Exploring the negotiations over the subcultural ideology of authenticity within the Etsy community.

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Date:	30 June 2014
Word Count:	13,490

Abstract

This thesis examines the status of the indie craft movement as a subculture, and its articulation within online communities. Whilst the study of subcultures has traditionally focussed on youth based movements within face-to-face environments, the indie craft subculture appeals to a wide range of age groups, and is largely practised within online, virtual communities. Online, it is difficult to judge subcultural "authenticity" according to style or looks; therefore judgements are often made according to how an individual embodies the ideology of a certain subculture. Through examining the notion of "authenticity", this study demonstrates that the ideology of authenticity, which can be identified within the online indie craft community, is rooted in a specific interpretation of the "handmade" notion. By undertaking an "ideology analysis" (Van Dijk 1995) of a conflict that occurred within the popular crafting site, Etsy, in October 2013, this thesis explores how the notion of "handmade" was negotiated by the various stakeholders within the Etsy community. This study concludes that the Etsy website is an active site for subcultural practice, but that the October 2013 conflict revealed how the differences in the perceived ideology of authenticity of the "handmade" notion have caused divisions between the site's stakeholders, the long term impact of which is uncertain.

Key words: subculture, authenticity, ideology, indie craft, Etsy, online community

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Introduction

When Etsy, the widely popular e-commerce site based around handmade products, announced a set of major policy changes that would allow for sellers to partner with outside manufacturers to produce their goods, it spurred an online "backlash" from the site's users (Rao 2013). One typical example of this user outcry, posted on a blog that offered details on the policy change, stated;

> Having your product manufactured is not handmade and never will be in the real world. Sorry etsy, but you have no right to try and redefine the term, "handmade".[1]

This statement highlights the specific understanding and value which Etsy users attribute to the notion of "handmade", a word that has come to define and differentiate Etsy from other social commerce sites since its creation in 2005. Etsy's popularity has stemmed from the growth of a subcultural "indie craft" movement, in which a predominantly female segment of society has popularized the practice of crafting as an alternative lifestyle, one which emphasizes the joy of making things and the value of the handmade and homemade as an alternative to the mass-produced and factory-made[2]. There has been a relatively wide-range of academic writing about this contemporary movement. Just a few examples include Campbell 2005, Gauntlett 2011 and Luckman 2013, all of whom approach the topic from a sociological perspective. Yet, with the exception of the so far limited work of post-doctoral candidate Emily Howes (2008), and the writing of

[1] Comment posted by Etsy user, Susan from archaicdesign, on October 11, 2013. Retrieved from https://blog.etsy.com/news/2013/5-etsy-sellers-partnering-with-manufacturers/?ref=community_blog_title.

[2] indie craft, is a term which has been utilized to describe this emerging lifestyle by authors such as Howes 2008; Matchar 2013; Luvaas 2013 and Buszek 2011. Though it is difficult to offer a precise indication of the demographics of the indie craft subculture, there is a common understanding that most craft practitioners are women. This is reflected in the demographics of the Etsy site, for instance, an Etsy survey of 30,000 users in 2008 revealed that 96% of respondents, which included both buyers and sellers, were female (see https://www.etsy.com/storque/media/article_images/Survey_-_For_Storque1.pdf). More recent demographic estimates were offered by a 2013 report published by Etsy, "Redefining Entrepreneurship: Etsy Sellers' Economic Impact", which found that 88% of U.S. Etsy sellers are women (see https://blog.etsy.com/news/files/2013/11/Etsy_Redefining-Entrepreneurship_November-2013.pdf).

journalist Rob Walker (2007; 2008), studies of indie craft have overlooked the fact that it is possible to see subcultural values at play within the movement and amongst its practitioners. This oversight may well be due to the fact that indie craft does not fit many of the more traditional assumptions that characterize subcultures, which are normally centred around youth movements with distinctive stylistic, music, or fan oriented activity. I therefore believe that approaching the subject of the indie craft movement from a subculture studies perspective may offer new insights into the study of indie craft. Moreover, the indie craft movement is a subcultural community that has been much assisted by the Internet. Consequently, it is academically relevant to conduct research around the Etsy community, as "[r]esearchers have yet to pay adequate attention to the internet as a social space where subcultural communities emerge, develop, and change" (Williams and Copes 2005, 69). Online social spaces for indie craft include sites such as Get Crafty (http://www.getcrafty.com/), Craftster (http://www.craftster.org/) and, of course, Etsy (https://www.etsy.com/), which have worked to spread and strengthen the popularity of crafting, through allowing craft practitioners to share their creations, ideas and expertise to wider audiences. This study therefore also seeks to expand on existing research about online subcultural communities by exploring the roots of the indie craft subculture, which has been detailed by authors such as journalist Rob Walker (2008), Benjamin Schultz (2011), who approaches the "handmade" and DIY through the field of economic geography and Sarah Abrahams (2008), who examines Etsy and its surrounding culture from the perspective of folklore. Through understanding this history, it is possible to trace how Etsy, functioning as a now very much commercial e-commerce site, has played a role as an online community through which the values of the indie craft subculture are articulated.

This thesis will be structured using a theoretical framework based around the notion of "authenticity", something which has become increasingly valued in modern society (Taylor 1991; Fine 2003; Boyle 2004; Lewin and Williams 2009; Cobb 2014), but which is also of central importance to subcultural communities. Beginning with a discussion which works to define "what is authenticity?" sociologists Vannini and Williams' work will be drawn upon. This establishes how the concept of "authenticity" has changed from a realist perspective, to a

constructivist one, in which "authenticity" is seen as a variable, culturally dependent term, rather than an "inherent quality of some object, person or process" (2009, 2). Lewin and Williams' (2009) study of the punk subculture will also be utilised, as it presents an argument which sees authenticity within subcultures as being rooted, not in more traditional understandings of style, but instead in ideological values. This is applicable to the indie craft subculture, especially due to its presence online, where, as Williams and Copes (2005) argue, it is more difficult to judge other community members' authenticity by visual markers such as fashion. Instead, authenticity is judged in accordance with the perceived sense to which an individual embodies the lifestyle or ideological values of a subcultural community. It is these judgements over ideology, I assert, which bring online subcultural communities such as Etsy together, and through which different stakeholders negotiate their authenticity within these communities. Therefore, this thesis will work towards answering the research question; *how is the ideology of authenticity surrounding the "handmade" notion negotiated within the Etsy community?*

In order to answer this question, I will undertake a discourse analysis of the Etsy user "backlash". My method will take inspiration from Van Dijk's focus on 'ideology analysis', as he states that "Ideologies […] are the overall, abstract mental systems that organize […] socially shared attitudes" (1995, 18). The focus will be on Van Dijk's assertion that ideologies can be most clearly seen through language that emphasizes an *us* vs. *them* dichotomy. Therefore, exploring an event where Etsy users reacted in opposition to the Etsy company is likely to reveal such *us* vs. *them* dynamics. The case study will focus on three different areas. Firstly I will offer an overview of the background to the "backlash", which did not occur in a vacuum. By looking to a number of different sources published in April 2012, on the Etsy website itself and in external news articles that tracked and commented upon these events, it will be shown that discontent between users and the Etsy company (including its administrators) had been growing for some time. Secondly, two web pages will be analysed, which address how the Etsy company and its CEO, Chad Dickerson, phrased and issued the policy changes made in October 2013. Thirdly, two more sources from within the Etsy website will be analysed; a forum through which administrators gave users an

opportunity to voice their opinions on policy changes; and a blog post which was 'highjacked' by Etsy users commenting about the policy changes that had been made. It is these sources that will provide the bulk of the analysis in working to reveal how users reacted to the changes Etsy made. A more detailed explanation of the method will also be provided in chapter three. It is expected that this analysis will reveal the ideological value that the site's stakeholders attribute to the "handmade" notion, and that conflicts arose because of differing interpretations of this notion.

Chapter 1: indie craft as a subculture & subcultures online

The indie craft movement

Within the past ten years there has been increasing academic interest in the growth in popularity of crafting. As mentioned above, Campbell offers a sociological approach by looking at craft as a form of consumption, focussing on exploring "the reasons for the recent rise of craft consumption" (2005, 23). Studies of "DIY" (Do-It-Yourself) and "Craftivism", exploring the combination of craft and activism, have been detailed in Ratto and Boler's (2014) edited volume, which takes an interdisciplinary approach, though largely focussing on a new media studies perspective. Von Busch (2010), and Kettley (2010) have approached the subject from an arts and design studies perspective, focusing on how the border between craft and design has become increasingly blurred. Research that has traced the history and growth of the crafting movement, and its particular articulation in modern culture, includes Gauntlett (2011), Luckman (2013), writing from a sociological stance, and Walker (2008) whose work as a journalist and social commentator offers a view from outside the purely academic sphere. Additionally, Buzsek's *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art*, gives an Art History approach, offering an overview of modern craft practices, in which she describes the "growing indie craft movement, where handcrafted (and often locally produced) items are championed as alternatives to mass-produced, globally distributed goods" (2011, 210). Howes also provides a picture of contemporary indie craft, stating that its "central motif is the deployment of hand

skills such as knitting, embroidery and sewing – the domestic arts – to make clothes, accessories and household items" (2008). Yet, she adds that

> "Unlike amateur crafts of the past, indie craft distinguishes itself through the particular way it twists the tradition to fit a contemporary cultural context, and the motivations of the crafters as they do so. Typically indie craft objects are richly ironic, include self-referential motifs from popular culture and the history of domestic crafts." (Ibid.)

This contemporary indie craft movement has roots in DIY culture, and the "Riot Grrrl" subculture of the 1990s, which combined punk and DIY ethos with feminist ideology and was centred around female punk bands (Abrahams 2008). One of the key characteristics of the Riot Grrrl movement was the creation of zines, which were often made using simple, homemade techniques. Walker argues that "there was a particular style associated with riot grrrl identity: for instance, altering cheaply bought thrift store goods - a do-it-yourself approach, making something from nothing, and rejecting mainstream consumerism." (2008, 238) This emphasizes the links between Riot Grrrl and DIY/crafting practices, but after the scene began to decline towards the end of the 1990s, many of Riot Grrrls began to focus more intensely on crafting (Schultz 2011, 113). For instance, Walker notes the case of Debbie Stoller, the "founder of the pop-culture-meets-feminism magazine *Bust* (which began as a photocopied zine)" (2008, 238). This magazine "identified craft as a vehicle for both self-expression and connection" (Ibid., 239). Groups of crafters began to form, especially located in the United States, which had been the centre for the Riot Grrrl movement[3]. A concern for environmental protection, and subsequent focus on buying local, non-factory made products to minimise the impact of consumption on the planet, combined with feminism's embrace of traditional crafts and homeworking (no longer considered a tool of necessity and repression, but instead an expression of

[3] Cities became hubs for organisations such as the Austin Craft Mafia, and fairs such as the Renegade Craft Fair in Chicago, Bazaar Bizarre in Boston, and the Urban Craft Uprising in Seattle (Walker 2008, 236).

creative and professional freedom[4]) helped to create a movement of individuals who became passionate about the practice of crafting, making, and sometimes also selling their own goods[5]. The popularity of the movement grew, and by 2004, "Crafting had attained a subculture status" (Walker 2007). Yet despite the acknowledgement of indie craft as a subculture (Howes 2008; Walker 2007), there has been little exploration of precisely *how* or *why* the movement constitutes a subculture, and how this fits within current subcultural studies. I believe it is therefore useful, and necessary, to explore this briefly.

Is indie craft a subculture?

The study of subculture has traditionally focussed on delinquent, oppositional and counter-culture youth movements based around specific fashion and musical styles, pioneered by the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Culture Studies (CCCS), which published research on youth cultures in post-Second World War Britain, such as Teddy boys, mods and skinheads (Hall and Jefferson 1976). Another of the prominent early studies of subcultures was Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979), which, as the name suggests, focussed on style as a central trait around which subcultures formed. Moreover, the study of subcultures largely focuses on *youth* subcultures, and whilst indie craft does appeal to young people, it is not restricted to that demographic, with a wide

[4] Betsy Greer, an influential member of the indie craft subculture and author of the book *Knitting for Good!*, discusses the perceived disconnect between feminism and crafting, but also explains how the two became linked; "Knitting didn't make me a traitor to feminism; instead, I found myself able to connect with women of previous generations in a whole new way and celebrate their accomplishments [...] I had to rethink my feminist views when I became attracted to knitting, and many others in the indie craft movement have had to do the same." (2008, 12-13). Indeed, she states that today "Crafts have been redefined in a way that better reflects current views of feminism and domesticity" (Ibid.,14).

[5] The indie craft movement is very much framed in opposition to 'mainstream' production and consumption values. Those who craft see the practice of making as an alternative to a modern society filled with mass-produced goods which were made in a sweat-shop or soulless factory on the other side of the world, which were environmentally damaging, and lacking in originality and quality. This is emphasised in the first issue of the American magazine, *Craft*, which offered an opening editorial, stating, "The new craft movement encourages people to make things themselves rather than buy what thousands of others already own [...] it offers original, unusual, alternative, and better made goods to consumers who choose not to fall in step with mainstream commerce." (Sinclair 2006, 7) In another article in the same publication, Jean Railla expanded on these values by stating,, "With globalism, factory labour, and sweatshops as growing concerns, and giant chains like Starbucks, McDonalds and Old Navy turning America into one big mini-mall, crafting becomes a protest" (Railla 2006, 10).

appeal across age groups[6]. Considering these factors, I believe it is necessary to give a brief defence of my assertion that what has been termed the indie craft movement can actually be considered a "subculture"[7].

In order to do this, I will look to Gary Alan Fine's 1983 study of the fantasy role playing subculture surrounding the popular board game, 'Dungeons and Dragons', in his book *Shared Fantasy: Role Playing Games as Social Worlds*. This source provides a clear set of criteria for determining whether or not a culture or lifestyle movement can be deemed to be a "subculture". Fine argues that it is important to differentiate between "subculture" and "subsociety"[8]. A subsociety, he argues, is dependent upon three defining elements. Firstly, "a collection of individuals who have importance as a distinctive segment of society" (Fine 1983, 25). Fine looks at the size of the distinctive society, which in the indie craft case is very difficult, if not impossible to calculate, because unlike Fine's case of fantasy gaming, there is no one cultural product of which sales figures would help to determine the size of the subsociety. However, he also discusses the crucial role that is played by members of the subsociety who are strongly committed to the practice, and who help to shape the actions of the less committed. Those who are 'core' members of the indie craft community are those such as Debbie Stoller (founder of *Bust*), and Faythe Levine, author of the influential book and documentary *Handmade Nation*. It is such key figures who inspire others to craft, to attend fairs and conventions, individuals who are admired and seen as inspirations for the subsociety, who encompass and promote its values. Secondly, "common activities must be present" (Ibid.), and this is obvious within the indie craft subsociety. Though these activities may vary, from pottery and painting through to knitting and quilting, they are all focused around making and creating by hand or using simple, home-based techniques and skills. Thirdly, there must

[6] To give an indication of the age of crafters, Luckman notes that the average age of an Etsy user is 34 (2013a).

[7] It is worth stating here that there has been much critical discussion around the concept of "subculture" since the 1980s, and it has been suggested that traditional studies surrounding this term were short-sighted, and are no longer applicable to modern cultural movements (Williams 2006, 174). Yet Alternative terms, such as "neo-tribe" (Bennett 1999) and "scene" (e.g. Kahn-Harris 2004), have also proven problematic, and Bennett and Kahn-Harris acknowledge that "in subculture there is at least an identifiable, knowable research space" (2004, 15), and therefore I will continue to utilise this term in my study.

[8] This framework is based upon an earlier study by Fine, undertaken alongside Sherryl Kleinman, in exploring the problematic concept of "subculture" (see Fine and Kleinman 1979).

also be "common cultural elements" which "characterize the population segment" (Ibid.). In the world of fantasy gaming, this revolves around shared language and in-jokes. In the world of indie craft it is arguably more focused on core values, mentioned above, which revolve around the importance of handmade goods, living by a DIY ethos, and reducing consumption. There is also a clear shared aesthetic to the objects crafted by members of the subsociety, often taking traditional designs normally perceived as old-fashioned and re-styling them with ironic statements such as cross stitch patterns displaying rap lyrics, or soaps made in the shape of skulls or grenades (Abrahams 2008).

In order for a subsociety to then be considered a subculture, it must also incorporate three further elements. A subculture must have "networks of communication through which common information is transmitted" (Fine 1983, 26). Fine also breaks this down to state that "individuals may belong to several groups simultaneously" (Ibid., 31), which is true of many indie crafters, who may craft with friends as part of a group, such as a social knitting group or "Stitch n' Bitch"[9], but then also take part in different online groups, such as being part of a specific Etsy "team" (https://www.etsy.com/teams), or taking part in discussions on forums such as Reddit's subreddit, r/crafts (http://www.reddit.com/r/crafts). Through these multiple group memberships, Fine argues that subculturalists develop "aquaintanceships or 'weak ties'" to assist with the "rapid diffusion of information" (1983, 31). Since Fine was writing in 1983, there was no tangible concept of the Internet or World Wide Web, which has, as I shall go on to argue, assisted significantly in the "rapid diffusion" of subcultures, and has certainly been key to expanding the indie craft subculture.[10] Yet Fine also mentions the role of magazines and conventions in assisting the spread of a subculture, and

[9] The original Stitch 'n Bitch in New York, was founded in 1999 by Debbie Stoller (a figure discussed at multiple points in this writing, as an influential figure in the indie craft movement), and quickly spread. According to Stoller's website, *stitchnbitch.org*, there are now 2291 Stitch n' Bitch groups registered through this site alone (http://stitchnbitch.org/Find-a-Group/index.html). The phenomena has also been detailed in news articles (Carpenter 2003; Elsworth 2006)

[10] Williams and Copes (2005) offer an update on Fine's (1983) study of subcultures, alongside his earlier work with Kleinman (1979), in their discussion of subcultural authenticity and identity in Straightedge online forums. They utilise the latter study in particular, arguing that "Because Fine and Kleinman's (1979) work on the subculture concept preexists the widespread growth of the internet, it could not anticipate its influence on subcultural life. We suggest that internet forums should be conceptualized as one new example of a communication interlock that lies between immediate face-to-face situations and mass media." (Williams and Copes 2005, 85)

this is still true for the indie craft community which, despite the role of the internet, still organizes conventions and fairs where crafters come to buy and sell and share their passion for the subculture and practice. “Structural roles” (Ibid., 33) are also important, in which influential individuals may bring others together. Unlike Fine’s fantasy games, the indie craft movement has no cultural text or author who acts with authority, but is instead dependent on key members such as Stoller and Levine, referred to above. “Mass media” is also needed in order to help “disseminate information within the subsociety” (Ibid., 35). In the case of indie crafting, these come in the form of specialist magazines such as *Maker*, *Craft* and *Readymade*, as well as websites such as Etsy and Craftster.

Members of a subculture must also "identify themselves as a group and as sharing a subculture" (Ibid., 25), and Fine suggests that this can come through acknowledgement of shared problems or in statements where subculturalists “indicate the perception of identification with the hobby”, which “produces a sense of community” (Ibid., 36). This is reflected in the findings of David Gauntlett, in his book *Making is Connecting*, which includes a quote from one crafter, Alena Hennessy, who states, "In the craft community, I feel very connected to people whom I have never met in person. I didn't expect to be so inspired by what everyone else was doing" (2011, 65).

Finally, the subculture "must be identified as such by those outside of the group" (Fine 1983, 25). This is noted clearly in news articles, such as the BBC News Magazine, which stated in the report, “Etsy, Folksy and the mania for making crafts”, that

> There is a subculture of crafters. They congregate on online marketplaces like Etsy and Folksy. They craft everything from bunny-shaped bookends and knitted jam jars to Union Jack radiator covers and shabby chic coffee tables. (Barford 2012)

These points have therefore shown that the indie craft movement can meet Fine’s six characteristics that define both a subsociety and a subculture. From this, it is therefore possible to move to explore how the indie craft subculture may fit within existing studies of subcultures, particularly within more recent studies

which have concentrated on their migration and articulation in online environments.

Subcultures online

The indie craft subculture is one that has thrived due to the presence of the Internet. This assertion is made by several commentators. Howes argues that, "[a]longside their reclamation of the handmade, indie crafters have harnessed the internet as the primary site of their community" (2008). Garth Johnson, a prominent figure in the craft movement, has similarly noted that access to online communities has been of central importance to the indie craft movement, emphasizing that "[i]t's the internet that holds the craft world together […] The handmade nation wields the internet just as effectively as it does a knitting needle or roll of duct tape" (Johnson 2008, 30). David Gauntlett stresses that the Internet is "the new vehicle for communicating about (real world) craft, for showing projects and connecting with others." (2011, 63) Indeed, he suggests that such developments have meant that crafters have "been able to collectively develop a firm and positive sense of shared meaning, and mission" in online spaces, "which was probably more difficult to establish when craft activity was more fragmented and isolated" (Ibid.). Arguably, therefore, without the presence of the Internet in connecting crafters, the subculture would not be as vibrant as it is today. This is consistent with more general studies of subcultures online. For instance, Ross Haenfler suggests that "[w]ith the advent of new media, in particular the constant access to digital entertainment, communication, and community via the internet, subcultural places exist increasingly online." (2014, 123) Yet, there has been a relative paucity of work surrounding the impact of online environments on subcultures.[11] Geoff Stahl argues that this is a surprising omission, but notes that the "recent analyses of virtuality and digitally connected individuals and groups shares common absences and elisions with certain

[11] Whilst studies which focus on the articulation of subcultures in online communities may be rather limited, the closely related field of fan cultures and fan studies has very much expanded, and there are hundreds of academic studies which explore fan communities online. Some fan communities may well also constitute subcultures, but when I state that studies of subcultures in online spaces are limited, I do not refer to these studies which focus primarily on online *fan* communities.

aspects of subcultural analyses" (2004, 37). The movement of subcultures to online spaces and communities has challenged many traditional assumptions, such as "the conventional notion of subcultures as local scenes embedded in physical space and characterised by face-to-face interaction" which is now "at least partially obsolete" (Haenfler 2004, 123). One of the primary studies of the impact of the Internet in subcultural practices is J. Patrick Williams' study of Straightedge culture online, in which he investigates "how the internet functions as a new social space for subcultural identity and change" (2006, 175). Crucially, he argues that "[a]s individuals interact in internet-based cultural sites, they construct and affirm meaningful collective identities based on norms and beliefs that are personally important and that are supported by others" (Ibid., 178). Similarly, in his consideration of youth identity online, Andy Bennett argues that "youth cultures may be seen increasingly as cultures of 'shared ideas', whose interactions take place not in physical spaces such as the street, club or festival field but in the virtual spaces facilitated by the Internet" (2004, 163). Bennett argues that the Internet can be seen as "a new site for the formation of alliances grounded in common beliefs and shared practices" (Ibid., 164) and therefore "this notion of the Internet as a subcultural space is analogous to the concept of 'virtual community'"[12] (Ibid.). This suggests that online sites have become more than just a means of distributing information about subcultures; they are more than just a modern update to what Fine termed "mass media" (1983, 35). Instead, online sites offer an actual space for subcultural activity and, as Williams and Copes argue, "It is through these new media that participants establish, contest, negotiate, and transform subcultural identities and boundaries." (2005, 85) Therefore, when considering the role of the Etsy website, it is possible to see how this online site has offered up a space for the subculture to grow and flourish.

[12] It is worth noting at this point that academic discussions of 'virtual community' come with a vast range of complex critiques, ranging from early studies which give a utopian view of a "new" type of community online (Schuler 1996; Rhinegold 1991), to those which question whether online spaces can be considered "communities" at all (Postman 1993; Doheny-Farina 1996; Wilbur 1997). Bennett interestingly cuts through this debate by suggesting that criticisms of online spaces and groups as "communities" "fail to acknowledge the increasingly romantic nature of such interpretations of community" (2004, 165). Therefore, scholars have argued for a more flexible definition, or a rethinking of "community" (Watson 1997) in order to understand virtual relationships in online spaces. In terms of subcultures online, then, Bennett asserts that "[r]ather than viewing the Internet as a 'cultural', or 'subcultural' context, it is perhaps better conceptualized as a cultural resource appropriated within a pre-existing cultural context, and used as a means of engaging symbolically with and/or negotiating that context" (2004, 165).

Etsy and the indie craft subculture online

One of the facets of this research is to investigate how the essential values of the indie craft subcultural movement may have been affected by the online environment. One of the major websites that has had a crucial role in expanding and popularizing the practice of crafting and the indie craft movement, is Etsy, an e-commerce site founded in 2005. What is so interesting about Etsy in particular, in contrast to sites that preceded it, such as Craftster and Getcrafty, is that Etsy is built around not just sharing tips and experience about craft practice, it is first and foremost a place to buy and sell handmade products. Yet Etsy has branded itself as a site which encompasses all the ideals held by the indie craft subculture, offering a "community" with forums for discussions amongst members, as well as blogs written by the company which highlight the work of crafters and the values of the crafting movement[13]. Whilst having an overtly commercial purpose, Etsy also aims to promote the ethical and personal value of living according to the principles that had been espoused by early members of the indie craft subculture. Pace et al.'s study, "From Organizational to Community Creativity: Paragon Leadership & Creativity Stories at Etsy", advanced the view that "Featured Seller" interviews posted on the Etsy website "help Etsy-corp develop a coherent community vision and ethos, strategically […] strengthening the bonds of the loosely coupled millions that make up its community" (2013). It could also be assumed that the other blogs and "community" elements within the Etsy website may play a similar role. Though Pace et al. do not explicitly state what this "vision and ethos" is, they do quote a mission statement from an Etsy press kit (no longer available online), which stated that Etsy is a "community that actively supports one another in the shared goal of offering alternatives to mass-produced objects" (see Pace et al. 2013). Interestingly, this differs from Etsy's early mission statement, detailed in Abrahams' study of the site, in which she states that "Etsy's mission statement exclaims the following, 'Our vision is to build a new economy and present a better choice: Buy, Sell, and Live Handmade'" (2008, 62-63). The

[13] Sarah Abrahams suggests that "Etsy has purported to create a virtual and physical community of participants who share a core belief in the symbolic and commercial value of the handmade" (2008, 5), and also argues that "Etsy has aesthetically and ideologically aligned itself with the DIY/indie craft and new domestic movements" (Ibid, 10).

latter "mission statement" makes clear the early emphasis on the "handmade", though both acknowledge a strong ideological focus of Etsy as an alternative to mainstream, mass consumption, which is arguably very much rooted in the early ideals of the indie craft subculture, and the DIY movement. Moreover Etsy's founder, Rob Kalin, is arguably very much connected to the indie craft subculture.[14] In creating Etsy, Kalin seized upon the values of the indie craft subculture and took them into a new, commercial, online space. Etsy's continued dedication to the values of the indie craft subculture was made clear in 2007, when the company founded an external site, *buyhandmade.org*, which encouraged people to take "the handmade pledge", claiming that buying handmade products gives the buyer the "satisfaction of supporting an artist or crafter directly", which helps buyers to understand the "local and human sources of our goods", is "better for the environment" and also "strikes a small blow to the forces of mass production."[15] Here we see that the values of the indie craft subculture are very much alive within the Etsy site and its brand.

Subcultural studies have frequently documented how elements of subcultures, mostly focussed around style and fashion, are often appropriated into the "mainstream" by companies. Ken Gelder argues that subcultural style is "highly vulnerable to commodification, easily sliding into the more diffused realm of 'fashion'" (1997, 374), and the links between consumerism and subcultures have been made clear by a number of authors (e.g. Hebdige 1979; Goulding et al. 2002). Interestingly, the indie craft subculture, where there is a limited hierarchy and constraints to membership, is widely acknowledged to be an open and accepting community (Howes 2008). This presents a kind of paradox, since subcultures are "a category traditionally suspicious and antagonistic of the mainstream", and yet the indie craft movement "actually *aspires* to become

[14] Kalin was introduced to crafting through Getcrafty's founder, Jean Railla, and though Kalin was not really a craft practitioner, he was interested in woodwork, and also felt a connection with the values of the indie craft movement, and the value they placed on "handmade" objects. In an interview with Kalin for *The Wallstreet Journal*, Teri Evans wrote; "An artisan at heart, Rob Kalin, now 29 years old, attended five different colleges before he finally earned a bachelor's degree in the classics. But he ended up bypassing the traditional job route to instead focus on his woodworking talents. He created a unique item—a computer encased in wood —but couldn't find a marketplace for it. So he built one." (2010)

[15] *Buyhandmade.org* is no longer running as a separate site, and visiting that URL now links directly to the Etsy website. The quotes are therefore taken from Sarah Abrahams' Master Thesis which presents an in-depth study of the Etsy site (2008, 65-67).

universally practised, to become itself mainstream albeit retaining a pure indie craft ethic" (Ibid.).[16] This is perhaps why it has been possible for Etsy to 'piggyback', or even appropriate, the values of the indie craft subculture for its own brand and company ethos, without being rejected by the community's core members. Though, of course, it is also important to acknowledge that Etsy is a website which the community *needs* in order to sell and buy goods online, which perhaps also overcomes issues related to commercialization of the indie craft movement. Moreover, it has also been Etsy's approach in creating a *community* based on indie craft values, which has made it so popular with crafters. In his article "Handmade 2.0", Walker states that "the luck or genius of the site is that Kalin and the other founders encountered in the D.I.Y./craft scene something that was *already* social, community-minded, supportive and aggressively using the Web" (2007). Von Busch similarly comments that "what has made Etsy such a success story, with over 500 million visits monthly, is that the online platform could plug into a movement basing its values on participation, not consumption." (2010, 116) This suggests that the crafting subculture was uniquely able to merge into a commercial site like Etsy, one which arguably works hard to cultivate a supportive, participatory community, and also one which understood the ideals of its users. Indeed, Walker noted that "It's pretty clear that [Kalin] not only respects the values of the D.I.Y. world and the earnest idealism of the Handmade Pledge; he also really believes in them" (2007).

Within this chapter, I have focussed on tracing the history of the indie craft movement and the values it holds, as well as arguing that it can be considered a subculture, and can therefore be placed within existing subcultural studies. This offers a way of understanding how the indie craft movement is cemented around shared culture and practice, and also how, in exploring the recent focus on the shift of subcultures into online spaces, the indie craft movement has been expanded through the sharing of ideas and experiences online. Moreover, in understanding indie craft as a subculture that, in fact, is largely dependent upon

[16] An excellent quote from the founder of Getcrafty, Jean Railla, featured in the first issue of *Craft* magazine embodies the acceptance of the growth of the indie craft movement; "it's hard to bemoan the popularisation of crafting. What is "selling out" if you only encourage creativity? [...] The point of crafting is to be in touch with one of the things that makes us human - our ability to make stuff. And if this spreads like organic honey on a hot stove, then I'm all for it." (Railla 2006, 10)

online communities for its growth and vitality, it is possible to observe how (even overtly commercial) sites like Etsy have become centres for subcultural practice.

Chapter 2: Understanding authenticity and ideology within subcultures

It has so far been a focus of this thesis to explore how online communities can be formed around subcultures, and how these communities may therefore be based upon shared values and practices, which unite disparate individuals. Within subcultures, one of the key notions that allows for participation is the extent to which an individual is "authentic", that is, the extent to which they embody the values of the subcultural community. Indeed, Ross Haenfler argues that "[p]ursuing, performing, and judging authenticity is central to most subcultural experience" (2013, 83). In understanding the articulation of the indie craft subculture in online environments and, in the context of this thesis, Etsy in particular, it is therefore necessary to explore the role that authenticity may play within the subcultural community. To do this, first the notion of "authenticity" itself must be understood.

What is "authenticity"?

Sociologists Vannini and Williams argue that in order to answer the question "what is authenticity?", it is necessary to understand the relatively recent sociological shift from a realist perspective of the world "that assumes the obdurateness of reality and social facts" (2009, 1), to a constructivist perspective. They argue that "the realist-constructivist dichotomy relates directly to both academic and lay assumptions about authenticity" (Ibid., 2). They look to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) to suggest that the realist perspective sees authenticity defined as being "in accordance with *fact*, as being *true in substance*." (Ibid.) The OED offers a second definition of authenticity "as being what it professes *in origin or authorship*; as being *genuine*", here, they argue, "we get the sense that authenticity is rooted in creativity and self-expression rather than in conformity to social forces." (Ibid.) They also note a third definition of authenticity as "real, actual", and argue that "[h]ere the authentic stands against

replicas, pretense, and posing - a narrative common in popular culture" (Ibid.) What unites these definitions is the sense that

> [a]uthenticity is to be understood as an inherent quality of some object, person or process. Because it is inherent, it is neither negotiable nor achievable. Authenticity cannot be stripped away, nor can it be appropriated. In short, the object, person or process in question either *is* authentic or it is *not*, period. (Ibid.)

This is a “modern myth of authenticity” (Ibid., 3), a fictional perception that authenticity is an unchanging ideal, when in fact it is “a socially constructed phenomenon that shifts across time and space" (Ibid.). Vannini and Williams quote Richard Peterson’s study *Creating Country Music*, in which he explores the “fabrication of authenticity” in country music by the corporate music industry, and through which he argues that “authenticity is not inherent in the object or event that is designated authentic but is a socially agreed-upon contract in which the past is to a degree misremembered" (1997, 5). Modern academic interpretations of "authenticity" have therefore moved away from realist notions of the term, towards a constructivist perspective, which acknowledges that authenticity is a notion that is variable, assigned different connotations and characteristics according to the perceptions of different social groups. Vannini and Williams therefore offer a definition or understanding of authenticity as "some sort of ideal, highly valued and sought by individuals and groups as part of the process of becoming" (2009, 3). Yet they also offer up an alternative, suggesting authenticity may also be "something strategically invoked as a marker of status or method of social control." (Ibid.) Overall, therefore, they present a view that "Authenticity is not so much a state of being as it is the objectification of a process of representation, that is, it refers to a set of qualities that people in a particular time and place have come to agree represent an ideal or exemplar." (Ibid.) This constructivist notion of authenticity, then, allows for a wide interpretation of what “authenticity” means, and what may be considered “authentic” by one group, may not be shared by another; and this is therefore

particularly useful in exploring the role that “authenticity” may play within subcultural groups.

The ideology of authenticity

As already stated, claims to authenticity are central to subcultural practice. Authenticity in subcultures is utilized in many of the ways described by Vannini and Williams; as something “highly valued and sought by individuals”, as a “marker of status”, and as an agreed upon “set of qualities” that are seen as “ideal or exemplar” (2009, 3). The concept of authenticity, then, is used to “determine who is 'true' and who is a 'poseur'" within a subcultural group (Haenfler 2013, 83). Considering the emphasis of the specific values and beliefs that are tied to the notion of authenticity within subcultures, it has been suggested that authenticity can form an ideology to which subcultural communities adhere. Lawrence Grossberg writes that

> Every fan- of whatever forms of popular culture - exists within a comparable ideology of authenticity, although the difference need not operate in just the same way, and the ideological grounds of authenticity may vary considerably. The ideological difference has taken many forms, which are not necessarily the same: the centre vs the margin, rock vs pop, the mainstream vs the periphery, commercial vs independent, coopted vs resistant. (1992, 62)

Though Grossberg is discussing fans of popular culture here, it helps to make clear the concept of the "ideology of authenticity", which can also be extended to the closely related study of subcultures, and it emphasises that the ideology of authenticity varies across different groups – supporting the modern constructivist notion of the term. This has been done in Lewin and Williams’ study "Ideology and Practice of Authenticity in Punk Subculture", in which the authors argue that there has been a tendency to see the ideology of authenticity in subcultures as something which is invoked as nothing more than a "vehicle to social status" (2009, 66). That is, subcultural members vie for authenticity within

their subcultural communities, in which being “authentic” is something that is desired, and gives an individual value in the eyes of their subcultural peers. Lewin and Williams suggest that this has been asserted in previous studies such as Sarah Thornton's research on rave culture in which it was argued that "participants accrued status by garnering subcultural capital, which also reflexively marked then as 'authentic' in contrast to the mainstream" (Ibid.). This authenticity has traditionally "framed, interpreted and defined subcultures through the lens of style" (Ibid., 80), and was particularly emphasized in early work such as Hebdige’s *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979). Yet Lewin and Williams offer a differing analysis of authenticity within subcultures, arguing that it is necessary to explore authenticity in a deeper way, by attempting to "locate the quest for authenticity within the larger social context of late modernity" (Ibid., 66). This “social context of late modernity”, they argue, is one in which “traditional concepts of self, community, and space have collapsed” (Ibid.). This has led to “a widespread internalization of doubt and an obsession with distinguishing the real from the fake” (Ibid.). Therefore, in the “uncertain seas of postmodernity”, Lewin and Williams argue that it is the “quest for authenticity” which serves “as a lifeboat to keep [individuals] afloat” (Ibid.).

To be considered “authentic” within the punk subculture, Lewin and Williams found that individuals must live their lives “through commitment to three ideological tenets: rejection, reflexivity, and self-actualization", and it is these three values that encouraged “young punks to come together.” (Ibid., 80). Whilst these three ideological tenets are not applicable to the indie craft subculture, nor to its articulation in online communities, Lewin and Williams’ argument that it is *ideological values* that determine the authenticity of punks, is of central importance. In contrast to traditional studies which emphasize style, here the focus is on a specific set of behaviours and life choices. I believe that it is possible to apply this to the indie craft movement, grounded as it is in the practice of crafting as both an activity but also as a way of life, which arguably builds itself upon ideological values in order to bring the subcultural community together, and through which authenticity may be claimed. This ideology is articulated in the authentic value of the “handmade” as personal, unique and local, in opposition to the mass-produced as alienating, unoriginal and global. The

idea that ideology, as opposed to style, can be a central means through which subculturalists create authentic identities within their communities is arguably something which becomes increasingly important in online subcultural communities. When it is not possible to judge another individual by their stylistics choices, other means of making judgements of authenticity should become more important. Williams and Copes support this by stating that

> [w]hen interacting face-to-face with other subcultural members, it is possible to express one's authenticity through a variety of ways, including argot, style of dress, and behavior. In the internet forum, however, it is difficult, if not impossible, to identify other users in such embodied terms. (2005, 76)

In Williams and Copes' study of the Straightedge subculture within online spaces, they found that these groups "often articulate their authenticity by emphasising either their participation in a straightedge scene or their adherence to a straightedge lifestyle." (Ibid.) More crucially, they found that those who did not root authenticity in the participation in "face-to-face scenes", instead "define[d] authenticity in terms of adherence to the subculture's core values" (Ibid.). It is my assertion that a similar tendency can be seen within the online crafting communities such as Etsy, where core subcultural values not only unite these communities, but also form a means by which authenticity is judged.

The material, authentic handmade in online communities

The role of the online environment in the specific articulation of subcultural quests for authenticity also presents an interesting paradox when it comes to the indie craft movement and sites such as Etsy. This paradox is based around the fact that the key ideology of the indie craft subculture is rooted in the explicit value and desirability of handmade goods as objects which are authentic because of their material, inalienable, unique status, having been crafted by the touch of one maker's hands, and yet much of the indie craft subcultural practice takes places in online, *virtual* spaces. Lewin and Williams assert that the modern

industrial world has been increasingly consumed by a desire for authenticity. This, they note "is because humans live in a world in which people learn that the future of food is artificial, that the future of books, newspapers and medicine is virtual, and that they will soon deal entirely through computer screens rather than through people" (2009, 80). It is indie craft, which is arguably the subcultural movement that forms part of a wider cultural reaction against the effects of our increasingly digital world. For both the craft movement specifically, and arguably society more generally, it is the "handmade" which

> offers a reprise, an alternative and an access to a world where technology takes the form of simple tools, and objects are understood as 'safe' and nostalgic […] handmade objects are imbrued with touch and therefore offer a sense of the 'authentic' in an inauthentic world. (Luckman 2013, 254)

Considering this emphasis on the quest for authenticity being linked to the tangible and material, it is interesting that the subcultural movement which places the greatest value on the handmade object in particular, is one which conducts the majority of its community life online. In other words, the very fact, that the indie craft subculture ascribes authenticity to "handmade", and ideological value to the material practice of crafting, is completely at odds with the *virtual* status of the community in which these values are grounded. This is a paradox of the indie craft subculture, one which seemingly poses no problem for its members, many of whom rely on the internet to learn or share their passion for craft with others. Consequently, there are few who question the authenticity of a crafter because they may solely articulate their craft identity through online spaces. Interestingly, this contrasts directly with Williams and Copes' study of the Straightedge subculture, where those who did not take part in the "face-to-face scene" were often judged to be inauthentic (2005, 76).

In order, therefore, to assess what makes indie craft subculturalists authentic within their online communities, the following chapter will undertake an analysis of the Etsy community, and attempt to determine whether, as I have

asserted, it is indeed ideological values which unite the community, and through which authenticity is judged.

Chapter 3: Case study – the Etsy "backlash"

I have so far asserted that the ideology of authenticity surrounding the notion of the handmade is rooted in the indie craft subculture. As was mentioned in the previous chapter, the handmade invokes strong associations, both for "indie crafters" and for modern society in general. The handmade, with its tactile, inalienable relationship with real, physical objects that are unique and are created through one person's input, is an especially important counter to life in advanced industrial societies where the mass-produced, the digital and the virtual increasingly dominate our lives. In order to assess how this ideological view of the authenticity of handmade is articulated within online subcultural spaces such as Etsy, I will undertake an analysis of the Etsy community, by investigating the conflict that occurred in October 2013, when the company changed their policy to allow crafters to work with manufacturers to produce their goods. The "backlash" is an important event to analyse because it helps to reveal the ideological value and meaning that Etsy as a company attach to the notion of the "handmade", and how this may contrast with the ideology of the site's users[17]. By studying what happened when the long-held definition of "handmade" was threatened, it will hopefully reveal the strength of users' ideology surrounding the "handmade", and how the site's different stakeholders have negotiated this term.

[17] In the study "Anatomy of a flame: conflict and community building on the internet", it was found that conflict within the early Communet community, caused by so called "flames", could actually be beneficial for a community, as conflict "can help an electronic community define its common values, and encourage people either to bond more closely or to leave the community, after evaluating the congruence between the group's values or interests and their own" (Franco et al. 2000, 213). I therefore hoped that by studying the conflict which occurred within the Etsy community, (though it was not caused by "flames" but by the company itself) may also reveal similar "common values" shared by community members.

Method

Considering that my aim is to investigate how the subcultural ideology of authenticity is negotiated within the Etsy community, I believe it is necessary to analyse my case study in a way that may help to draw out this ideology. I will therefore undertake a discourse analysis, inspired by the work of Van Dijk (1995), in his essay "Discourse Analysis as Ideology analysis". Within his paper, Van Dijk addresses a number of characteristics that may be present in "text and talk" and which "function to persuasively help construct new and confirm already present ideologies" (1995, 22). Though Van Dijk concentrates on texts such as newspapers as prime examples through which ideologies are expressed, he also notes that "we have no a priori theoretical grounds to exclude any textual structures from expressing underlying ideological principles" (Ibid.), and therefore it is possible to use his methodology for analysing online discourse. Van Dijk states that in order to undertake an ideology analysis, we

> need to attend primarily to those properties of discourse that express or signal the opinions, perspective, position, interests or other properties of groups. This is specifically the case when there is a conflict of interest, when events may be seen, interpreted or evaluated in different, possible opposed ways. (Ibid.)

This difference of interpretation of events, and the emergence of groups, will be key elements in exploring the Etsy "backlash", where some users expressed anger, some expressed support, and where Etsy and its administrators were forced to defend the company's position on the changes made to the definition of "handmade". Yet, in my analysis I have not undertaken the same in-depth breakdown of linguistic choices such as syntax and lexicon, which Van Dijk discusses. Instead I have worked from his basis of focussing on how uses of language may reveal an "*us* versus *them* dimension" (Ibid.) within the Etsy conflict, and I will do this by pointing out how specific choices of words may be interpreted as ideological, and deeply value-laden. Moreover, Bonnie Brennen also offers up a useful clarification of ideology, which can be seen as "the

dominant ideas of an individual group, class or society, the way meanings are socially produced, or even the false ideas upon which a social, political or economic system is based", so when undertaking an ideological analysis the aim is to draw out these ideas, which are often overlooked as they may appear "to us as common sense" (2013, 201).

There are a large number of resources to draw upon when exploring this case. Due to the restrictions in the length of this study, I focus on three areas. First I will offer up a context to the October 2013 "backlash", providing an overview of other conflicts that had arisen in the months prior to the policy change, in order to give a clear idea of the existing struggles between Etsy users and the company. This will be done via a brief summary of news articles and responses from Etsy users within the Etsy website. Second, I will move into an in-depth discourse analysis, which will aim to provide insight into the various stakeholders involved in the conflict, who were focussed on negotiating an ideology of authenticity surrounding the "handmade". In doing this, I will work to establish Etsy as a company's actions. Thus, I will consider the webpage that announced the changes from Etsy's point of view, looking at the company's CEO, Chad Dickerson's blog, which expanded on the reasoning behind the change. Third, I will turn to a discourse analysis of the views of users, looking at the comments from Etsy users themselves, which were posted on a discussion forum which linked from Dickerson's blog post; and also looking to comments posted on a blog published ten days later, which aimed to show Etsy users that the policy changes were in keeping with Etsy's core values. The role of Etsy's administrators will also be noted as, although they are employees of the Etsy company, they also have a role in mediating between the company's official line and the concerns of users.

Given the volume of information, I will seek to give an overview of as many views as possible, whilst also looking closely at the specific choices of language and phrasing used, in order to draw from this a sense of the ideological values over which these groups negotiate. I have chosen a chronological approach to my analysis, as Brennen states that in using historical sources, a "chronological framework" can be utilised for the purpose of "tracing a variety of themes over time" (2013, 105). I believe this approach is appropriate for my study, considering that my analysis of the Etsy "backlash" is looking at what happened

between April 2012 and October 2013, which may be a recent occurrence, but can still be considered as history, since it is a study of past events. Tracing these events chronologically helps to give a sense of how the conflict emerged, providing a background context, followed by a discourse analysis of the views of the site's different stakeholders.[18]

The background to the "backlash"

What I have described as the "backlash", occurred in October 2013 after Chad Dickerson, Etsy CEO, announced a set of changes that aimed to clarify existing Etsy policy on handmade items. The changes, which allowed sellers to use external manufacturers to help with activities such as production and shipping, did not occur in a vacuum. This event was arguably the final straw for many Etsy users who had become increasingly dissatisfied with the management of the Etsy community. This stemmed from the influx of "resellers" on the site, shops which offered goods that were mass-produced, mimicking the Etsy aesthetic, but made in factories, or bought in stores and customised with a minimal amount of effort. In April 2012, Etsy featured a seller on its blog, *Ecologica Malibu*, which claimed to be making "handmade" furniture. The popular Etsy parody site, *Regretsy*, "discovered evidence that the shop may be associated with wholesale retailer Bali Ha'i Imports" (Orsini, 2012a)[19]. This provoked anger from Etsy users, and Etsy

[18] It should also be noted that I have chosen not to make user comments anonymous in my study. This decision was made with a consideration of the ethical implications of naming individuals without their direct permission. However, it is my belief that due to the fact that the Etsy forum is a public forum, one which can be openly accessed by any Internet user, those who commented should also be fully aware of that their statements can be accessed – this has occurred on many occasions when press articles have quoted Etsy users by name, and often directly link to their comments in the Etsy site (for example, see Orsini 2012b). If my method had been interview based, or if an ethnographic approach had been taken, then my decision to name users would have been rethought, however, due to the fact I am using a discourse analysis, I believe naming users is appropriate. Moreover, the nature of the Etsy website itself is very much based upon transparency; users, particularly those who are sellers, cannot have anonymity, because they are dependent upon other users trusting them enough to purchase items from them in an online environment. Finally, it should also be noted that a decision has been made to place references to the Etsy forum and blog comments in footnotes in order to maintain the clarity of the text for the reader. These references include the name of the user, as well as the name of their Etsy shop if they have one; this indicates that they are a seller rather than solely a buyer. Comments have also been noted in their original format, and have not been edited to adjust spelling or grammar.

[19] The *Regretsy* blog is no longer running, having been closed by its owner, April Terri Winchell on February 1, 2013. The site is now completely removed, and cannot be accessed. However, it was extremely popular, and this is reflected in news articles (see Solon 2013).

mounted an investigation. The results of their inquiries explained that "Ecologica Malibu is a collective shop, run on Etsy by Mariana with help from a local staff. In keeping with Etsy's rules […] that collective should have been disclosed within the shop; this is now corrected."[20] However, an "open letter to Chad Dickerson" on the Etsy discussion board on April 24, 2012, emphasized continued community dissatisfaction;

> If you cannot do something about a BLATANT re-seller here on etsy, how do you expect to have the trust of other authentic Etsy sellers and Etsy customers when it comes to the smaller re-sellers? We complain about the re-sellers each and every day and yet nothing is done about it.[21]

Here we see a clear opposition between "authentic Etsy sellers and Etsy customers", and the "re-sellers", who are implicitly labelled as being "inauthentic", as they fall outside the classification of authentic Etsy sellers. This gives an indication of the kind of ideological values those who deem themselves "authentic" buyers and sellers possess with regards to this issue. On May 10, Etsy users organized an Etsy blackout, where it was estimated that more than 3,300 sellers set their shops to "vacation mode" in order to protest the confusion around reselling and collectives, highlighted by the controversy over *Ecologica Malibu*, and to try and force Etsy to take action (Kumparak 2012). Etsy responded by saying,

> Right now we think the best way we can address [sellers'] concerns is to focus on clarifying our policies in the ways our community has requested. These policies have been unchanged since 2009, but they do need clarification. Every marketplace's policies grow and evolve with their community. We're committed to that evolution and in fact have been working on it seriously for a few months. (Ibid.)

[20] This announcement was made by the Etsy Administrator, Juliet Gorman, posted on April 23, 2012, on the Etsy team announcements forum, (see Gorman 2012).
[21] This "letter" was posted by the user, StuffINeed on April 24, 2012 on the Etsy teams discussion forum, (see StuffINeed 2012).

This brief overview offers a context that is important in understanding that the conflict between Etsy as a company and its users has occurred on occasions other than solely in the October 2013 "backlash". Indeed, it must be made clear that throughout its history, there have been conflicts between Etsy and its users. Nevertheless, the choice to study the October 2013 "backlash" in particular, is related to the specific focus on the change to the definition of "handmade" on the site, and the particularly ideological nature of the conflict that ensued.[22]

The changing definition of "handmade"

The policy changes promised by Etsy came in October 2013, when the company published a webpage containing details of their "New Guidelines for Etsy Shops"[23], which followed with the statement; "In eight years, you've grown Etsy in amazing ways we never predicted. It's time for our policies to catch up." (Ibid.) At the centre of this announcement was the statement "Handmade will always be the heart of Etsy", but "In our diverse marketplace, handmade can't mean a single method or process." Three principles of Etsy's new definition of "handmade" were introduced as (1) "Authorship", in which "[a] handmade item begins with you. Etsy's not the place to sell new items you had no role in creating." (2) "Responsibility", though which "[s]hop owners on Etsy are invested and knowledgeable about how their handmade items are made." (3) "Transparency", defined as "being open and honest about how items are made" in order to "create a marketplace built on trust." (Ibid.) This is a significant departure from the original values of the Etsy site, and its roots in the indie craft subcultural movement. It transforms the notion of "handmade", which, as we shall see, a vocal group of users felt was defined in a very different way, setting in motion a negotiation between the site's stakeholders over the "handmade" term.

In the blog post series "Notes from Chad", Etsy's CEO, Chad Dickerson also added his own thoughts on the changes to policy and defended them in the face of

[22] Though the October 2013 "backlash" has been one of the most high profile Etsy conflicts, there have been other notable instances of disagreements between Etsy users and the Etsy company over the years, which have been documented by the press. See Marco (2008), Bruder (2009), Kramer (2011).

[23] These new guidelines were retrieved from the Etsy website at, https://www.etsy.com/new-guidelines (see Etsy 2014a).

criticism from users. He addressed the issue of the "handmade" first and foremost, stating:

> When Etsy started, we relied on one word to carry all our values out into the world: handmade. Almost immediately, that was a problem. Many of us felt we knew handmade when we saw it, but that was hard to put into enforceable policy[…]When we rethought these policies, we went back to the heart of Etsy: the people in the community […]handmade was about values we as a community prize […] on knowing the person and the story behind a handmade item. We know defining handmade as authorship, responsibility and transparency may not match your personal definition, but these are the values we see Etsy sellers living every day. (Dickerson 2013a)

This idea of knowing what handmade was "when we saw it", very much relates to Vannini and Williams' discussion of the "modern myth of authenticity" (2009, 3), that communities have a perceived sense of what is and is not authentic. Dickerson is suggesting that the Etsy community has a collective sense of what is or is not handmade, and he draws directly on the "values we as a community prize", which is about the "person and the story behind a handmade item". He also acknowledges that not everyone will agree on his definition, which suggests the socially constructed notion of the authentic "handmade" product. Nevertheless, the reaction from many members of the Etsy community revealed that they had a very clear idea of what was handmade, and that Dickerson's new definition was not up to scratch. This statement by Dickerson can also be seen as an attempt to construct authenticity around the company's new definition of handmade, by claiming that it is very much part of the original values and 'spirit' of Etsy. This resonates with Vannini and Williams' study, in which they noted that "contemporary culture industries invest their lifeblood in producing the very authenticity they tell us cannot be manufactured" (2009, 2). By attempting to construct, or "manufacture" a new definition of "handmade" and defending it in such a valued, emotional way, Etsy's aim was arguably to try and maintain the authenticity of their site in the eyes of their users. Since authenticity is socially

constructed, and therefore a "moving target" (Peterson 2004, 1094), perhaps Dickerson believed that it might be possible to convince users that Etsy's redefinition of the handmade term could still retain its authenticity, even if it then meant that items were not required to be made by the hands of the designer.

Rapidly, opposition began to form against the changes that had been implemented. One of the main discussions around the policy changes was hosted by Etsy administrators, who aimed to help to make clear the details of the changes noted by Chad, and to try to placate users. Administrator Jaime DeLanghe began the discussion entitled "New Guidelines and Policies"[24], which detailed the changes and also noted "I realize that these are big changes -- a subject for more than one town hall, one email announcement, or a post in the forums. These changes deserve some mulling over and talking through."[25] Here we see the role of the Etsy administrator as a mediator, and as an employee of Etsy whose job is to help maintain the Etsy community. In this case, the administrator in question was following through with Dickerson's note at the end of his blog post, which stated, "We're here to take your questions and discuss your concerns. Join us in the Forums […] we will be listening and responding." (2013a), and which linked directly to the forum in question.[26]

[24] It is worth noting here that since there were 2271 responses on the discussions forum, I limited my analysis of this section of the Etsy website to the first page of responses, which equated to 83 comments. I also read through the first ten pages of these comments, and noted down the key themes that were coming up time and again. What I found was that the first page of comments was largely reflective of the rest of the comments, so in only choosing to closely look at the first page of comments, I believe that I am not severely limited or causing bias within my analysis.

[25] Jaime DeLanghe from peanutbutterandjaime, posted on October 1, 2013, (see DeLanghe 2013).

[26] When looking at the forum in question (see DeLanghe 2013), it should be noted that the page begins with posts from administrators, which address "top rated" questions in the forum thread. The administrator who set up the forum, Jamie DeLanghe, explained that "we'll create a voting thread overnight, so that we [the administrators] can rest up, come back in the morning to answer top voted questions and pick the conversation back up." This shows the relatively democratic system administrators used in order to answer questions from users, selecting those that had been voted for by the users themselves. I have chosen not to discuss these administrators' responses in my discourse analysis because they reiterate the explanations offered by Chad Dickerson's blog (see Dickerson, 2013a). For example, the administrator Eli Goodman responded to a user question about how using manufacturers can still be considered handmade, in which he stated ""What we concluded is that our sellers make Etsy - we look to them to tell us what handmade means […] Thus, we settled on a definition of handmade that was more around the values that these sellers embodied, as opposed to the methods of production that they used." This is almost exactly the same as the wording used by Chad, and very much represents the nature of the administrators responses in the forum.

"True" handmade

Almost instantaneously after Dickerson's announcement was made, users, most of whom were sellers with their own stores, began commenting. The user, Melissa Scholefield, offered one of the first comments that addressed the issue of "handmade", stating that the changes seem to be

> just a roundabout way of saying that the whole concept of "handmade" is being completely thrown out the window. Small business are never going to be able to compete with people who can hire outside help or work with manufacturers. Basically what everyone has said is going to happen for ages, but that Etsy has vehemently denied, has now officially happened - Etsy can no longer really be called a site for small business selling completely handmade items.[27]

Twenty-one other comments were issued in direct response to this, all of which stated that they agreed with Melissa's sentiments. A user named Ann added,

> Now actual "handmade" items, made with a single persons hands, are now going to be side to side in searches with mass produced items that are outsourced and sold on Etsy for cheaper since those shops have the means to do it on a larger scale.[28]

Here we begin to see some of the constructed notions of "actual 'handmade'", which could also be read as a concern for "authentic" handmade, as Ann is implicitly stating a valued judgement of "handmade" by distinguishing that "actual" handmade must be made "with a single person's hands". Moreover, she contrasts this with a description of "mass produced items", which she is implying cannot match her notion of "actual" handmade. Comparisons with mass

[27] Posted by Melissa Scholefield from NailVirtuoso. In the following references, all comments were posted on October 1, 2013, and have been retrieved from https://www.etsy.com/teams/7722/discussions/discuss/13091813/, (see DeLanghe 2013), unless stated otherwise.
[28] Posted by Ann from PrettyVagrant.

production are similarly raised by the user Barbara Heiling, who noted, "Etsy Handmade - The New Wal-Mart. So sad to think true handmade is become a thing of the past on Etsy."[29] Again, it is clear to see that a sense of the "authentic" handmade is being drawn upon in this comment, through the use of the word "true". Much like Ann's use of the word "actual" to describe handmade, Barbara's use of "true" works to the same effect. Both are invoking a sense of the *real*, the *authentic* handmade product. This also touches upon Van Dijk's ideological focus on *us* vs. *them*, in terms of those who remain "true" to authentic handmade processes, and those who sidestep or undermine these values by using manufacturers.

"The Little Guys" & competing with manufacturers

This issue is also directly addressed by many commentators, who assert that they will have to "compete" with large, manufactured shops and, because of their dedication to the authentic, true, handmade craft, they will lose out. Karen Martinez noted, "what happens to single makers like myself who are in charge of the whole process from beginning to end, how will we ever be able to compete?"[30] This comment is also interesting as she classifies herself as part of a group of "single makers", and evokes a communal, shared sense of disappointment, using the word "we" in both a personal and a collective sense. Other users who replied directly to her comment followed suit. Eve Geisler stated, "This is what I want to know. But I think I already know the answer. We can't compete"[31]. Two other users, reiterated the latter part of her statement that "we can't compete"[32]. A similar and repeated phrase also crops up in this first page of comments in the discussion forum, in which commentators differentiate between the "little guys" and those with larger stores that use multiple workers to craft their items. Rae Padulo stated; "I feel so let down by Etsy. The company was built on small, handmade vendors. Their whole philosophy was the little guy,

[29] Posted by Barbara Heilig from bobann23.
[30] Posted by Karen Martinez from FioriBelle.
[31] Posted by Eve Geisler from EvesLittleEarthlings.
[32] Posted by khmetalwork from khmetalwork, and helen from hjmArtGallery.

one-of-a-kind. Their foundation was built on guys like us!"[33] The personal and the collective "us" is used on this occasion, and Rae's testimony also highlights the sense that Etsy is rejecting its roots, turning its back on the original "philosophy" of "one-of-a-kind" handmade items. Through this sense of competition between the "handmade" and the manufactured, the "little guy" and the large established stores, there is a shift away from simply looking at the value of handmade. This suggests that users are also very much concerned about the impact of the policy changes on their ability to make money by selling their goods on Etsy. This moves beyond a focus solely on authentic handmade items, and towards a concern for making a living. Nevertheless, the sense of making a living by doing what you love[34], was also one of the founding elements of the Etsy community, and links back to the subcultural values of the indie craft movement, as craft is seen as a means of earning a living away from the grind of a "nine to five" working life[35].

Users' differing definitions of "handmade"

The week after the policy change announcement was made, Etsy published a blog entitled, "5 Etsy Sellers Partnering With Manufacturers" (Madewell 2013), which aimed to highlight the positive elements of the policy changes, and emphasize that they were not a huge departure from previous rules. This was done by profiling five sellers who used manufacturers and were Etsy 'legal' before the policy changes had been implemented. Unlike the discussion forum, this blog post was not intended as a site for users to discuss the Etsy policy changes, and it can be said that those who commented on the blog "hijacked" its purpose, making it a location for the expression of discontent.[36] Thus the blog,

[33] Posted by Rae Padulo from mudstarceramics, posted on October 2, 2013.
[34] This is supported by the Etsy blog series "Quit Your Day Job", which profiles Etsy users who are successfully running their own businesses through Etsy, (see Etsy 2014b).
[35] Abrahams discusses the "Quit Your Day Job" blog posts on Etsy at length, stating that "Etsy works diligently to promote the concept that anyone can make a living doing his or her hobby. The 'quit your day job' series of articles […] speaks to this ideology most directly." (2008, 119). Walker also references examples of crafters outside of Etsy who were able to use their crafting skills as a form of employment, stating the example of the Austin Craft Mafia, a "group of nine indiepreneurs [that] traces its roots to a 2001 meeting of young women who hoped to leverage their craft skills into a way to quit their day jobs. Each member built her own business and helped the others do the same" (Walker 2007).
[36] It should be noted that Etsy keeps strict community standards where overt criticism of other users is not tolerated, and Etsy has often been accused by users and critics of censoring or closing

which was intended to convey an optimistic message about the new policy changes, in fact became a site that further played out the conflict. Though some positive comments were posted, they remained in the minority. An example of one of the positive comments came from the user, Isha Webb, who stated;

> Bravo! Its cool to see small handmade businesses growing and thriving and adapting to meet their growth as they succeed. Sustainable, Ethical, Made in the Usa products from cottage industry or small family owned manufacturers is ADMIRABLE and the future of America and key to repairing the economy.[37]

Though this post may agree with Etsy's new definition of these businesses being "handmade", the user still emphasises the "authentic" values of the company, with a focus being on the business as "small", "sustainable", "ethical", "cottage industry", "family owned". The implication is that this makes the products valuable and desirable. This positive reaction may be linked to the fact that the blog was intended to show optimistic stories surrounding the policy changes, or may be due to the fact that users had had a little time to process the changes, as the blog was posted nine days after the original announcement. What is important to note here is that subcultural members "will not internalize or identify with pre-existing culture in exactly the same way, nor will they necessarily construct identical or even similar subcultural identities" (Wood 2003, 38). Interestingly, those Etsy users who supported the changes were not attacked or questioned by other Etsy users who did not share their opinion, instead they were simply ignored, no comments were directed in reply to such positive statements. By contrast, those sellers who appeared in the blog were subject to much discussion and judgement; many users declared that their work

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off discussions that are overly critical of the site and its users. The comment thread on this "hijacked" blog was closed on October 12, 2013, when an administrator stated; "We understand that many of you have strong opinions about Etsy's new Guidelines, but calling out other sellers or making judgements about their businesses isn't okay. I am going to close the comments on this post" (see Madewell 2013).

[37] Posted by Isha Webb from Loveybyisha. All of the following references have been retrieved from https://blog.etsy.com/news/2013/5-etsy-sellers-partnering-with-manufacturers/?ref=community_blog_title, (see Madewell 2013) and were posted on October 11, 2013, unless stated otherwise.

was “not handmade”[38]. This led to one of the featured sellers, DiscoveryDenim, to comment in defence of her company and her commitment to Etsy’s original values; she had to defend her authenticity within the Etsy community,

> I started here on Etsy (back in its Beta days). It is the home to my business. I have grown it slowly and steadily, with a lot of all nighters. If I had to leave, because it was too hard to do everything myself, and that came at the sacrifice of serving Etsy customers, then I would. However, I think Etsy is a visionary for what handmade is and always has been. It exists at a heart, soul level. Working with a local business to help me with production, doesn't mean I plan on flooding out other shops, or EVER moving my process overseas. It doesn't mean I will start slacking on the quality, or lower my price to prevent any competition. It means the opposite of all of that. Handmade also means that I have a personal relationship with each and every woman who helps in the creation of my capes.

This is reminiscent of subcultural studies of online communities (Williams and Copes, 2005), in which members vie for subcultural authenticity based on the extent to which they uphold and embody the values and lifestyle of their given subculture. Here, we see that the user is placing herself as a veteran of the Etsy site, stating that she has been part of the community since “its Beta days”. She emphasizes the work that she has put into her business, by pulling “a lot of all nighters”. Most crucially, she defends her allegiance to the Etsy vision, which “exists at a heart, soul level”. Arguably, she is invoking a sense of authentic values in her description of her store, playing down her commercial success and emphasizing her small business built on “handmade” values.

[38] The users Lisa from ShesSoCraftyGoods1, Stacey Sobelman from SMARTdesignsbyStacey, chantelle rodriquez all specifically used the phrase “still not handmade”, and user Travis from strangepainting stated “This is small business, not handmade”.

Selling out

Aside from this, the real anger and dissatisfaction was largely directed at Etsy, the company. One commenter, Ann, in reply to another user who questioned whether the photos used on the blog documented the actual people who made the product, stated "Those photos do seem misleading Serena. I wonder if they are from the past when they used to make their items themselves. Don't get me wrong, I am not knocking the shops. My issue is the way Etsy is handling this for the shopper."[39] This attitude was supported by several others, including Kenna Rustic, who said; "Don't blame or find fault with the big shops....etsy opened the door for them and they just ran through it."[40] The user Stitchy Fox argued, "I'm sure the makers are also good people, and they're doing what's right for them. I have no beef with them. But Etsy, you let us down. You let the individual artisan handmakers down."[41] This sense that anger was directed strongly at Etsy as a company suggests a kind of solidarity between the sites users. They may not agree with the way that these stores use "collectives" or outside manufacturers, but they see Etsy as the entity which has rejected its values and its roots. This ties to Van Dijk's study of ideologies, in which he suggests that "[n]egative properties attributed to outgroups […] may be enhanced by focussing on their responsible agency" (1995, 24). Here, we see users placing the responsibility for the problems with Etsy as a company. Moreover, Van Dijk also argues that ideological values are often expressed by "semantic strategies". In the cases above, we see what he terms "*blame transfer*", and he uses the example, "I have no problem with the minorities in the shop, but my customers…" (Ibid., 27). The effect of such statements, he argues, is that they "contribute to the overall strategy of positive self-description […] on the one hand, and of negative other-presentation, on the other hand, because the second term of this moves, introduced by the 'but', is always negative about Others" (Ibid.).

The accusation that Etsy is "selling out" is also noted. As one user put it; "Shame on you, Etsy, for selling your soul... Shame on you"[42]. "Selling out" is a

[39] Posted by Ann from PrettyVagrant.
[40] Posted by Kenna Rustic from RusticSpiritLinens.
[41] Posted by Stitchy Fox from SleepingFoxStitchery.
[42] Posted by Veronica from VeronicaRussekJoyas.

term which is commonly used in relation to perceptions of authenticity, Pillsbury argues that "Selling out functions within various discourses of authenticity, but it has developed primarily as a way to *defend* notions of authenticity and autonomy […] the cry of selling out signals the breaking of an unspoken social ideal" (2006, 139). Therefore, by accusing Etsy of "selling [its] soul", users are suggesting that Etsy is not being true to its own values. A user called Caroline sums up the perceived "shallowness" of Etsy's policy changes by stating that "What I resent most about their attempt to change what manufacturing looks like is that it rides on the coattails of what Etsy was. The 'spirit of handmade' is now being used to maintain an image, the Etsy brand."[43] Here we see how the user suggests that "spirit of handmade" is being sold out, it is being "used to maintain an image", rather than being a value through which the Etsy community is built. Again, there is a sense that this user feels there are commercial interests at play, which are undermining the values and authenticity which made up "what Etsy was". We also see an oppositional argument being made, that is between what Etsy *was* and what Etsy is today; so instead of an *us* vs. *them*, there is a *then* vs. *now* debate emerging, where the sense of what Etsy was in the past is viewed nostalgically.[44]

The "handmade" & Etsy's original vision

Many other users expressed their disappointment that Etsy had turned its back on its original values, and these statements revealed strong emotional and ideological values attached to the "handmade". A user named Christine stated: "I always thought Etsy as a 'shelter' for talented people who like to make things

[43] Posted by Caroline from DarkRide, posted October 12, 2013.

[44] It is interesting to note that Etsy's administrators were not directly targeted in negative terms by users in the way that Etsy as a company was. Administrators are frequently discussed in negative terms outside the Etsy website itself, on blogs by Etsy users, which critique the site and its behaviour. Examples of such sites include *Etsy Bitch* (for a list of their blog posts related to Etsy administrators, see Etsy Bitch 2014) and *The Muted Seller* (again, for a sample of posts about Etsy administrators, see The Muted Seller 2014). These are obviously extreme examples, and such opinions are not often articulated within the Etsy forums themselves, though there are instances where users express exasperation because administrators have not answered their questions, which leads to comments such as "where are the Admins when you need them?" (see Thornton 2013). Overall though, the lack of anger towards administrators themselves in both the forum thread and the blog comments suggests that users were not interested in attacking administrators as individual Etsy employees, but were dissatisfied with the choices that "Etsy", as a company, made. Nevertheless, this may of course also encompass employees and senior staff such as Dickerson.

with their hands, who spend their time, effort, spirit, ideas to make unique things, that carry a special aura as HANDMADE."[45] Here there are a number of uses of language that are worth examining. Firstly, the user asserts a belief in the kind of place Etsy was, that it fostered a community which acted as a "shelter" to those who made things "with their hands". There is an implicit value attached to this action, as she states that there is a "special aura" in the handmade. This sense of an "aura" is an interesting use of language, it is a word that Susan Luckman uses, stating that "[t]oday, when direct connections to the hands that produced the goods we own are rare, an abundance of mass-produced goods reinstates a Benjaminian aura to the analogue and the handmade." (2013, 264) This "Benjaminian aura" Luckman speaks of is one which invokes Walter Benjamin's understanding that the aura of art "withers in the age of mechanical reproduction." (Benjamin 1968, 219) This concept of aura links to authenticity as, in Benjamin's view, "the whole sphere of authenticity is outside the technical" (Ibid., 218). Other users also utilize language which emphasizes the authenticity of the handmade. A user called dgordon suggested that handmade goods have a "purity"[46] and another, Serena, suggests that the handmade is "beautiful". She also adds that this is due to the fact that "a buyer knows whose hands made the object they are buying."[47] Here, the emphasis is again on the hands of the individual, and this connection which develops between a buyer and a seller because of the tactile nature of the practice of crafting.

Ownership over Etsy and the "handmade"

An interesting comment from a user named Susan suggested that there may be another issue involved in the "backlash" over the change in Etsy's policies. She stated;

> Having your product manufactured is not handmade and never will be in the real world. Sorry etsy, but you have no right to try and redefine the

[45] Posted by Christine from xroma.
[46] Posted by dgordon from dgordon, posted on October 12, 2013.
[47] Posted by Serena from SerenaSmithLampwork.

> term, "handmade." It's not yours, it belongs to all the artists who actually create with their hands.[48]

Here, a claim to ownership is being made over the term “handmade”. We again see an opposition forming through users defining themselves in groups. In this case, the user is asserting that possession over the “handmade” is with “all the artists who actually create with their hands”, as opposed to simply a company which facilitates these artists through allowing them an online space in which to sell their products. There is certainly some sense of emotional ownership at play within the Etsy community. Lamerichs, in her study of fan practices, argues that “emotional ownership is achieved through creative practices, the purchase of objects or memorabilia and establishing social bounds with like-minded individuals” (2014, 8). This may also be applicable to the Etsy community, which, though not a fan community, does base itself on “creative practices” and “the purchase of objects”, which is rooted in a community of people who share similar values. Steven G. Jones comments interestingly that early studies of online communities, detailed in McLaughlin, Osborne & Smith’s (1995) study of the Usenet newsgroup, found that “those who frequented Usenet newsgroups provide evidence that they feel the group and its messages ‘belong’ to them” (Jones 1997, 16). This, Jones argues, created

> an inversion of traditional community power and possession. No longer do *we*, as members of the group, belong to the community, rather the community belongs to *us*. Our sense of identity is not only derived from our identification with the group, it is derived from our understanding of the group identity. (Ibid.)

Moreover, many users offered up suggestions for how they saw the new policies fitting within the Etsy community. Across both the blog comments and the discussion forum, users contributed ideas about how they saw the Etsy community functioning. For instance, several users suggested making separate categories for those items that are “truly” handmade, and those that use

[48] Posted by Susan from archaicdesign.

manufacturing. The user, Rhi Louise, suggested; "Etsy bosses why don't you open a sister site, keep Etsy hand made, and collectives, and open a second site, or at the very least a separate section for the companies who have been so successful with your help"[49]. The fact that users are making suggestions about how the Etsy site should be run suggests that the participatory nature of the Etsy community has given them a sense that they have a role in shaping it. This also perhaps begins to explain part of the anger felt by Etsy users, who may have questioned the authenticity of the participatory "community" when considering the lack of consideration Etsy had for its users in making its policy changes[50]. Moreover, it shows how users who were dissatisfied with the company's alterations to the site's policy attempted to negotiate with the company to make changes that would fall in line with their idea of Etsy as a site for authentic handmade practice.

Discussion

Overall, the discourse analysis of the sources above has aimed to provide a sense of the chronological reaction to the changes in policy made by Etsy in October 2013 and draw out the negotiations over the "handmade", which occurred amongst the site's stakeholders. It has revealed that the Etsy users who commented in the online sites discussed above were united by a shared ideological view of the notion of "handmade" as something valuable and desirable. However, it was also shown that not all users interpreted the changes made by Etsy as something negative; as an attack on the ideology of authenticity of the "handmade". This was observed in the blog post published by Etsy on October 10, 2013, which profiled five users who had incorporated the new changes into their shops, and also featured some comments from users who in turn supported these profiled businesses. These Etsy users understood the positive elements of the policy changes as something which would help make

[49] Posted by Rhi Louise from PuffyTheSlayer.

[50] In a post on Henry Jenkins' blog, Jenkins interviews Aaron Delwiche and Jennifer Jacobs Henderson. Within this interview, they state that "When authentic participatory energy turns out to be little more than democratic window dressing for top-down decision-making, those who devoted time and energy to the process might walk away feeling cynical, hopeless, and discouraged" (Jenkins, 2013), this could arguably be applied to the case of the Etsy "backlash", where, as we have already seen, some users certainly expressed such feelings of disenchantment towards Etsy for the changes it made.

ethical, local, "handmade" businesses successful. Nevertheless, negative opinions made up the majority of comments on the blog, and revealed that, despite Etsy's aim to negotiate the authenticity of their new policies by producing the positive stories featured on the blog itself, this move failed to pacify a certain group of users. Those who reacted with anger offered up a much more specific interpretation of the "handmade" as a process which is restricted to a sole individual who acts as designer and creator.

Despite these differences in opinion, it can still be argued that both groups highlighted an ideological interpretation of "handmade", one that was rooted in small, ethical business practices. Though, if we focus on the views of the majority of the users who commented in the forum and the blog post, it is clear to see that these users saw the changes as a rejection of the 'spirit' of Etsy. Additionally, they also saw it as a move that would disadvantage many sellers who are committed to handmade crafting.

The comments analysed revealed that the majority of users who commented in the forum and the blog post made claims to be authentic by asserting their belief in "true" or "actual" handmade, and placed themselves in opposition to those who did not fall within this classification. Common uses of language were revealed, in which concern was shown for the "small", and the "little guys", who adhered to "handmade" practices, and who were painted as the victims of Etsy's changes, who would be left unable to compete with larger manufacturers. Etsy itself was also demonized, seen as "selling out", and as rejecting or turning its back on its original values. It can be argued that these emotional and value-laden responses support my assertion that the Etsy community is brought together by a commitment to the value of "handmade", which is rooted in the values of the indie craft subculture, and is invoked as a means of judging authenticity. These attitudes that were displayed by the Etsy users reflect the website's position as a subcultural "social space" (Williams 2006, 175), the site where subcultural activity takes place, which, (reiterating Bennett's arguments about subcultures online) is key for "the formation of alliances grounded in common beliefs" (2004, 164). The analysis above has revealed these alliances and common beliefs within Etsy. The site's role as a subcultural space also explains why users felt a sense of ownership over the community, (and, by

extension, the notion of "handmade"). This means that Etsy occupies an awkward position as a site of subcultural practice that is, in fact, owned by a commercial company, rather than by the users. Considering this, it is easy to see how conflicts have emerged between Etsy as a company and its users over the years.

Yet it is important to understand that those who were most vocal in their opposition to the changes were a minority of Etsy users. The site is now so large, with around 1 million sellers, that even the 2271 comments which accumulated on the discussion forum were a tiny percentage of the overall users. I must acknowledge that my method has only scratched the surface of the Etsy community and the values which unite it. A much more extensive exploration of the site would be necessary in order to begin to develop a greater insight into the complexities of this huge, and growing community. Nevertheless, it can be argued that these vocal users (the majority of whom are sellers), can represent the subcultural 'core' of Etsy; those who may identify strongly with the values of the indie craft movement and who could be seen as offering what Fine described as "structural roles" (1983, 33) for the Etsy community. They voiced an ideology of the "handmade", which offers up a shared sense of the values that Etsy as a company and a community *should* embody, harking back to the early days of the site and its original policies.

Conclusion

Whilst studies of subcultures have tended to focus on counter-cultural youth movements centred around fashion, music, and fan-related activities, this exploration of indie craft has exposed a rather different kind of subculture, one which includes participants from a variety of ages and which, whilst valuing DIY and handcrafting as an alternative to mass-consumption, is open to expansion and "mainstream" appropriation. Moreover, indie craft offers an example of a subcultural community that is grounded predominantly in online, rather than face-to-face activities. As has been highlighted, Etsy is one of these online sites, which the indie craft subculture utilises as a space to share ideas, buy and sell craft artefacts, and to form a community around the ideology of authenticity rooted in the perceived value of the "handmade".

Through an analysis of the Etsy "backlash" to policy changes made in October 2013, I have provided evidence of the ways in which different stakeholders within the Etsy community have negotiated this ideology of authenticity. Etsy as a company aimed to adapt the notion of "handmade" to fit its own business needs, with the CEO and the company's administrators trying to maintain the perceived authenticity of their new definition, defending that their changes as still preserving the "spirit of Etsy". Yet this conflicted with the views of a vocal minority of users, who saw this new definition as completely inauthentic, and considered the changes as a destruction of their "romantic and utopian vision of the handmade" (as something created with one makers' hands), whilst also raising questions over "the very real necessity of income generation" (Luckman 2013a, 264), and the viability of this in the face of competition from manufacturers.

This study opens up venues for further research, which could expand the analysis in order to directly investigate user attitudes to the "handmade" through qualitative interviews to reveal more personal stories of the Etsy experience. Additionally, it could also be of academic interest to investigate this romantic notion of the handmade, which scholars have linked to the British Arts and Crafts movement of the early nineteenth century (see Abrahams 2008, Gauntlett 2011, Luckman 2013a). Indeed, romanticism has also been identified in the formation of the modern notion of authenticity, stemming from the Romantic period and Rousseau's thinking about authentic individuality and "le sentiment de l'existence" (see Taylor 1991, 27). Whether these two ideas could interplay would certainly be interesting to explore.

Today, the Etsy community has been transformed from a start-up founded by an idealistic young man with ties to the indie craft movement, into a company with offices around the world, which is "on track to cross $1 billion in total annual transactions" (Malik 2013). Arguably, this exponential growth has magnified the existing tensions within the community, and for some Etsy users, the interests of Etsy as a business are beginning to overturn the romantic ideal of "true handmade". Whilst the CEO may claim that "[i]n a world where everyone is trying to manufacture authenticity, I'm really proud that Etsy is the real deal" (Dickerson 2013b), the opinions of its most vocal users have suggested

otherwise. This suggests that the negotiation over the ideology of authenticity rooted in the “handmade” remains unresolved, and the effect on the site’s subcultural core uncertain. Whether the site can retain its position as a home to the “handmade” and a site for indie craft subcultural practice in the long run, therefore remains to be seen.

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