techniques or projects. They're descriptions of their knitting were marked by curiosity and enthusiasm.

Spending time with other knitters

Pam and Olivia regularly attend knitting circles (weekly), and Olivia says that she has also gone to knitting conventions, such as *Stitches* (see Section 3.24 for further description). Sadie does not regularly attend one, but sometimes accompanies her mother when she goes to a circle that meets in members' homes. Elaine says that knitting groups are becoming easier to find in her area, and that she sometimes attends one that has started up in her local library.

Knitting in public is something all of the knitters mentioned, whether knitting at work, on the bus, trolley, or train. Sadie mentions that knitting in public often attracts

attention, in that non-knitters and knitters alike will approach her to ask about her project, admire it, or sometimes just watch. In response to my question about how people react to her knitting in public, Elaine wrote:

“Usually it is something like “Oh, that is so pretty! Who are you knitting it for? That yarn looks so soft! How long have you been knitting? What other things have you knit?” Pretty much in that order and in rapid fire succession :-D And then they “pet” the yarn and they’ll start asking me about what kind it is and if they are knitter as well they will tell me what they are working on and the types of things that they knit. If they are not knitters then they will usually comment about how soft it is and start telling me what they like to do.”

Knitting functions as something of an icebreaker between strangers that would not normally converse, such as fellow riders on the bus.

Male knitters?

Pam says that she reads some blogs written by male knitters, but that there aren’t any men in her knitting circle and she thinks it is still socially less acceptable for men to knit. She didn’t know whether there were more or less male knitters out there than before. I didn’t have a chance to talk about male knitters with Elaine, but both Olivia and Sadie guessed that there might be more men knitting today than previously, and both felt that this was because gender roles have become a little more flexible. Sadie thinks that men still hold themselves back from knitting, and she says that a few men she’s met have expressed interest in learning to knit but have never taken her up on her offers to teach them. She thinks many are still “closet knitters” (knitting in private) and are not always comfortable openly knitting because of the strong association between knitting and the female gender role. Olivia says that a man showed up at her knitting circle once, but that he didn’t seem comfortable and never returned; she says this may be because he was still

learning to knit (and thus wasn't comfortable being at a knitting circle in general) or because the circle was otherwise all-female, and may have overwhelmed him.

Feminism

Olivia didn't know what impact feminism or the feminist movement might have had on knitting. Pam pointed out that it was a complicated question, but given that "Feminism to me means being able to do what you want without worrying about what others thing," felt that knitting could be a part of the modern woman and was increasingly being embraced by women who were learning (perhaps with the aid of feminism) to make room in their lives for the activities they truly wanted to pursue. Sadie points out that the women's rights movement (of the 1960s or 1970s) may have discouraged knitting in its emphasis on women stepping away from traditional roles. Now that women have become more comfortable with nontraditional activities, such as having careers outside the home, they are also becoming more comfortable doing traditional activities, like knitting, as well. She thinks that recent (within the past ten years) popularity in knitting can be attributed in part to a newfound comfort with such traditional activities. I did not have time to ask Elaine about feminism.

Generational differences?

Young knitters saw continuity and change. Elaine emphasized continuity, saying "There are new yarns and projects and different techniques but in the end, it is still 2 sticks, a ball of yarn and you. I think that is part of what is so appealing about it." Pam feels that there was more of a practical aspect to it in previous generations, and explains

that for her mother's generation (in Communist Romania), it was a practical way to clothe the family, but that knitters were still enjoying the activity. Now, she says, it's expensive to do and is mostly a hobby. Olivia suggests that there may be different fibers available, and thinks that knitters are knitting different types of projects now. Sadie believes that the newest generation of knitters is more likely to pick up knitting from books or the internet, a trend that was supported by my survey results (see above). After having first been introduced to it in these ways, young knitters find out about older members of their family knitting, she suggests, and become more involved. Sadie also felt that her generation was exposed to knitting as something of a fad or popular craze, and she believes that many other people are aware of Hollywood celebrities (such as Lindsey Lohan) knitting, even though she says that this was not a motivating factor in her decision to take it up.

3.22: Between 30 and 40 years old

These four participants were 30 ("Hilary"), 31 ("Angela"), 35 ("Gayle") and 37 ("Felicity").

Learning

Gayle first learned to knit as a child, when her mother taught her. She picked it up again in high school, but then stopped knitting until four years ago, when she started again. She doesn't know exactly what about knitting caught her eye, but she is a

generally “crafty” person and has done many other needlecrafts like sewing, crochet, and spinning her own yarn. Felicity learned about two years ago, by taking a class at a local yarn shop. She explains:

“My neighbor that I grew up next to all my life was from Norway and she knit beautifully... Her grandchildren and my kids were the same age and she used to send over mittens and hats. My kids never wanted for wool hats and mittens. She had had cancer and it came back. And when we found out it was terminal, I said... before she goes I really should learn to knit. So I went to the yarn shop that she owned and I said to her friends... I want to learn how to knit just like her. And they said ok and they taught me to knit Continental just like her.

Angela had a friend who learned to knit in anticipation of spending a lot of time in the hospital, and this friend taught her to knit approximately a year ago. Hilary was inspired to learn to knit by watching her boss; although she did not learn from her employer, she cites this as the reason that she picked up books and taught herself to knit after leaving that job. All four of these women have been knitting for relatively short periods of time, five years or less, even though Gayle had some prior experience. Only Gayle had learned from a family member.

Internet

Felicity checks out six or seven knitting blogs every day, and browses more semi-regularly. She says that the internet has been “amazing” and she’s found it very useful to reinforce techniques she learned in class. Angela also uses the internet “all the time” to figure things out, and does some shopping online as well, although she does say that she likes the sensory experience of yarn shopping in person. Hilary does similar things, and is also considering keeping her own blog. When asked what is appealing about blogs for knitters, and how they use them, she answered that it was a good way for her to keep track of her projects and see other people’s projects, which she finds encouraging and

inspiring. For example, she says she might not have tried to knit socks (because they look intimidating) except that she read other knitters' accounts of knitting them, and encouragement that they can be done. Gayle also uses the internet for learning, shopping, reading blogs, keeping a blog, and so on. She feels that the internet is a particularly important tool for young knitters:

"It makes the craft more available to younger people, and I don't mean that because older folks can't use computers, that's not true - I do see a lot of older folks using computers. It's just that if you didn't have a mother to teach you... you know, some of these handicrafts fell away for a while during women's lib... I think there's a generation of women who didn't have an older woman to teach them this stuff, or an older man to teach them this stuff, and so they have to learn from something else."

She also talked about the advantages to small businesses that have come from the internet: it is now possible to self-publish patterns, sell small batches of handspun or hand-dyed yarn, and market other products without prohibitive cost.

Other materials

Gayle regularly consults books, either her own or from the library, and has subscriptions to a number of popular knitting magazines. Felicity finds books very useful, but feels that magazines are too trendy for her: "I'm *so* not hip and happening - I'm somebody's mom now. There's a lot of fashion involved in magazines." She finds books that cover technique more interesting than books of full patterns, because the techniques can be combined into her own custom designs. Pam is considering buying more magazines in the future (perhaps subscribing), but thinks that they have a tough job right now, in competing with the internet. They need to market themselves as being somehow different from what is already available (for free) online, and she thinks that they sometimes have much better photography and more complex patterns. Hilary has several

magazines, but buys single issues that interest her at the bookstore or the yarn store. She likes the convenience of not having to print the patterns, but thinks they are comparable to online offerings in scope and quality.

Their projects

Felicity does craft shows in the summer and fall, and also sells some of her items through the internet. She says she doesn't do a lot yet, but does get a lot of local customers from the craft shows. Like Olivia, she knits an inventory and then advertises the finished products, but she also does custom orders for people. She says that selling her work is really mostly a way to make her hobby pay for itself and to get rid of all of the extra objects she knits, so this arrangement works for her even though she isn't earning high wages. Hilary has also sold scarves at a bazaar – she explains that she hasn't done that sort of thing very often, but a friend wanted to go in on a table with her. She knits some things as gifts, but does most of her knitting for herself and her son. Angela knits a lot as gifts, and is starting to knit socks for a "Socks for Soldiers" group that will send the socks to troops in Iraq. Gayle spins a lot of yarn for her projects, and will occasionally knit things as gifts, but only in situations in which she feels the gift would be really appreciated, because of the effort involved in its making.

Spending time with other knitters

Felicity regrets that she hasn't found a knitting circle in her area since the local yarn store closed (when the owner passed away). She's considered starting one. Otherwise, she says she doesn't knit in public very much because she doesn't find herself

in public very much, being a stay-at-home mother. Angela has also wanted to participate in a knitting circle, but is also the mother of a young child and is currently in the middle of a move; she hopes to find one to attend after she gets settled again. Hilary has just finished relocated and still getting settled, so she has not yet found a knitting circle but is looking for one. As a busy mother, she thinks it would be a great chance to knit uninterrupted and socialize with other adults every week. Gayle participates regularly in two knitting circles, knits in public, and is teaching a knitting class. She feels that she's made a lot of new friends through her knitting, and particularly female friends, which she's found nice because her other interests lay in very male-dominated areas.

Perhaps more than the interviewees in other age groups, these knitters seemed to find it harder to fit knitting circles and outings into their schedules, as they juggle parenting, settling into new homes, and other work. They each express interest in the camaraderie and relaxation that they expect a knitting circle would provide, and (aside from Gayle, who already attends) are all hoping to find knitting groups to get involved in as soon as they can. Those who are currently unable to attend seem to make up for it by participating in internet communities, and they specifically mention that the internet makes it a lot easier to socialize when schedule or location wouldn't permit it.

Male knitters

Hilary and Felicity can't recall meeting any male knitters in person, although Felicity thinks she remembers some that participate in forums. Angela knows of a friend of a friend who knits, and Gayle has met a few – enough that she says it doesn't seem odd

anymore.⁸ Gayle has also met male spinners, and thinks that it is possible that there are more men who are willing to openly knit. Felicity thinks that men have most likely remained a steady proportion of knitters – that if there are more out there today, it is because there are more knitters overall. Angela thinks there are definitely more and thinks the internet serves to support communities of male knitters. She also thinks that there may be a sizeable number of gay male knitters, but also says that some of the blogs she reads involve men knitting for wives. Hilary thinks more husbands and boyfriends might be learning to knit in order to spend time with the female knitters they know, and also thinks that it is more acceptable to knit now because knitting is more of a “creative process” and less of an “arts ‘n’ crafts” activity.

Feminism

Gayle is pretty certain that in the 1980s, feminism devalued crafting, because women were trying to find themselves by pursuing traditionally masculine activities. Now she believes that women are settling into a middle ground, and are feeling more comfortable with what were feminine crafts. She feels that gender roles have become a lot more flexible (mentioning male knitters to support this). Felicity agrees that feminism encouraged women to reject anything that was stereotypically female, because “for a while, it seemed like all or nothing.” Her generation, following on the heels of that, has found ways to make knitting acceptable: “My generation did whatever it wanted. Career women knit now. In the same way that we’ve fit everything in – we can have it all.”

⁸ I don’t recall where the other knitters were living, but Gayle does live in a major metropolitan area...it would be interesting to look into whether there are more male knitters in cities, either because of population density or because of the privacy and tolerance of eccentricity one sometimes finds in urban areas.

Angela has chosen to become a stay-at-home mother, and sees the decision to knit and the decision to do that as related. Feminism (new feminism) has taught women that they have choices: beforehand, women could not have careers; afterwards they could not be stay-at-home mothers. Now women are free to make the choice based on their own desires and needs: "Women realize that they have choices and those choices can include things that were typically required of them." She thinks knitting may have declined as a result of "old feminism" (that which encouraged the rejection of traditional female roles), simply because she doesn't know how women would have found the time to knit and work outside the home and everything else. She also doesn't know many people from her mother's generation who knit.

Finally, Hilary disagrees that feminism has impacted knitting, and sees it as unrelated to the craft.

Generational differences

Gayle suggests that the current emphasis on knitting's "hipness" or "coolness" is new and unique to these generations. This trend includes the *Stitch 'n Bitch* books and "edgy underground knitting" of different sorts. Felicity thinks that knitting is much more likely to be a luxury hobby than it was for her mother or grandmother's generations, both of whom knit clothing because it was economical. Angela agrees that there has been a shift from practical to hobby, and also points out that different generations knit different things because they are at different points in their lives. She's knitting baby clothing, but 20-somethings are knitting iPod cozies. Hilary thinks recent generations of knitters are branching off from traditional patterns (the sweater, the hat, the mitten, etc.) and are

inventing new things entirely, bringing a good deal more creativity into the knitting world.

3.23: Between 40 and 50 years old

These four subjects were 41 (“Julie”), 41 (“Carmen”), 46 (“Claire”), and 47 (“Nadia”). Two (Claire and Julie) were sisters, and daughters of “Abigail” (see section 3.25). Another, Carmen, was the daughter of “Christine” (see section 3.25).

Learning

Claire notes that although her grandmother taught her first stitches in sewing and other crafts, she did not learn to knit until taking a home-ec class in third grade, in a Belgian school.⁹ Nadia also learned knitting in a home-ec class, in seventh grade in the U.S., and she believes her mother may have learned the same way. Julie remembers that she asked her mother to show her, but doesn’t remember why, and Abigail thinks that Julie was learning to knit for elementary school in England. Both Julie and Claire say that after first learning, they did not knit again until later in their lives: Claire began again in college (early 1980s), and Julie began again a few years ago. This group of knitters is the youngest group to have experienced knitting in organized home economics classes; according to their experiences, such classes were still being offered in some schools in

⁹ Claire, Julie, and Abigail are originally from the United States. For a period of a few years during Claire and Julie’s childhood, they relocated to Belgium, and then to England before returning home in time for the children to attend American high schools.

the United States, England, and Belgium. Younger American students largely saw the removal of home-ec from the public school system.¹⁰

Carmen first learned to knit much later, at age 26, when meeting another knitter in a grocery store and admiring the woman's child's hand-knit sweater. She learned to knit, knitted a few years, and then she also stopped until recently. Nadia seems not to have knitted seriously until in her twenties, when she came across knitting books in the bookstore she worked in and "opportunity presented itself." She has been knitting continuously since the 1980s.

All four knitters say that they learned, knit for a short period of time, and then stopped knitting for a few to several years. This seems most attributable to their levels of busyness and distraction (raising children, finishing high school), as well as fluctuations in their level of interest in knitting. Claire mentions being aware of social pressures (though not necessarily giving in to them); these are discussed under "Feminism."

Internet

Claire does not have a computer or use the internet, but notes that she has had to start buying a lot of materials through mail-order catalogues because a lot of craft stores have moved out of her area. This is a scenario in which internet-users frequently start making use of online shopping, although Claire suggests that online shopping may be contributing to the disappearance of local stores. She believes computers may have also made designing and pattern-making easier for some crafters. Julie uses online shopping

¹⁰ I had home-ec in middle school, as a required class for both boys and girls. This was unusual; other school districts in the area did not have such a program, and in my last year of it (1998), they changed it to "Family and Consumer Science," which was supposed to emphasize other home-skills, rather than cooking and sewing. Knitting was not a part of the program at any time, and many older knitters I spoke to said that they did take home-ec, but knitting was not necessarily taught.

for yarn because she sometimes finds it easier than shopping with children, although she does shop locally as well. She also uses the internet a great deal to find patterns, learn, read blogs, listen to Podcasts, and communicate with other knitters via forums and listservs. Her mother, Abigail, does not use the internet but Julie sometimes helps her find things online, demonstrating that the internet's influence is not always restricted to its direct users. Nadia doesn't use the internet much to learn techniques, but does use it to find "non-technical" information, perhaps patterns or other materials. Carmen uses the internet for a range of purposes, and also keeps a non-knitting related blog. When asked about the appeal of blogs and the impact of the internet on knitting, she talked about the camaraderie of the online community, the encouragement that gives to knitters to try new projects, the easy sharing of information, and the ease of obtaining materials (although, like many other knitters, she misses the ability to touch and see yarn when buying online).

Other materials

All four knitters emphasized that they used printed magazines and books a good deal. They have collections (sometimes quite sizeable) of books and magazines. These include patterns, techniques, and stories about knitters. Nadia finds these very useful because of their portability (compared to carrying a computer or having to print something), and because she lives in a rural area without high speed internet. Claire uses these exclusively, as she does not use internet equivalents. Carmen feels that sometimes printed patterns contain more errors than they should (with online patterns, it is often easier to publish amendments to a pattern).

Their projects

Claire keeps many of her projects, while Carmen and Julie say they give away most of their knitting and Carmen makes a lot of items both for herself and other people. Julie is involved in a lot of organized charity knitting projects, such as the “Ships Project” (which now brings hand-knitted hats to troops in Iraq or Afghanistan) and “Afghans for Afghans” (which takes warm blankets and clothing to people who are need them in Afghanistan). She has chosen these projects in particular because she feels these groups are particularly reliable in getting the items to the destinations they claim they will. Julie states that she has not sold any knitting and probably won’t, and Nadia says that she is not interested in doing so either, although she’s donated some knitting items to charity auctions. Claire has done a few pieces on commission, but only rarely, and Carmen has agreed to knit a few items, mostly scarves, for people to give as gifts. She doesn’t advertise herself and says that most of the time, it’s that somebody saw her knitting and approached her to ask. Overall, selling knitted objects was not popular or common in this group. Reasons include the fact that it is not cost effective and that it is difficult to get a fair wage. Julie also explains that she always thought that if she started knitting things to sell, it would feel too much like work and would lose its appeal. Claire speculates that crafters (such as knitters or quilters) that do high volume work to sell have independent sources of income that enable them to tolerate the unpredictable and low wages.

Spending time with other knitters

Claire has taught four or five people to knit in formalized sessions, and observes that “a lot of women are scared of needlework, and think they can’t do it.” She does not participate in any knitting circles or local groups. Julie also hasn’t participated in any knitting groups, but is thinking about starting one. Nadia goes to a knitting circle, and also has a group of close friends that meet as a small group and take an annual knitting trip to the shore. They also go on yarn shopping field trips together. Carmen participates in a private knitting circle that meets in member’s homes, including her own sometimes. The members originally lived within walking distance of each other, but people have left or joined over the years and she says they are now about 24. On average, 16 will meet on a given week, and they also host holiday parties.

Male knitters

None of the knitters know many (or any) male knitters personally, but Nadia and Julie are aware of male pattern designers and bloggers. Carmen thinks there may have been an increase in males knitting, and she thinks that the macramé craze of the 1960s may have brought men into crafting that then segued into knitting. None are quite sure about whether there are more or less male knitters today than before, but Carmen thinks there might be more.

Feminism

Claire thinks that the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s definitely discouraged knitting and handcrafts, and says that she felt some pressure to be like “a

little boy” when she was growing up. She feels that this was a much stronger influence in the United States than in Belgium, but says that by the 1980s and later, women were more encouraged to do their own thing. Julie is not sure about the influence of feminism, but says that there are some knitters out there that make it a point to knit unusual things as sort of a backlash against the feminine-knitter stereotype. Carmen doesn’t see a direct correlation between feminism and knitting, but thinks that feminism eventually allowed men’s gender role to be relaxed, allowing some to take up knitting. Nadia agrees that feminism probably discouraged traditionally feminine crafts in the 1960s and 1970s, and says that there were probably some people who didn’t want little girls to be taught knitting and sewing. She has seen an increase in numbers of knitters over the past eight or ten years, but is not certain whether feminism is involved in that, and feels that knitting is freer of gender associations now.

Generational differences

Carmen thinks that knitting has become more social and more accessible to people today. She also mentions that people her age or younger were probably less likely to have been taught by their parents. Nadia says that for her generation, home-ec projects were very defined and the grandmother/knitter stereotype was very strong. She feels that today’s learners have more freedom to choose their first projects and more variety of yarn and materials to use, and also thinks the grandmother stereotype may be fading. Claire feels that the patterns different generations have had access to have varied a great deal in quality, and thinks the patterns that were published during the 1970s in particular were so unappealing as to discourage knitting or other crafts. Awareness of internet usage and

new variety in materials (and increase in quality of materials) permeate these knitters' discussions.

3.24: Between 50 and 60 years old

These four respondents were 53 ("Carly"), 54 ("Maggie"), 55 ("Eve") and 58 ("Sarah").

Learning

Carly and Eve were both taught by older family members; Eve's mother taught her when she was about 16 or 17 years old, and Carly's aunt taught her and her sister when she was in high school. Maggie tried to teach herself with books when she was 8 or 9, but had trouble and did not knit again until two years ago, when she found other books that worked better for her. She did not know any other knitters in her family. Sarah also learned from books. When she was about thirteen, her parents gave her a general crafts-kit designed to teach young people various crafts, and because she has been visually impaired since childhood, she had the instructions written out in Braille before using them to teach herself. Since that time, she has also made use of knitting listservs, a knitting guild, and classes to learn further. Carly has also taken classes, some more useful than others. Maggie and Eve have not taken classes.

Internet

Sarah says that her knitting changed completely at the time she started using the internet. At roughly the same time, she joined “KnitList” and joined a local knitter’s guild. Both expanded her skill sets considerably, and she attributes the changes in her knitting to the combination of the two, not solely the internet or the guild. She no longer finds herself learning many new techniques from the internet, but does find many patterns and uses it for online shopping. She also visits various blogs and forums, and belongs to a few other knitting listservs. Her computer allows her to print internet sources, or scanned text, into Braille so that she can read them.

Maggie keeps a blog and also uses the internet to research answers to her questions, read other blogs, and visit online knitting groups. Carly finds unusual patterns online (such as patterns for knitting socks from the toe-up, which is less common than knitting from the ankle down), reads blogs such as Yarn Harlot, and has done some online shopping, although she prefers to shop in person to feel and see the yarn. Sarah also prefers to feel her yarn before buying it, and Eve particularly likes the ease of browsing through yarn in a local store, looking for inspiration. Carly likes hand-dyed yarn especially, and prefers to see the colors before purchasing. All of these knitters find the internet and computer to be best suited for some types of questions or shopping, and personal communication or browsing in local yarn stores to be better in other situations.

Other materials

As stated previously, all of these knitters make use of printed materials, such as books and magazines, to supplement or complement internet materials. Eve in particular

buys a lot of her patterns as single leaflets from craft stores, or in books – she likes the ease with which she can flip through books to see interesting pictures. Maggie, on the other hand, gets most pattern books online but does use some books for technique.

Their projects

Eve knits a lot of gifts, particularly for Christmas presents, and has also knitted scarves on commission. She says she doesn't really advertise, but that instead, people will see her knitting in public and approach her to ask her to knit something for them. Carly has not sold anything – she knits primarily gifts for others and things for herself. Maggie hasn't knitted anything to sell, either, and knits primarily for gifts. Sarah has knitted things to sell, although she hasn't advertised and says, like Eve, that others see her knitting or something she's knitted and ask her to do projects for them. Rather than figure out how to charge for materials and labor, or choose yarn for somebody else, Sarah asks people to purchase the yarn and send or give it to her, so that she only works out a price based on labor and is certain that the client chose a yarn they liked, in a price range they were satisfied with. She also knits gifts, but rather than deciding to give someone a gift and then figuring out what to knit for them, she waits until somebody mentions that they like something or want something and then she might surprise them by knitting it. She finds this to be more fun, and more likely to result in a present that a person actually likes.¹¹

¹¹ One wonders why more knitters don't take this approach.

Spending time with other knitters

Eve hasn't really participated in knitting circles before, but has met with groups to get charity knitting efforts organized. The group will usually meet once to kick off the project, and then everybody goes home and knits objects to drop off later. Carly and Sarah do participate in knitting circles, and Maggie has visited a few, but has so far found their schedules and locations to be incompatible with the rest of her schedule.

Carly and Sarah also participate in knitting guilds, which are larger and more organized than a typical "knitting circle." Carly describes hers:

"It's essentially a knitting club... we pay dues and we sometimes have teachers who give classes...on Saturday she's going to teach us how to customize patterns so that they actually fit..."

My question: So do you ever take trips with your guild then? Like I've heard that some groups will sort of get together and go to fiber fests, or knitting conventions, or their favorite yarn stores. Is that part of this?

"It certainly can be – for instance we're thinking about renting a bus and going down to MD Sheep and Wool the first weekend in May."

The Maryland Sheep and Wool Festival was mentioned by several other knitters in different age groups. It seems that often a yarn store or knitting circle, group of friends or guild will organize a carpool down to Maryland for the festival. Part agricultural, and part craft-related, the festival brings together breeders, sheep, fleeces, spinners, knitters, vendors of spinning and knitting related products, and other spectators for the weekend. It is a time for showing animals, shopping, and taking classes in different crafts.

Sarah also referred to shopping at "Stitches" ("The Knitting Universe" website), a knitting convention that has versions in three regions of the country. Knitters in Pennsylvania are most commonly referring to "Stitches East" which is held in different locations from year to year, such as Atlantic City and Baltimore. *Stitches* brings together vendors into a large marketplace (in which many knitters go on yarn shopping binges) and sets up a schedule of seminar-like classes for knitters in attendance.

Male knitters

Eve's boss is a male knitter, but she hasn't met any others, even though she is convinced that there must be more out there. Carly thinks there are probably more male knitters in England and Europe, but says there may have been an increase in the United States, particularly since it has been possible for more people to be openly gay. Whether she meant that gender roles have become more flexible or that there has been an increase in gay male knitters was not certain, although other interviewees cited both theories. Although Maggie only knows one male knitter (a man she taught), she also feels that there has been a recent increase in male knitters, or at least an increase in men who openly knit. She feels this is both because gender roles are less stringently defined and because society is somewhat more accepting of gay communities, and she says that there are many gay male knitters out there. Sarah knows a few male knitters through her guild, and thinks there are more out there today because it is more acceptable to knit for both men and women. ("For a while there, knitting wasn't the thing to do for anybody, certainly not males.").

Feminism

Eve, Maggie, and Sarah note that because knitting was associated with the home, it may have been adversely affected by early feminism. Carly points out that "it was women who stayed home that would knit" and Maggie, in talking about different types of feminism, says that "there's a generation that lost a lot of hand arts" (when feminism meant leaving home). Sarah was not particularly tuned into the early feminist movement,

in part because her family was already egalitarian and she was studying mathematics at college; she was less aware of a movement to abandon the home, and more aware that people didn't believe she was actually studying mathematics. She ignored those people and studied math anyway, and before allowing people to categorize her, emphasizes her personhood above all else. Thus, she does not immediately identify herself as visually impaired, or as a knitter, or as a professional woman or a woman who enjoys cooking and other traditionally domestic activities – these are all just parts of who she is. She particularly notes that others used to see a conflict in domestic or professional activities:

“...people were always surprised that we liked to craft, and we liked cooking and things like that – when we were so into math, science, reading, intellectual things, teaching. That was back in the eighties. Neither of us could figure out why anybody thought there was a conflict there, but a lot of people did.”

These days, she feels that modern knitters are people that, like her, have a variety of interests and are not only domestic. This perspective is quite similar to that expressed by some of the younger interviewees, who explained that a new wave of feminism, or a relaxation and balancing of older feminism, has given women the freedom to enjoy whatever domestic or non-domestic activities suit their personal goals and desires.

Generational differences

Eve sees a lot of continuity between her generation and her parents'. She believes that both knitted to make gifts and to enjoy themselves, rather than because they needed clothing. She isn't certain about her grandparents' generation, but thinks that the cost of basic materials (such as acrylic yarn) may have decreased. Carly feels that knitters are much more demographically varied than they used to be, especially in age range, and that they are more likely to publicly take pride in their work (rather than dismissing their craft

as “just knitting”). Maggie says that her mother and her mother’s cohort experienced the sort of conflict that Sarah spoke of; her mother had children right after World War II, at a time when most women were being encouraged to work outside the home. Although her mother was not proud of knowing how to knit, Maggie is. Maggie isn’t sure that her children’s generation sees any pride in housework, but speculates that her grandchildren may have a different perspective.

Sarah feels that a lot of people in her generation are just starting to get into knitting, an opinion that Chloe (see section 3.25) shares. She knows a lot of people that were taught as children but did not knit until recently. She also feels that there are much better quality materials available today, and that knitters are experiencing a period of creativity and innovation now, whereas the generations before hers was probably knitting the same sorts of things over and over again, to make things that were needed and stay warm.

3.25: Older than 60 years old

These knitters included Elizabeth (62), Christine (64), Chloe (65), and Abigail (73). Abigail is the mother of Claire and Julie, and Christine is the mother of Carmen. Elizabeth was particularly reluctant to give her age, feeling that chronological age is artificial and not very meaningful.¹²

¹² This subject eventually told me that I could record that she was in her “fifties,” but a close relative confirmed for me that she was 62 years old, which is why I have placed her in this section. Although I have no reason to doubt other respondents’ statements, this does illustrate the risk researchers face when using self-reported information.

Learning

Abigail and Christine have been knitting for lengthy periods of time. Abigail took a class at her church in the 1960s, shortly after getting married and followed this up with a community class a year or so later, but otherwise considers herself self-taught. She thought it would be nice to be able to make things for her children. Christine learned while Carmen was still a baby, and one of her first projects was a sweater for her. Her sister-in-law taught her.

Chloe and Elizabeth, on the other hand, have been knitting for very short periods of time: Chloe for two or three years, and Elizabeth for about a month. Chloe was looking for something to do after she retired, and her former neighbor started teaching her. She's taken classes at a local yarn shop since then. Elizabeth notes that her mother tried to teach her when she was a girl, but at the time the effort was a failure and she thought knitting seemed hopelessly complicated. She became inspired to learn to knit recently because as a writer, she has spent her entire life working with words and thought it would be interesting to try something more visual and tactile; in addition to this, she was interested in joining other members of her church who were knitting prayer shawls. It seems that a woman who was organizing this effort helped her get set up with the pattern and her first stitches.

Internet

Abigail herself does not use the internet, but reports that when she has a question or is looking for something, her daughter Julie will often go online and find information

for her. She says that the internet has helped her daughter get involved in various charity knitting projects that she might not have heard about otherwise, and observes that today, those who use computers have a much easier time finding information. Chloe expects that if she continues to knit, she will use the internet more for shopping and finding patterns or information, but says that she hasn't yet because she is still a beginner, and is practicing the things she's learned so far. Elizabeth hasn't yet dived into the online knitting world just yet, because she is still working on her first project and finds that more than enough to occupy herself. She did go online and look for knitting websites, however, and was impressed by the volume of knitting-related sites out there. She thinks this adds a lot to the feeling of community that knitters share, and the ease with which they can get patterns and project ideas, but doesn't think it would heavily influence how people learn to knit. She happens to keep a blog, but not about knitting.

Christine has been knitting longer than Chloe and Elizabeth, but unlike Abigail, uses a computer regularly at work. She says that she gets patterns online all the time. She doesn't use the internet for yarn shopping very often, because she doesn't usually shop for very expensive yarn (other knitters often go online to find bargain prices on otherwise expensive fibers). She also doesn't keep a blog or read forums and blogs, because she doesn't have the time, but thinks she may after she retires. She feels that these online communities have supported and encouraged the recent growth of knitters.

All four of these knitters are aware of the sizeable online knitting community, and the possible uses of the internet in knitting. Aside from Christine, they have not used it heavily, however, in part because two of them are still very new to the craft in general.

Interestingly, these new knitters are close in age to Sarah (see section 3.24) and both Sarah and Chloe feel that many of their peers are taking up knitting anew.

Other materials

Elizabeth has so far only worked on one pattern, given to her by a woman involved in the prayer shawl effort. Chloe has also only worked on a limited number of patterns, given to her by the friends that helped her learn. Abigail says that she gets her patterns from magazines, but also sometimes from books, when she is looking for something specific. Christine also gets some of her patterns from magazines, leaflets, books, and other people she knows that knit (such as her aunt, 86, who knits every night while watching television).

Their projects

Elizabeth has been involved in the creation of a “prayer shawl.” She described the idea behind prayer shawls to me:

“It’s really very popular – I looked it up online. People, mostly women knit shawls, and when you knit them you say prayers, you might light a candle, I like to listen to sacred music – you think about the person, good things... The one that was given to me when I was ill had a little charm. And then you give it to someone that’s ill – it’s not always for a particular person. It’s not a group that meets so far – she’s [the organizer] kind of enlisting people. She’ll even sit in church and knit. The priest blesses them. I think there are some places where people meet in a group.”

Abigail reports that a similar effort is going on at her church, but she hasn’t tried it. She’s been involved in knitting “chemo caps” (hats that are knitted to give to people undergoing chemotherapy) and items for premature babies at the local hospital. She has also knitted a range of clothing items for her family and to give as gifts over the years.

Over the long run, she says, it was easier to buy than to knit, but the knitted items were more personal and special.

Christine is interested in participating in similar charitable knitting projects when she retires and has more time; in the meantime, she knits a lot of gifts, as does Chloe.

Abigail and Christine have never sold any of their knitting, and nor has Elizabeth. Chloe hasn't either, although she says that she knew one woman who (with her sister-in-law) knitted so many bags that they ended up selling them. She thinks it would be difficult to sell knitted objects, because it would be hard to get a fair price for them, and just because so many people are knitting today.

Spending time with other knitters

Although Chloe has participated in classes at her local yarn store, she hasn't really participated in any knitting circles, and neither have the other three women. Abigail mostly knits at home, and so does Christine, although she has visited Carmen's knitting circle from time to time. Elizabeth has not participated in a knitting circle yet either, but says that she has signed up for a class at her local library; once a month, they have a free knitting class there.

Male knitters

Chloe knows of a man that owns a yarn store, and suspects that he knits, but otherwise doesn't know any male knitters. Her grandson showed some interest in knitting, but that made his grandfather a little unhappy, because of its femininity. Abigail didn't say that she knew any male knitters personally, but was quite certain that they were

out there and says that she thinks some men knit for its therapeutic benefits. She thinks they are able to be more open about knitting than they were in her youth (“it wouldn’t be heard of in my day”). Christine doesn’t know any men that knit, but has heard of a husband of a friend of a sister...She reminded me that Rosie Greer, the football star, was a knitter. She didn’t speculate as to whether there were more men knitting today than before, but thinks it’s great that some are. Elizabeth also didn’t know any knitters personally, but explained that her brother-in-law is the captain of a tennis team in Mexico, and that the tennis players used to knit between sets to relieve their nerves. She is also reading a book (by a Victorian author) that features a sock-knitting old sea captain. She believes men are probably less likely to knit because it is so identified with women.

Feminism

Abigail, Christine, and Chloe were not really sure whether feminism had influenced knitting. Chloe thinks that knitting used to be more heavily associated with grandmothers, who would theoretically be knitting cute sweaters and booties for their grandchildren, but might be more likely to knit modern and fashionable items today. When she was growing up, the elderly grandmother knitting stereotype was very prevalent, but she feels that it is now fading and that, in fact, the stereotypical grandmother is also fading: “They don’t have to sit and knit; they can knit and then go run.” Elizabeth believes that feminism has had different sorts of influences over the years, possibly starting out as a dampening effect:

“...maybe for a short time, early on in the feminist revolution, when women were feeling that they had to be more like men. But then I think that as feminism developed, women started to realize that that’s not how it has to be – we have to be respected on our own terms, instead of needing to be men. It’s always surprising to me how feminism has a bad reputation now.”

In various ways, these knitters addressed the evolving relationship between knitting and gender identity, but the specific relationship between feminism and knitting was less clear for them.

Generational differences

Abigail believes that knitting was quite common for people in her own generation, but that for some reason it became unpopular with the generation following. She suggests this might be because of the ready availability of merchandise. Chloe, as noted above, has seen a fading of the grandmother-knitting stereotype, and at the same time, the disappearance of assumptions about what a grandmother is supposed to do or look like in general. Christine is impressed by the willingness of younger knitters to tackle complicated projects and innovate; she feels that the knitting world has become more creative in recent generations. The knitters also talk about the increased variety of yarns and patterns available.

3.3: Knitting Circles

I visited five different knitting circles while doing the research for this project, although I have participated in others previously and draw from my experiences in those, as well. The five differed in their locations, as mentioned before: one was in a yarn shop, one in a public library, one at a private home, another at a university, and the final one at a senior center. In doing so, they differed somewhat in their participants. For example,

the circle at the university was composed primarily of university staff, while the senior center group was obviously only open to seniors that use the center. The circle in the private home was for a group of friends, and was not advertised or open to the public, while the knitting circle in the yarn store was, more than any other group, open to the public and containing a wide age range. The public library circle might have had a similar cross-section of the public, but for the fact that it met at lunch time on a weekday, which I believe might have limited its turn out.

Though appearing to differ in these ways, I found a number of similarities between knitting circles. They each consisted of a core group of regular attendees, who seemed to have developed friendships through knitting together. However, they were all welcoming to newcomers, and were quick to engage in conversation or ask about the new person's projects.

Sharing the common interest of knitting (or crochet, as I found at the senior center), participants did typically spend a portion of their time talking about their projects with one another, asking after other people's projects (both projects being worked on that day and projects they remembered from past weeks), contemplating new ones, and sharing news about new books out, knitting events (such as the Maryland Sheep and Wool Festival), happenings in the internet community, and new yarns. When talking about knitting, they often used highly specialized terminology and were very specific: not saying "I used a soft green yarn," but rather saying "I decided to use a DK weight alpaca blend tweed from (Company X), and it's working out great." When knitters started talking about particular brands, varieties, fiber blends, and weights, other knitters usually seemed to understand them perfectly, quick to ask for more information if somebody

brought up an unfamiliar material. This specificity is a badge of the knitters' seriousness. Knitting circles certainly contain a range of interest levels, and even serious knitters sometimes find it more appropriate to use generalities when talking about their tools and materials, but I feel that the knitters at these knitting circles were more likely than average to be "Knitters" and to want to use specifics. This tendency was less noted in the crochet group at the senior center; these women were primarily engaged in crocheting baby blankets, for which one would normally use a basic, washable acrylic yarn. Like the knitters, however, they were keen to talk specifics in terms of stitches and patterns.

Interspersed with this "shop talk" was always talk about personal lives and local events. I found knitters to be unlikely to talk about controversial global politics, and I think this was because knitters were more interested in relaxing and maintaining a sense of camaraderie between themselves. They also, contrary to a few opinions I have encountered, did not sit around talking about their love lives or gossiping about sensitive personal issues. They mentioned family members and romantic partners, and would tell anecdotes about them, but the knitting circle did not feel like an appropriate place for more intimate details. Attendees were far more likely to talk about work (sometimes sharing information that was probably meant to stay confidential) and local goings-on. For example, at one circle, knitters discussed the candidates for the Philadelphia mayoral election, and freely shared opinions about them, and in another circle, knitters were dismayed to have heard about motorists stranded on I-78 during a snow storm (Feb. 14-15), some expressing the opinion that the state government and department of transportation had shown appalling incompetence and lack of planning.

More often than these types of conversation, I found knitters sharing advice and experience with each other. Knitters talked about problems and opportunities at their jobs, and others weighed in on them. In one circle I received a great deal of advice about funding graduate school, and at the senior center knitters shared knowledge of house maintenance with recently widowed participants. Financial advice (usually in generalities, not in specific dollar amounts) was shared at a few circles as knitters tried to figure out tax questions. One young knitter (age 22) was given advice on securing a new job *and* on handling an incident in which she felt she had been mistreated by an overly-aggressive police officer. Knitters also talked about strategies for handling ex-husbands, children, and aging parents.

At only one knitting circle did I see a male knitter; he seemed familiar with the group as though he attended fairly regularly, but on the occasions that I came back, he wasn't there. This advice was therefore from women to women, and it seemed to me that this was an arena in which women were supporting each other as they navigated certain territories that were once male. It is now commonplace for women to have careers outside the home, and at the same time take responsibility for home repair, children, parents, and community. This may not be entirely new, either – just more obvious. Either way, it struck me that although knitting is apparently a “traditional female activity” and was at one time considered anti-feminist, knitting circles provide a lot of support to women as they navigate their worlds, handle their responsibilities, and achieve their goals. When I saw women bring questions to knitting circles, whether about their careers or their taxes or their house's plumbing, other knitters took their questions seriously and treated them with a level of respect that is sometimes hard for women to find, particularly

for people who are ostensibly female *and* “too old” or “too young” to know what is going on around them.

3.4: Internet communities

Thoroughly documenting all of the ways in which knitters use the internet to practice their craft and communicate with each other is well beyond the scope of this paper and would probably provide enough material for an entire other thesis or book. However, given that the introduction of computers and the internet to our society has been one of the most significant social developments of the past twenty years or so, a brief look at the online knitting world is in order.

As is clear from survey responses and interviews, knitters of all ages, from teenagers to those in their sixties or older, have used the internet to find patterns and project ideas, competitive prices or unusual yarns, and communication. That communication takes place in a number of different online settings, such as the forum, the listserv, the social networking group, and the blog.

The “KnitList” was one of the first listservs created for knitters. As mentioned in Chapter 1, it was founded in 1994 by Jill McAllister, at the University of Minnesota. Its membership has expanded so that it reaches approximately 10,200 members (The Original KnitList website). Knitters join by sending an email to the list, and then they receive messages from other list members who post messages about all aspects of knitting. There are also specialized subgroups within KnitList, such as a sock knitters list

and a machine knitting list, and those who respect the rules of posting (for example, by only posting messages about knitting, no advertising, etc.) are welcome to begin posting their own tips and ideas. In addition to KnitList, untold other listservs have grown up in recent years, with different topics and target audiences.

Like “listservs,” “forums” are designed to allow large numbers of people to communicate about defined subjects. The forum is located at a website, and members go to that website, log in, and then can read or write content, which is organized into “threads.” Typically a poster can create his or her own thread or respond to a thread started by somebody else; the thread is started with a message that is given a topic heading or title, and responses to that particular message are listed underneath it in a long chain. Some forums are more public than others and make it possible to read content without logging in, but it is standard to have to log in before posting any new material. “Moderators” continuously check the content of posts to make sure that they are appropriate for the forum. Some forums stand alone, such as “Knitting Forums” (Various) while others are attached to educational websites, such as KnittingHelp.com (Finlay), which was very popular among the knitters I interviewed because of its videos. The internet-based pattern magazine *Knitty* has an associated forum (The Knitty Coffeeshop), and so does online magazine *Knitter’s Review*. On these forums, knitters use threads to call attention to favorite projects, ask questions or complain about problems, find nearby knitting groups or stores, chat about new fibers, meet knitters in other subgroups for support (ex: male knitters, left-handed knitters, knitters in isolated communities), exchange yarn swaps (in which two knitters agree to mail each other balls of yarn that they’ve agreed to trade), and pass around knitting, spinning, crochet, or other

news. Many forums (such as those on Knitty, Knitter's Review, and KnittingHelp) also contain several "personal" or "other" threads, in which knitters exchange posts about non-knitting subjects. Some of the topics I noticed while looking at knitting forums were book discussions, career advice, recipe exchanges, weight loss or health related discussions, and any number of other things.

A few forums in particular deserve special mention: MenKnit (del Vecchio) and Men Who Knit (Various), both of which provide virtual spaces in which male knitters can communicate openly about their knitting to other men. Although MenKnit's forum is currently unavailable, both websites provide information for men about knitting history, the role of men in knitting, patterns, and links to the blogs of male knitters. Men Who Knit has a working blog at this time, and it provides a lot of insight for the researcher into the important topics surrounding men and knitting. For example, although I was not surprised to learn that non-knitters are often skeptical, unsupportive, or downright hostile to male knitters because of preconceived notions of gender appropriateness, I was surprised that there was an entire thread on Men Who Knit about female knitters' hostility to men in female-dominated forums, with knitters pondering whether it was that women themselves were uncomfortable and unwelcoming, or whether the forums are simply catty and hostile by nature (equal opportunity offenders), and with some posters having had only positive experiences (MenWhoKnit: "Female Hostility?" node). The "Women" thread (MenWhoKnit: "Women" node) fosters debate about whether women should be discouraged from participating in the Men Who Knit forums, to allow men a comfortable environment in which their voices can be heard, or whether to welcome those that choose to participate for any insights and ideas they may contribute.

For the knitting internet surfer, forums frequently lead to blogs. Many sites that host forums have other sections in which popular blogs are listed, and many forums themselves have threads in which members advertise their blogs. The blog, like a forum, is a collection of information on a website; however, most of that information is created by one author (or a small group of authors), and takes the form of a journal with a chain of entries by that author. Readers of the blog often have the option to leave comments at the bottom of a blog entry; they can do so by creating a username and password with the company that is hosting the blog or can sometimes do so as an anonymous guest. Some blogs are read by a relatively small and intimate group of virtual friends; others become hugely popular and attract hundreds or thousands of readers. A small sampling of the popular knitting blogs out there includes “See Eunny Knit!” (Jang), “Yarn Harlot” (Pearl-McPhee), and “Norskybear” (Rains).

Finally, social networking sites differ from forums in that an individual first joins a website, usually having nothing to do with knitting, creates a profile with biographical information, photos, and other personalized content, and then links their profile to the profile of desired friends and groups, also on the website. Such sites include Live Journal, Facebook, and My Space, to name a few that are extremely popular with teens, college students, and young adults. In allowing the creation of virtual “groups,” these sites have fostered the development of various knitting groups. Some groups are little more than affiliations, while others may involve a good deal more communication, and some may also inspire knitting get-togethers in local communities.

Chapter 4: Discussion

Among all of the data I collected about the experiences of knitting for different age and gender groups, a few key themes emerged. There were five areas that I identified in which the knitting community had seen either consistency or change. These were Community, Productivity, Creativity, Health/Relaxation, and Gender. “Technology” could certainly have been another area to address, as it is clear that the introduction of the internet has been revolutionary not only to knitters but to the entire world. However, in reviewing the information I gathered about the internet and its influence, it appeared that its impact had been to enable changes or continuities in the areas above (and possibly other areas that were not studied in this project). The internet has not greatly changed the techniques knitters use: selecting straight, circular, or double-pointed needles to wind fiber into an interlocking fabric of slip knots, creating different textures or shapes with different organizations of slip knots. Instead, it has primarily enabled the storage and retrieval of patterns, easier communication and sharing of information between knitters, and increased accessibility to a wider variety of materials for purchase. Therefore, neither “Technology” nor “Internet” appear as separate headings in the following pages; instead, information about their influence has been woven into the discussion of other areas, where relevant.

4.1: Community

The aspect of community involvement was important to knitters I spoke to or surveyed. Knitters cite the activity's community building qualities as significant benefits of the craft. My research found that knitting could give participants a sense of community in a number of ways, and that with only a few exceptions, each of these ways was experienced by each age group and both gender groups studied.

Many of the knitters I surveyed participated in a local knitting circle, which allowed them to knit, but also to meet other members of the community and engage in face-to-face interaction with them regularly. These circles added another group of friends and acquaintances to knitters' lives, and were particularly appealing because of the common interests shared. In particular, many of the circles I visited were heavily (or exclusively) attended by women, and I observed these women sharing news about the community and advice about careers, finance, families, and other areas of life.

When knitters were not able to attend knitting circles for logistical reasons, or wanted to supplement these circles with additional contacts, they often turned to the internet and virtual communities. Such communities include forums, social networking groups, and blogs, as described in section 3.4. Usage of the internet for these purposes was not exclusive to young people (i.e., those in their twenties and thirties); middle and older age groups were also avid participants in these virtual communities, and although the knitters I interviewed in the over-60 group were not yet heavily using the internet, three seemed likely to do so after retiring or becoming more involved in their knitting.

Although knitting for charitable causes is not done as often as knitting for oneself or for friends and family, my survey and interview data did find that this was another way

in which knitters used their craft to engage in their communities, particularly in the older age groups. *Knitting For Peace* (Christiansen) documents the many ways in which knitters have been inspired to give their time and materials to “make the world a better place one stitch at a time (title page).” Projects vary widely, including efforts to provide warm garments and blankets to those in need, comfort items to those experiencing trauma, and those items that serve both practical and emotionally supportive functions for soldiers fighting far from home. Betty Christiansen summarizes all of these projects well when she says that “They knit for countless reasons, but they all share one thing in common: a desire to knit the world into a better place, through handmade gifts of love and peace (8).” I asked many knitters why they were involved in one effort or another, and they told me that they felt the urge to knit when others were in trouble, and that hand-knitted gifts better communicated their feelings of love, hope, and concern. The “Prayer Shawl Project,” which Christiansen describes (54-7) and several knitters told me about, explicitly embodies the notion that positive energy and emotions can be embodied in hand-crafted items.

Finally, some knitters in each age group told me that knitting caused them to feel connection with their ancestors and relatives. This could be in a tangible way: learning to knit with an older relative, or knitting side by side in one another’s company. This was often intangible, though. Knitters spoke to me not just of connections with the generations immediately before theirs, but also the countless generations before that had been producing their own clothing in America and in the “Old World,” through various world events, and with the aid of (or in spite of) important technological innovations.

“Connection with previous generations” can thus mean many things, but appears frequently in knitters’ discourse.

4.2 Gender

It is clear that one of the ways in which the knitting world has changed is that it now includes a larger number of male knitters than previously. Many interviewees felt that there definitely had been, or might have been, an increase. Younger knitters estimated slightly higher numbers in my survey. Middle and older knitters told me that society was more accepting of male knitters than it had been in the past, and that gender roles had relaxed somewhat. Some said that knitting was less about gender and more about creativity today. All knitters agreed that society at large was still skeptical of men who knit, and although they thought numbers had risen somewhat, very few of the knitters I spoke to said that they actually knew one personally.

Men have been assisted somewhat by the internet, which has allowed them to make contact with other men who knit (or crochet or spin), no matter how far away geographically. This has helped many feel more comfortable exploring a nontraditional activity. As one man wrote in response to my survey:

“I am a male knitter and I typically find there still is a lot of ‘unspoken’ bias towards male knitters in the ‘real world’ by other knitters. I think that’s why I enjoy the on-line knitting community, there are more male knitters in one ‘place’ instead of being the token male at a knitting group, it seems more comfortable to explore new techniques.”

Male bloggers have also raised awareness of the fact that there are talented and enthusiastic men in the world of knitters, both for male and female readers. Although

pattern books and other knitting-related merchandise are still heavily marketed to women over men, books such as *Knitting With Balls* (del Vecchio) have sought to address growing demand for men-friendly materials.

The presence and influence of men in the knitting world has therefore seen changes over the past few decades, and it is an area that may see further changes for generations to come. Although still considered “feminine” and dominated by women, younger knitters are more aware of men in their midst than older knitters were at the same ages, in the 1960s and 1970s.

While some men are becoming comfortable with a traditionally female occupation, many women have had to address its femininity as well, fitting it into their lives according to their current understandings of feminism. The influence of feminism on the craft has changed dramatically in the past decades. Although it appears that many knitters have knit on, not considering feminism in any way related to their craft, others have been sensitive to the teachings of leading feminists, whether explicit or implicit. The “Second Wave” feminists of the 1960s and 1970s encouraged women to step outside their defined gender roles and assert their rights to participate in previously male worlds, such as the business, science, and sports worlds. This set up a conflict between handcrafts (and housework, and child-rearing, etc.) and women’s rights, and this may partially explain the drop in knitting’s popularity at the time.

Today, “third wave” feminists such as Debbie Stoller seek to create a world in which women have the right to easily move between “feminine” and “masculine” activities, and women are feeling better able to fit knitting into lives filled with higher education, athletics, high-powered careers, and various forms (traditional or not) of

parenting. Women that are exploring this mixture of activities are not just the young; knitters just shy of sixty or a few years older told me that they believed many of their cohorts were just learning how to knit, and at the same time redefining what it means to be a grandmother or a certain chronological age. Shifts in gender stereotypes may see parallel shifts in age stereotypes in the knitting world; though still quite present, the image of the frail and elderly female knitter may be passing.

4.3 Productivity

To a non-knitter, knitting may not seem terribly productive, largely because it seems like willful inefficiency. How could knitting a scarf be productive if it takes one hundred more hours than driving to the store and buying one? Socks and sweaters may be even more puzzling. However, I repeatedly heard from knitters that they feel as though they are being productive when knitting. I encountered this sentiment in every age group I interviewed and in a vast number of the survey responses I received. Question #5 of my survey found that under-30s and over-60s were particularly likely to cite “it was practical” as motivation for learning, but the productivity factor goes beyond that.

To understand why an otherwise inefficient and often expensive craft can be considered productive, it is necessary to realize that “productivity” is relative. Our society values efficiency and cost-effectiveness, and naturally assumes that the more efficient or cost effective an activity, the more “productive” it is. On the other hand, a far more basic interpretation of “productivity” is that productive action produces *something*, no matter

what it is or what other methods might have produced the same effect. Different situations may call for efficiency or output, and a period of activity may be productive in comparison to alternative activities. Knitting is rarely productive purely for efficiency or purely because it produces an object.

Instead, knitters say that they feel productive because they create items that *they like* (a favorable outcome being more valuable than a neutral one, even if gotten by inefficient means). They like the feeling of creating something with their own hands and energy, seeing a tangible transformation of time, effort, and materials into a finished product. The intimate involvement in a product's creation can allow a person to feel more productive than skipping production and buying finished products at the store. They also feel *more productive* than they would have otherwise if they introduce knitting into other daily activities, such as watching television, waiting, commuting, and other sorts that normally involve sitting still. Knitting while otherwise sitting still feels less like wasted time because of the movement and creation involved; this is the relative nature of productivity. In particular, after a knitter has become accustomed to knitting while watching television, for example, reverting to watching without knitting may result in feeling restless or dissatisfied, because those hours no longer result in the creation of anything pleasing.

Many knitters, of different ages, told me that they find knitting allows them to sit still (aside from moving their hands) and focus when they previously struggled to do so. Improved ability to focus on speakers was a very common reason given for knitting during classes, meetings, seminars, and lectures. Additionally, some teachers are such firm believers in the improved focus that they teach their elementary and high school

students to knit, and encourage them to knit when their hands are not required for class participation. For example, after many years of incorporating knitting into her classroom, Cat Bordhi (Bordhi) has posted a curriculum on the internet for interested teachers, suggesting strategies for teaching the craft and benefits of doing so. She says that after other teachers in her school began to encourage knitting, the school saw many improvements in its classrooms:

“In every setting, initially skeptical administrators and staff were won over by the results: attention-deficit (ADHD) students who seemed transformed, evaporating management problems, increased engagement in learning, in some cases more regular attendance, and a beneficial atmosphere of alert, peaceful contentment and community in the classroom (Lesson Plan 2).”¹³

It is as though nervous energy were being channeled out of the body and into the knitting, leaving the mind free to concentrate without distraction. I myself have found that knitting while reading textbooks (propped open) allows me to sit still and focus on my reading for much longer periods of time. In this context, knitting can be considered productive on two levels: the creation of a knitted piece, and increased performance on concentration tasks.

In some ways, the urge to knit or fidget while seated suggests that knitters, and countless others, are uncomfortable with stillness. This is ironic, given that many Americans spend the majority of their days seated: in the car, at work, at school, and even in the evening at home. One wonders if the urge to fidget comes from too little physical labor, or whether the Puritan work ethic on which this nation was founded has survived in the collective unconscious.¹⁴ It is a great paradox that knitting allows knitters to feel that

¹³ Here, Cat Bordhi uses the abbreviation “ADHD” to refer to “attention-deficit” disorder, but “attention deficit disorder” (ADD) and “attention deficit hyperactivity disorder” (ADHD) are actually two different disorders that the public often mixes up. Whether Bordhi intends to refer to students with ADD or ADHD or both is not clear.

¹⁴ Before the table of contents of her book *No Idle Hands*, Macdonald quotes the following Colonial-era poem by Isaac Watts (1732):

they are accomplishing something and being productive, and at the same time fosters relaxation and stress reduction.

4.4 Health Benefits: Relaxation and Mental Health

The expression “knitting is the new yoga” gets bandied about in many newspaper articles about new knitting clubs,¹⁵ and Publishers Weekly reports that “Knitting was so widely declared ‘the new yoga’ that it’s an impossible quote to source...(Danford).” Whether very many knitters themselves seriously use this term is another matter, as Stephanie Pearl-McPhee suggests:

“It is possible, even frequently probable, that knitting is deep. Many knitters speak of the meditative qualities of knitting, though the majority of us will collapse on the floor in a fit of giggles if you call knitting ‘the new yoga.’ (I’ve both knit and done yoga, and other than the occasional painfulness of both occupations, they don’t have a lot in common.) (*Stephanie Pearl-McPhee Casts Off 12*)”

Talk of yoga and whether or not knitting is strictly *meditative* is secondary to the fact that for many knitters, knitting is an activity that aids in relaxation. Many knitters interviewed and surveyed spent time knitting in the evenings, after coming home from work or school as a way to unwind. Stay-at-home moms knit in random moments throughout the day or after the children are in bed as a way of taking time out for themselves. Many knitters take their knitting on visits to loved ones in the hospital, as a comforting activity to engage in during stressful vigils. Others find that knitting calms them when they feel

“In works of labor or of skill
I would be busy too;
For Satan finds some mischief still
For idle hands to do.”

¹⁵ For examples, see “Knitting Goes Feminist” (Hickman), and “Knitting Has Made a Grand Return” (Madden).

anxious, or cheers them when life goes badly. Touching on a few of these scenarios, one survey respondent writes:

“Very simply put, knitting saved my life. During a particularly bad bout of depression, I could not sleep and I found that knitting sample squares helped soothe my mind and gave me something to focus on. While her husband was undergoing extensive medical treatment, my aunt would knit for hours on end. I guess that’s where I must have gotten the idea that knitting could be soothing.”

Another writes about how knitting helps her get through long hours at a demanding job:

“It’s the only thing that keeps me sane and centered. I view it as meditation more than anything. I work 60-70 hours a week as a lawyer, and my paralegal can tell when I haven’t knitted much, because I don’t have as much patience or I’m in a bad mood.”

Knitters in all age groups find that knitting helps them manage stress and stay calm during difficult times. They use it as a way to take personal time and unwind after work, restoring balance in their lives.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, various medical professionals in different time periods have believed knitting may promote physical health. Relaxation and stress management in general are believed to help prevent or reduce high blood pressure, and recently, the presence of high levels of the stress hormone cortisol has been linked to unhealthy abdominal fat (Norrie) and other damage to the body. Anecdotal evidence from my interviews suggests that some knitters avoid snacking by occupying their hands with yarn instead of food; controlled medical studies would obviously be needed to determine whether this is a reliable weight control technique, but some knitters have found it helpful. One young man wrote in response to my survey that: “I learned in one of my occupational therapy classes. Occupational therapists use knitting as an activity for rehab.” That usage of knitting is reminiscent of 1980s’ arthritis specialist Dr. Morris Bowie, “who lauds knitting’s twin benefits of relaxing finger joint tissues while helping sufferers to forget pain in the excitement of the creative process (Macdonald 342-3).” Substantiating claims of the physical benefits of knitting is well beyond the scope of this

thesis or the capabilities of its author, but anecdotes about knitting's advantages appear semi-regularly and might be an intriguing area of future research.

4.5 Creativity

Finally, any discussion of knitting or people's reasons for knitting cannot fail to acknowledge the importance of creativity. The simple act of creating something with one's own hands is enormously satisfying for many people. Above and beyond this, the opportunity to experiment with colors, fibers, techniques, and shapes was enormously appealing to almost all of the knitters I spoke to, surveyed, or observed.¹⁶ "It looked like fun" was the most common answer selected for survey question #5 (see section 3.1), and extra write-in comments that knitters submitted described some of the ways in which knitting was fun, many of them having to do with the creative process. "It was an artistic medium" was also selected by significant portions of knitters in each age category and gender group, and more specifically alludes to the opportunities for self-expression available in knitting.

The recent expansion of knitting fibers and patterns has been a boon for knitters, who have found that their opportunities for experimentation have rapidly multiplied. Writes one knitter: "I think the most exciting thing going on in commercial yarns is the emergence of new fibers: Bamboo, soy silk, tinsel, kiviut, etc. Yarn design has come a

¹⁶ In fact, I cannot recall encountering a single knitter who did not find this satisfying; however, a few did not explicitly state that this was a motivating factor for them and I cannot make assumptions. It is hard to imagine a knitter *not* being voluntarily engaged in creative process, however, except possibly in situations that call for a specific color, pattern and technique, like knitting certain knitting projects that were encouraged during World War II knitting drives.

very long way, color use has come a long way: It's exciting to see the next new thing.” Many knitters relish the challenge of finding the right fiber for a project, or the colors to fit one’s mood and personality, or the right technique to alter a pattern for one’s taste. Altering patterns is quite common, and many knitters choose to write their own patterns from scratch. Knitting allows a person to become his or her own fashion designer and, with an adequate skill set, create the desired wardrobe in the right size and colors.

Further creativity and fun are to be had in the creation of toys and whimsical sculptures; the internet is full of patterns for strange objects, and it is becoming more common for printed pattern books to contain such things. Respondents to my survey described some of their more unusual projects in the “other” category of question #7.¹⁷ A selection of these items follows:

Cat beds, candle holders, “30 felted fish,” knitted cowboy boots, jewelry, cupcakes, amulets, felted bowls, inserts for a tri-fold room divider (similar to a traditional rice paper screen), a bathrobe, plastic bag raincoats (presumably knit out of strips of plastic bag), “action figure self portrait dolls,” corsets and lingerie, Klein bottles, moebius strips, knots, five- and six-pointed stars.

Under “whimsies” on Knitty (“Pattern Archive” section) a knitter can find patterns for wigs, a felted mancala board, a stuffed uterus model, a lampshade, various toys (including stuffed nautiloids), a chain, and knitted Calla lilies, among other items. Some of the older knitters I spoke to felt that younger knitters had been at the forefront of this movement of knitting from clothing into other areas.

The question of whether knitting is an “art” or a “craft” is debated, and it is becoming increasingly impossible to say one or the other without referring to a particular knitter and his or her intent. Some argue that “art” is properly meant to be items that are not functional, but are rather representational or symbolic, carrying some sort of

¹⁷ As well as pointing out that I should have made possible answers include “bags,” “shawls,” “washcloths,” cozies of various sorts, and a few other categories that were extremely popular.

underlying message. Others believe it is possible for something to be “art” *and* useful (clothing in particular comes to mind), and still others feel that it is the desire to explore color and fiber and shape that makes something art. On the other side of the debate, many argue that knitting is a “craft” and not an art, but that doesn’t have to take away the element of creativity or talent. Judging which side is right or wrong is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is clear that in recent years there has been an increase in the number of projects that are clearly meant to be “art” in its most message-oriented, least useful form.

Covering an exhibition of knitted pieces in London in 2005, Charlotte Higgins writes that “knitting – long belittled as the preserve of elderly ladies declining towards senility – has become a politically engaged, radical artform [sic] (Higgins).” One of the artists interviewed in the article explains that his work is rebellious because “By knitting you are resisting capitalism and consumerism. You are not responding to the fashion industry; you are making your own decisions.” In a description of art pieces currently in the *Radical Lace and Subversive Knitting* exhibition at the Museum of Arts and Design (NYC), the range of social and private questions explored is described:

“Many use materials and techniques to examine pressing contemporary issues of globalization and the environment, in addition to exploring personal questions of identity and sexuality. Cat Mazza’s *Knitoscope* is computer software that translates video images into “knitted” images to educate about sweatshop labor. Freddie Robins’s *Craft Kills* installation is a self-portrait that plays with our notions of craft as a passive activity (Anonymous).”

The scope for personal expression is therefore as broad or narrow as a knitter chooses to make it.

Although knitters of all ages and genders studied have enjoyed the creativity inherent in combining fibers and textures in projects of one’s choice or design, some older knitters believed that younger knitters had widened the types of projects commonly

knitted. In addition, professional artists have recently begun to use knitting as a medium through which they have explored various social and personal issues. Thus, although “creativity” is important to most knitters, expansion of the uses of knitting has been seen quite recently, and the craft may have become a more versatile form of self-expression.

Conclusion

According to my research, the two most significant changes to the world of knitting between the 1960s and today have been the creation of the internet and the various forms of feminism that have come and gone. Feminists, once discouraging women from engaging in traditional female activities in order to win the right for women to engage in male-dominated activities, now encourage women to follow their own passions, masculine or feminine. Now that some of the goals of the “second wave” feminists have been accomplished (in part, anyway), “third wave” feminists feel more comfortable incorporating formerly domestic activities, such as knitting, into career and family driven lives. Women now choose whether to knit or not. At the same time, the feminist revolution has caused gender roles to become more flexible for men, and larger numbers of men are learning to knit than in previous generations. Society is still skeptical, or hostile, to them, but the internet has made it possible for men to connect with each other in ways that were not possible thirty years ago.

The internet in general has increased communication among knitters across the United States, and has allowed them to become more connected to knitting communities in other countries around the world. The sharing of patterns, news, techniques, and products has become infinitely easier, and the international knitting world has become stronger for it.

Although internet communications were not available to older knitters when they were in their twenties or thirties, these knitters are not shying away from blogs, forums, and other websites. Many knitters in their late fifties and early sixties are learning to knit for the first time, or are relearning after decades of avoidance. These knitters, like knitters

in their twenties, thirties, and forties, are using the internet to supplement their learning, build friendships with other knitters, and look for project ideas.

As a whole, knitters of different ages have more in common with each other than not. They are often participating in the same intergenerational communities, teaching and learning from each other. They are interested in many of the same projects and fibers, and enjoy the same creativity and relaxation benefits. Knitters in their sixties are not more likely to have created items out of necessity than knitters in their twenties; both ends of the spectrum have grown up in industrialized worlds where it is usually easier and less expensive to buy an item than to knit one. Although younger knitters were somewhat more likely to have learned first from the internet or a book, it was most common for knitters in all age groups to have learned from a family member or close friend. Knitters over the age of 40 had a higher median age of learning than those younger, so it would appear that they tended to learn at younger ages, but the high deviations and similar averages suggest that brand new knitters enter the fold at all stages of life. There is not a clearly defined experienced senior group and novice junior group; in fact, it was during the 1980s that the need was felt to gather traditional patterns into printed books, because in this time it became less likely that the older generation would orally pass on its knowledge.

Younger and middle generations are quite comfortable innovating today, however, and knitting has been applied to a wide range of strange and interesting projects. Knitters continue to use their skills to create fashions to suit their tastes, and at the same time, are adapting knitting to a variety of household items, sculptures and art work. Knitting is gaining more recognition as a valid artistic medium, and artists have

recently gained recognition for their symbolic and expressive pieces in museum exhibits.

A wider variety of yarns and tools keep knitters occupied, and despite speculation about its “fad” qualities, the knitting “craze” of the past five years seems likely to stabilize, rather than diminish.

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Appendix A: Survey questions

This is the paper version that was distributed in the Philadelphia area. The online version had the same questions, with some format differences. Questions were broken into sections and put on different pages. If a knitter answered that he or she did not still knit, they were taken to the last questions, about why they no longer knitted. Alternatively, for the majority who did still knit, those last questions were not presented. For multiple choice questions, the answer choices were randomly ordered. On the paper survey, I used a larger font for readability.

Survey of knitting habits

The following is a survey designed to explore the habits and experiences of today's knitters. Information from these surveys will be compiled into an Anthropology thesis that will look at general trends in knitting. Personal information will not be used in the paper, and information that could identify you (such as your name, address, or phone number) will not be collected. By filling out this survey, you are helping me complete my undergraduate research project and learn more about a hobby that I love! Thank you for your time!

Personal Information

How old are you?

- A. Under 30 years old
- B. Between 30 and 40
- C. Between 40 and 50
- D. Between 50 and 60
- E. Older than 60 years old

Sex (circle one):

Male Female Other/Prefer not to answer

About my knitting:

I first learned to knit by (please circle the one that best describes you):

- A. Reading a book or magazine.
- B. A family member taught me.
- C. Reading a website
- D. In school (ex: a home-ec class or art class, or classroom activity)
- E. I figured it out by myself, without any of the above teaching aids.
- F. Other (please specify) _____

I was ____ years old when I first learned to knit.

I first learned how to knit because (circle as many answers as apply):

- A. It was practical
- B. It looked like fun
- C. Everyone else knew how to do it
- D. It was "unique" (not many other people did it)
- E. It was an interesting art form
- F. Someone suggested or required that I learn
- G. I saw someone I knew well doing it, and was curious
- H. Other (please specify) _____

Do you knit at present?

Yes No

If not, please skip to the last question.

The items I knit most frequently are (circle up to three):

- A. Hats
- B. Scarves
- C. Sweaters, pullovers, cardigans
- D. Baby clothing
- E. Toys
- F. Blankets
- G. Socks, Gloves, or Mittens
- H. Other (tea cozies, purses, things that defy classification)
Please describe: _____

The types of yarn I use most often are (circle up to two):

- A. Acrylic (ex: Red Heart)
- B. Wool or wool blends
- C. Luxury fibers (ex: cashmere, silk, angora)
- D. Novelty yarns (ex: eyelash yarn, ribbon yarn, etc)
- E. Cotton
- F. Vegetable fibers (ex: bamboo, cornsilk, hemp)
- G. Other (please specify) _____

When you knit, are you doing any of the above activities at the same time (circle all that you have done)?

- A. Talking
- B. Watching a movie or TV show
- C. Listening to music
- D. Listening to a book on tape, or having a story read out loud
- E. Other (please specify) _____

I most often knit (select up to two):

- A. Alone

- B. When I'm at home with my family (either knitters or non-knitters)
- C. When I'm with friends who are also knitting
- D. When at a knitting circle, or community knitters' group
- E. In public but alone (ex: waiting rooms, on the train, in the park)
- F. Other (please specify) _____

Approximately how much do you knit for yourself, and how much do you knit for other people? Please try to estimate the percentage (%) of items you knit for the following categories of people:

- _____ % for myself
- _____ % for my family members
- _____ % for my friends and acquaintances
- _____ % for charitable organizations
- _____ % for commission or sale

When you knit an object, would you say it is (less/more/same) cost as buying a similar item in the store? (please circle one). For example, how does the cost of knitting a scarf compare to the cost of buying a scarf made out of the same type of fiber?

Is this cost relationship the same as it was when you first started knitting? (yes/no). If it is different, please describe the difference: _____

Does it seem to you as if the number or type of people knitting has changed or remained constant since you learned to knit? Please explain.-

Have you taught others to knit? Please check off any of the following types of people that you have taught:

- _____ family members (younger than me)
- _____ family members (same age as me)
- _____ family members (older than me)
- _____ friends, coworkers, or classmates
- _____ students of a knitting class
- _____ community members or strangers
- _____ visitors to a knitting circle or craft group
- _____ I have never taught anyone to knit
- _____ Other (please specify) _____

If you have children, have you taught any of them to knit? If you do not have children, would you teach children to knit if you were to have them? (yes/no).

How many of today's knitters would you estimate are:

____% male

____% female

Please add any thoughts you have about knitting:

If you answered above that you no longer knit, please talk about why that is the case.

Appendix B: Assignment of Region Based on IP Address

This section was written by Alex Kaplan, who assisted me in separating United States responses from International responses.

The location data used in this survey was obtained using the IP addresses of the computers on which the surveys were taken. This section will explain how this was done, and address the validity of this data.

An IP (Internet Protocol) address is a unique number assigned to all computers and other devices connected to a network. Two computers attempting to communicate must know each other's IP address in order to send data. In this manner, all data received from a particular IP address at a certain time can be guaranteed to be coming from the same computer.

In this case, we are concerned with the international network known as the "Internet". Internet IP addresses are managed by The Internet Assigned Numbers Authority (IANA) which is an entity operated by Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), a non-profit organization which oversees the internet's domain names and IP addresses. The IANA assigns blocks of IP addresses to regional Internet registries (RIRs), which in turn distribute them to local internet service providers (ISPs) in their respective regions. The ISPs then assign their customers an individual IP address. Each RIR maintains a database of what IP addresses each ISP has assigned to it, and what areas those IP addresses are allocated to.

For this project, a list of the IP blocks and allocated areas was obtained from a website that distributes and maintains this list, software77.com. IP address allocations do

not change much, especially in developed areas of the world. Even so, software77.com updates its database once a day. They do not share their methods of collecting this data; however they do state that the expected error in their data is a fraction of a percent. This error goes down even further for IP addresses originating in the United States of America, as these records are well maintained and do not change frequently.

In order to match all of the IP addresses from this survey with their country of origin, a script was obtained in the Perl programming language which took each IP address and matched it to its location in the database. This script was modified to automatically process the IP addresses from the survey. This data was then added to the raw survey data and used to produce the results in this report.

The accuracy of this method can not be precisely quantified, however given the claimed reliability of the software77.com database, and the fact that IPs originating from the USA are generally more stable than others, the error in the location portion of the survey results is estimated to be 0-4 results out of 1500.

References:

An explanation of IP addresses at Wikipedia:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/IP_address

Software77.com's IP-Country Database:
<http://software77.net/cgi-bin/ip-country/geo-ip.pl>

License and information about the database:
<http://software77.net/cgi-bin/ip-country/geo-ip.pl?action=license>

The Perl script (before modification) that was used to process the data:
<http://webnet77.com/scripts/geo-ip/index.html>

Appendix C: Interview Questions

This is a list of the questions I tried to work into each interview. I changed the order of the questions and sometimes their wording in order to maintain the flow of conversation, and depending on information that was revealed, sometimes asked additional questions specific to the subject's experiences.

How old are you?

How did you learn?

Do you know how to crochet or do other crafts as well?

What sorts of projects do you do?

Do you prefer knitting or crochet for some things?

Do you ever knit things as gifts?

Do you ever knit things to sell, or for commission?

Where/how do you buy your yarn?

Do you use the internet to learn new techniques or get questions answered?

Have you belonged to a forum, kept a blog, read a blog regularly?

Have you subscribed to print magazines?

How do you think the internet has changed the knitting world?

Have you taught other people to knit? Please talk about that.

What does knitting add to your life that you couldn't get from anything else?

When do you typically find yourself knitting? (emotions, times of day, project inspiration)

Where do you get your patterns?

Have you ever participated in a knitting circle?

Taken a class about knitting?

Do you think feminism has influenced the craft? How or why not?

Have you ever met any male knitters? (describe)

Do you think there are more or less male knitters out there today? Why/why not?

Do you think knitting is different for your generation than for others?