

“Craft was just something everyone did”: Experiences of BAME women in the artisanal economy

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The contemporary maker movement is characterised by the recent explosion of craft and artisanal production, in Western economies at least. Social media platforms and sites such as Etsy have contributed to this increased consumer desire for handmade and authentic products. Such sites provide a platform for makers to create and sell online, but are said to be dominated by white, middle class, ‘hipster’ tastes and aesthetics as argued by Susan Luckman. Of interest in this research are the forms of artisanal production among black and ethnic minority, or BAME, communities. While some research has highlighted some aspects of this, such as Parminder Bhachu’s (2004) work on British Asian fashion economies, we know little about the experiences of women makers from BAME backgrounds in the contemporary artisan economy.

Drawing on interviews with 17 UK based makers, all BAME women, this paper explores makers’ motivations for a craft career and the influence of their background and upbringing on their practice. It is situated within critiques of creative self-employment in neoliberal times, most notably by Angela McRobbie, who argues that the promise of creative work, doing what you love and the autonomy and flexibility that it promises masks its harsh realities of precarity, self-exploitation and for women in craft, a retraditionalisation of gender – putting women back in the home. I argue that while such criticisms are important, they ignore the individual experiences of

women, and particularly women of colour, and their pleasures and motivations for self-employment in the burgeoning artisan economy. As I will show, their experiences and motivations are inextricably linked to their cultural background and heritage, in ways which can be both enabling and constraining.

Background

- 12 month project funded by AHRC Creative Economy Engagement Fund (CEEF)
- Collaboration with Crafts Council UK
- *Who Makes?* (2018) Suggests that people working in craft occupations are:
 - More likely to be male compared to all occupations, more likely to be female if self-employed
 - More likely to be older than those in all occupations
 - More likely to be from white ethnic groups than those employed in all occupations
- Challenges and opportunities of social media for Black and minority ethnic (BAME) women in craft sector

This paper is based on work I am doing for a 12-month project funded by the AHRC's Creative Economy Engagement Fund, and in collaboration with Crafts Council UK. The project itself is concerned with developing a knowledge base and resources for women makers to use social media for the benefit of their practice. As well as the interviews with makers for this research, I am also running free social media workshops, one in London which took place on June 8, and one in Birmingham on 5 October. The workshops are a knowledge exchange format, in which we work through, as a group, some of the issues around social media and work out how makers could use it best for their own needs.

The aim of the project is to address lack of diversity in the UK craft sector. A report by Crafts Council UK in February 2018, called [*Who makes?*](#) Suggests that people working in craft occupations are:

More likely to be male – around four fifths are male compared to just over half of employment across all occupations; but more likely to be female if self-employed and part-time

More likely to be older than those in all occupations

More likely to be from white ethnic groups than those employed across all occupational groups;

Lack of diversity is a problem across all creative industries as scholars such as Mark

Banks and Dave O'Brien have highlighted in recent work. In cultural labour scholarship, relatively little attention has been paid to the craft sector – specifically the experiences of makers working in the contemporary artisan economy.

The digital and social media aspect comes from my own PhD, in which I explored how artists used social media to signal expertise. I noticed that for the women artists, they used social media in a collaborative, supportive manner, sharing the work of other women to foster an online community and thus, I argue, contributing to a wider online raising of visibility of women's art. I wondered whether this could be fostered in the case of craft.

A 2017 report by a colleague of mine, Dr Annette Naudin, suggested that for female entrepreneurs from BAME backgrounds, communication and social media is a particular challenge for those looking to progress in the cultural sector. This was based on a relatively small entrepreneurial leadership programme called ASTONish in Birmingham, but I have also heard similar stories among my interviewees for this research. Social media is ubiquitous but it's also very challenging, particularly for older women who may not be as familiar with the technology, and now find themselves wondering if they should learn how to use it, if they are missing out, and trying to navigate online spaces which can be exposing, problematic but also potentially rewarding.

Method

- Interviewed 17 makers from all over the UK. All BAME women
- Recruited via Crafts Council UK (London) and Craftspace (Birmingham)
- Varying career stages, mixture of sole trader, part-time workers

I interviewed 17 makers from all over the UK, recruited via the Crafts Council's online call, and I also contacted members on the Crafts Council directory myself. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted between 30 minutes to an hour. I asked the makers about their background, their career progression, their craft practice and their experiences in the craft sector, and their use of social media.

All interviewees were women makers who identified as black and minority ethnic. Their career stage varied, with some just finishing University, others now working on their craft practice after a different career or raising a family. They were mostly from London and Birmingham, and this is because of how they were recruited - with the Crafts Council networks and reach in London, and my connections with Craftspace in Birmingham, and this led to the decision to hold two workshops in those two locations too.

I'm going to focus primarily on one theme which has emerged from the interviews – the idea that craft is so embedded in the background and upbringing of many of the women, and how for them, craft practice is so much more than creating stuff to sell on Etsy.

Jemima*

“As I was growing up I wasn’t encouraged into the work of crafts. It was “You be a doctor, you be a lawyer, you be an accountant.” You know, all these things imposed on me.

But at the same time, at the back of my head. This is what I’d like to do, I like to make. I enjoy making. When I’m making, you know, I’m in a different planet.”

For many of the women in this research, a career in making or in any creative field was actively discouraged by their families, but that did not stop them from moving into craft eventually because they felt it was who they were, what they were meant to do. Growing up, some were encouraged to pursue ostensibly less precarious careers and occupations in banking, law or medicine. For example Jemima*, who was born in Nigeria and now lives in London. She was encouraged to take business studies first, but when she moved to the UK she was able to start her own craft business. She said:

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But at the same time, at the back of my head. This is what I’d like to do, I like to make. I enjoy making. When I’m making, you know, I’m in a different planet.”

Majeda

*"I was born in Bangladesh so I grew up quite embedded in my own culture. In Bangladesh, as I grew up my aunts all embroidered. My mum made all our clothes. **It was just what you did.** Everybody had that skills. Even if I go back now and see my cousins, somebody is doing some cross-stitching, you know? Things are made.*

*It's a female thing. **It's women that do it. The men go to work.** It's that culture. In the home, it's very much the women who are making. Also the cooking is from scratch. It's artisanal. You can't buy anything in a packet. People spend their whole time in that domestic environment, making and using their hands and working in that way. I grew up around it. My aunt taught me how to use stitching and needlework."*

Majeda, who works in embroidery and textiles, talked about how she grew up in Bangladesh, where the handmade was natural and commonplace, but a part of homemaking, not a career:

"I was born in Bangladesh so I grew up quite embedded in my own culture. In Bangladesh, as I grew up my aunts all embroidered. My mum made all our clothes. It was just what you did. Everybody had that skills. Even if I go back now and see my cousins, somebody is doing some cross-stitching, you know? Things are made. It's a female thing. **It's women that do it. The men go to work.** It's that culture. In the home, it's very much the women who are making. Also the cooking is from scratch. It's artisanal. You can't buy anything in a packet. People spend their whole time in that domestic environment, making and using their hands and working in that way. I grew up around it. My aunt taught me how to use stitching and needlework." In this sense, making isn't a career choice, it is a necessity, and a gendered one at that.

Amarjeet

*"I've always wanted to do art, but it was a big struggle with my [...] father. He just thought, "No, **it's not something that good Asian girls do,**" so I had a battle on my hands. I didn't go to university because he refused.*

My family are really great. They support me quietly, but they don't really get what I do. When I'm saying, "Oh, I'm doing this work for an exhibition," they look at me like, "Why? Are you selling?" "No?" "So, why are you doing it?"

*It's a bit difficult, but I've plugged away and I've just thought, "**This is what I want to do.**"*

Amarjeet, who is from a British South Asian family, said that she had always wanted to be creative from a young age, but it was actively discouraged by her father in particular. She said:

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In Amarjeet's quote it is clear that cultural expectations of British South Asian women can sometimes be a hindrance to creative career aspirations. This is in tension with the contemporary expectation to 'do what you love' as Angela McRobbie has highlighted. She argues that the contemporary increase in autonomous, self-directed work in Western economies is facilitated by new and social media but ultimately driven by the idea that young women increasingly do not want to do the jobs their parents did, instead they want to 'take flight' which McRobbie argues destabilises the possibility for feminist and radical politics, to contest neoliberal structures. In this

sense, “Labour anxieties are refracted through ideas of creativity and self-organised work.” While such criticisms are valid, McRobbie focuses primarily on young, working class and middle class British women.

The idea that craft is not a viable career option for the women in this research may also be linked to the status of craft within their cultural background. As McRobbie and also Rosalind Gill have highlighted, precarious creative and craft careers are valorised in the Global North as an ideal model of work characterised by self-expression, flexibility and autonomy. However, where some of my participants are from and where they are brought up, craft is particularly ubiquitous and part of everyday life, as routine as cooking or cleaning, as described by Majeda earlier. Parminder Bhachu focuses on the British Asian fashion economy, and describes how initially, it was a need based economy, “in which such skills were critical if you wanted your children, yourself and your men to be clothed.”

For the women in this research, their progression into a craft career is characterised by the tension between cultural expectation and norms, and the need to start their own craft business with the hope of self-fulfilment, autonomy and flexibility. Susan Luckman claims that the contemporary maker movement and explosion of home-based ‘Etsypreneurship’ is part of a way of “looking to the home and family as a site where one remains needed, in an employment marketplace notable for its lack of permanence, loyalty and, all too often, absence of care for the individual” (p.44). In this sense, home and contemporary craft practice can be intertwined, which McRobbie argues points to a retraditionalisation of gender. While again this may be true, more attention needs to be paid to the individual experiences of women and the pleasures and possibilities which arise from craft practice.

Jules

"I find making is very therapeutic and I think, if I was just to have all of the collection made for me and all I would be doing is selling it, I'd just be a salesman. I wouldn't be a maker. So it would be very different. I don't think I'd be very happy about that.

I think, because I'm that bit older as well, I don't necessarily have that ambition to build up this massive brand, selling in shops all over the world. I almost want more of a gentle lifestyle and career and this sort of fits in with me, how I am and also where I am in life. (Laughter)."

For the women in this research, craft is integral to their self-identity and for some, essential for mental health and wellbeing. For example, Jules, who like Amarjeet and Jemima, had always wanted to make but had a different career first. She said: "I find making is very therapeutic and I think, if I was just to have all of the collection made for me and all I would be doing is selling it, I'd just be a salesman. I wouldn't be a maker. So it would be very different. I don't think I'd be very happy about that. I think, because I'm that bit older as well, I don't necessarily have that ambition to build up this massive brand, selling in shops all over the world. I almost want more of a gentle lifestyle and career and this sort of fits in with me, how I am and also where I am in life. (Laughter)." - Jules

Here it is clear that Jules really wants to make, not only because of the flexibility and opportunity for self-expression, but also because she finds it beneficial for her wellbeing. The criticisms of precarious creative work by McRobbie and others tends to overlook just how important craft and creative practice can be for individuals, in this case, women of colour.

Bhachu (2004)

The British Asian fashion economy, predominantly led by women, is a form of cultural production which:

“Constitutes a crucial form of resistance, often characterized by a negotiative aesthetic—which is all that you have when you are on the margins. When you do not have classificatory systems and vocabularies of command, your strength lies in your ability to improvise. Your weak power location forces you to improvise and to innovate.” (p.3).

Making can also be important for self-identity and sense of belonging in a community, particularly if they are a migrant, as Parminder Bhachu has highlighted in her research. She notes that the Asian fashion economy, predominantly led by women, is a form of cultural production which: “constitutes a crucial form of resistance, often characterized by a negotiative aesthetic—which is all that you have when you are on the margins. When you do not have classificatory systems and vocabularies of command, your strength lies in your ability to improvise. Your weak power location forces you to improvise and to innovate.” (p.3).

In this sense, craft economies can also be a form of resistance for women from ethnically diverse backgrounds. They can provide a space where they can exercise autonomy, express themselves creatively and collaborate and connect with other women. I suggest that the possibilities afforded by social media platforms can potentially facilitate this.

Possibilities online

- 'Mutual aid' in online contexts (Patel, 2017)
- Collaboration, community and support
- BUT – possibility of being drowned out?
- Etsy dominated by 'hipster' domesticity (Luckman, 2015)

In my other research on women artists' use of social media, I found that the women engaged in forms of what I call mutual aid – sharing the work of others and the reciprocal promotion of the creative work of other women. I argue that this can contribute to a collective raising of visibility of art made by women. The women also valued the relationship building and sense of community online.

While the craft sector is well represented online by women, Susan Luckman highlights that most of them, such as those featured on Etsy's featured blogs segment, are white, middle class and American or from other developed economies. This is somewhat supported by the views of the women in this research, who feel that their work, and the work of other BAME women, can be drowned out online by the predominant 'hipster' aesthetic which characterises the contemporary maker movement and which they cannot identify with, and this especially came out in discussions in my first workshop. So my aim in this project is to explore how their collective voice could be amplified online, and provide help to those who need it through a knowledge exchange approach.

Conclusion

- Social media and Etsy/Folksy provide platforms for artisanal
- Criticisms of independent creative/craft work – McRobbie (2016)
- Need to acknowledge positives – identity, wellbeing, preserving expertise of the past
- Potential for resistance and collective action

The contemporary maker movement is just part of a wider creative labour market shift towards self-employment. With social media platforms and increased demand for 'authentic', handmade consumer products and experiences, women makers are seeing opportunities for potentially self-fulfilling, expressive work which they can fit around their daily routines. Criticisms of these forms of work by McRobbie and Gill highlight how they conform to neoliberal values and destabilise the potential for radical feminist politics through a re-traditionalisation of gendered work. We also, however, need to acknowledge the positive aspects of this type of work, particularly for women of colour. Some of them in this research just have to make, it is who they are and their lives would not be the same without it. They have grown up around it and there is much more in my research, which I didn't have time to go into, that suggests there is a sense of duty to preserve the expertise of the past, and not let the skills die out. This type of work requires a great deal of expertise yet as Susan Luckman points out, home based crafts in particular are perceived to be amateur, and visibility of diverse makers and forms of craft are essential to helping to address this perception.

As Bhachu has suggested too, there is potential for resistance of some kind in the ostensibly empowering act of making, which some of these women were discouraged from growing up. As well as criticising the structures in place which do constrain and

exploit, we need to start thinking about how collective action and change could be facilitated using the technologies which have enabled the artisan economy to experience the growth it has in recent years.