“Grandma never knit like this”: Reclaiming older women’s knitting practices from discourses of new craft in Britain

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Accepted for publication in **Leisure Studies** (30 January 2019)

Abstract

New discourses of craft construct knitting as young, hip, socially networked and politically conscious and the experiences of knitters who do not fit into this formulation are marginalised. 7.3 million people in Britain knit; the vast majority are women in their mid-thirties and older. Yet popular media accounts of ‘new knitting’ mobilise the derogatory figure of the ‘grandma’ to repudiate knitters who are seen not to properly instantiate contemporary femininity. Although this derision accrues particularly to older women, knitters of all ages can be similarly dismissed. Knitting is thus a site of struggle around new formations of gender in postfeminist culture in which some women fall short. This study uses original qualitative data from focus groups with 15 adult knitters in North-west England and North Wales to give voice to women who do not identify with ‘new knitting’ practices and primarily pursue their hobby in more conventional contexts. The article finds that traditional domestic craft practices continue to play a significant role, particularly in older women’s leisure, and that ‘new knitting’ is alienating for some practitioners. While the article concludes that twenty-first century discourses of craft have devalued established knitting practices, it also indicates that these are useful sources of critique of hipster capitalist postfeminist culture.

Keywords: Age, craft, gender, knitting, postfeminism, woke

Introduction

Knitting has undergone a revival in popularity in the twenty-first century. An estimated 7.3 million people in Britain knit – around 11 per cent of the population (Wool and the Gang, 2015; Rowan cited in Turney, 2009). Until recently, knitting was seen as an unfashionable pastime associated with older women, mundane domesticity and the past (Turney, 2009), but its renaissance has gone hand-in-hand with the wider reinvention of ‘crafting’ as a youthful, fashionable leisure activity, imbricated in the ‘hipster’ lifestyle that is mainstream in cosmopolitan, urban areas of Western Europe, North America and Australia (Scott, 2017). Hipsters have been defined as the fashionable “young, white… middle class, typically between 20 and 35 years old” and are demarcated by their arguably ironic pursuit of authenticity via

connoisseurship of outmoded aesthetic styles and creative practices (Schiermer, 2014, p. 170). Indeed, after a decline in popularity in the late-twentieth century, crafts such as knitting, home brewing, baking and terrarium gardening have been reimagined as trendy pastimes in the hipster capitalist economy. According to Scott (2017), hipster capitalism is founded in "neo-artisanal production" practices that have emerged as "the totemic sites of the urban new cultural economy" (p. 61). Concomitantly, contemporary media discourse represents knitting as youthful, edgy, authentic, social, entrepreneurial, feminist and empowered. Groeneveld (2010) has called this "the 'new' knitting" (p. 259). But only some knitters are accorded these qualities; those who do not conform to the "hip and edgy aesthetics" of new knitting (Bratich & Brush, 2011, p. 241) or situate themselves within hipster capitalism's neo-artisanal cultural economies are marginalised and their experiences overlooked.

The majority of knitters in Britain – 5.9 million – are thought to be women in their mid-thirties or older (http://www.ukhandknitting.com/about-us; Immediate Media Co., 2017). While age is not a reliable indictor of hipster crafting affinities, many knitters in Britain today are older than is allowed for by popular media representations of knitting as a young person's leisure pursuit. This re-imagination of knitting is predicated on the simultaneous evocation and disavowal of a supposedly fusty past using the figure of the "grandma". Newspaper articles celebrating knitting employ titles like "Grandma never knit like this" (Trebay, 2014), while knitting accessories are emblazoned with slogans including "Yes, I like to knit. No, I am not ~~old~~" (We Are Knitters, 2018). Although these disavowals accrue particularly to older women, they are not only about age. As Turney (2009) observes, the ridiculed figure of the "'old' woman" knitter is mobilised "as a sign of non-liberated femininity" (p. 216). Being an older female knitter is coterminous with a passé gender formation so the 'grandma' encapsulates both 'old' women and younger women who do not correspond to imperatives to be cool knitters within hipster capitalist contexts. The granny-knitter is thus "a highly gendered relic from yesteryear that not only defies fashion but somehow deserves derision" (Turney, 2009, p. 5).

These ideas draw on feminist media theorist Gill's (2017) diagnosis of a new form of postfeminist femininity that is now "virtually hegemonic" (p. 609)

in neoliberal societies. Postfeminist sensibility emphasises individualism, agency, self-fulfilment and empowerment, all of which are sought and expressed via “endless work on the self” (Gill, 2017, p. 609). This extends to leisure practices understood to provide personal fulfilment for women, including re-articulations of traditional domestic crafts. Matchar (2013) coined the term “new domesticity” to describe how household activities that were once hallmarks of subjugated housewifery have been rebranded as signifiers of female satisfaction and entrepreneurialism, while Genz (2009) points to the polysemy of the postfeminist “housewife” who “renegotiates and resignifies her domestic/feminine position, deliberately choosing to ‘go home’” (p. 50) through her leisure practices. Thus domesticity is reconstructed as a site of feminine agency. New knitting is imbricated in this picture and knitters who do not perform their domesticity in line with the required postfeminist sensibility threaten to disrupt its distinction from earlier, oppressive instantiations of housewifery and, consequently, are denigrated via the moribund signifier of the “grandma”. This observation supports Jermyn’s (2016) work on postfeminism and aging where she argues that postfeminist culture cannot countenance “becoming that most disparaged thing, *an old woman*” (p. 574).

The sociological study of textile handicrafts has been neglected because they are generally perceived to be “too domestic, too enmeshed in the non-economic (and therefore less valued) world” to be of interest to leisure studies researchers (Stalp, 2015, p. 269). Although things are changing and a body of research on textile crafts, including knitting, has emerged, academic accounts of knitting generally favour hipster contexts such as craftivism and ‘stitch and bitch’ groups that, while not exclusive to young knitters, are certainly part of the new knitting scene (Minahan & Cox, 2007; Mann, 2015; Black, 2017; Close, 2018). Empirical work has privileged young knitters (Stannard & Sanders, 2015) or focussed on subversive knitters who “explicitly reject the stereotype of the ‘granny’ knitter and seek to re-invent knitting as something creative, hip, fun, and sexy” regardless of their age (Kelly, 2014, p. 138). Only a handful of analyses have engaged with older knitters. Riley, Corkhill and Morris (2013) concentrate on the craft’s therapeutic properties for combatting illness and loneliness, which has the side-effect of constructing older knitters as vulnerable and in need of (self-

)care. Clarke (2016), Platt (2017) and Burke (2018) have also studied older women's knitting to varying extents. These studies exemplify the importance of the perspectives and experiences of older knitters and raise questions about how these may be different from those of younger practitioners and how this can be explored without reproducing the reductive 'hipster-versus-grandmas' rhetoric of popular media representations of knitting.

Following Hall and Jayne's (2016) argument that empirical research into the multiplicity of contemporary textile craft cultures is "much needed" (p. 230), this article sets out to give voice to knitters who do not conform to the discursive construction of the hip, young knitter promoted in popular media and contemporary culture and given prominence in academic research about knitting. In this way, it seeks to counter these knitters' marginalisation within discourses of leisure in Britain. We present original qualitative data generated in mixed age focus groups with adult knitters. The study finds that many participants' experiences of knitting differ significantly from discourses that construct it as a youthful, public, politically conscious hobby. Older participants in particular expressed a lack of identification with the new cultural practices of younger knitters. Our focus on what may be considered ordinary or mundane knitting contributes to a body of work on "vernacular, traditional and situated forms of creativity" (Edensor & Millington, 2012, p. 158), which concentrates on everyday creative practices (see also Price & Hawkins, 2018). Edensor and Millington (2012) show that such practices diverge from the modes of creativity advocated by lifestyle media and the self-proclaimed "creative class" (p. 158), just as the knitting highlighted by our research deviates from dominant discourses of new knitting. By focussing on participants' lived experiences of knitting rather than broader commentary about knitting's newfound cachet, we aim to reveal the quieter, more personal but no less important ways in which knitting figures in women's leisure in contemporary culture and society. Simultaneously, we show that knitting provides a useful source of critique of hipster capitalist postfeminist culture.

Young and hip

In 2014, *The New York Times* celebrated the success of knitwear designer Josh Bennett, "a talented 33-year-old… whose pneumatic physique and

unorthodox knitwear creations for designers like Tommy Hilfiger … have earned him the nickname 'the Knituation'". The article, entitled "Grandma Never Knit Like This" (Trebay, 2014), mobilised dismissive stereotypes about older female knitters to emphasise knitting's radical reinvention. Other newspapers have published similar articles with titles like "Knitting: Not Just for Grannies" (Gonsalves, 2013) and "Not Your Grandma's Knitting Circle" (Kratochwill, 2015). Such language stereotypes and denigrates older female practitioners (who may or may not identify as grandmothers) who may be life-long adherents to knitting. As Groeneveld (2010) observes, "The construction of knitting as new and hip seems to come at the expense of older women, who are here constructed as the antithesis of 'cool'" (p. 272). We add to this younger female knitters who do not knit in the required 'cool' ways. These knitters too are viewed as behind the times and implicitly branded as 'grandmas'. Indeed, news reports celebrating knitting tend to focus predominantly on fashionable young people wearing vintage-style clothes who may be described as hipsters.

Minahan and Cox (2010) have explored the role of "nanas" as receptacles for both nostalgia and contempt: "while Nanas provide an important connection with a past that may be celebrated as a source of learning, loving and nostalgic comfort, they may also be tolerated with humour or discounted with distaste" (p. 39). This is the case within new knitting discourse where nana-knitting is the object of comical reports and Internet memes featuring naff Christmas jumpers. An advertorial email disseminated by online clothing retailer ASOS.com (2018) exemplifies this blend of condescension and abjection. Featuring images of young female models dressed in faux hand-knits, it reads: "We're taking our AW18 notes from stylish nanas everywhere with this mash-up of cute knits… hanky up the sleeve optional". Where knitting is attributed to 'nanas' (be they old or young), it has become "the butt of jokes" (Turney, 2009, p. 218).

The effect of this divisive construction of knitting is epitomised in a disagreement between members of the Women's Institute (WI) in the UK reported in *The Telegraph* (Rudgard, 2018). The WI has seen a dramatic increase in membership in line with the resurgent popularity of domestic crafting (Harley, 2018). Stephanie Gaunt, President of Hastings and Ore WI,

wrote a disgruntled blog commenting on the “radical” knitting activities of another, younger branch, the Shoreditch Sisters, located in a famously hip area of London:

> Modern, cool, hipster knitting seems to be about knitting for protest. They are proud of knitting a ‘Solidarity Blanket’ for the [refugee] women in Yarls Wood Detention Centre. Is this any more commendable or interesting than the thousands… of WI women who quietly get on with knitting clothes for premature babies, twiddle muffs for dementia patients, daffodils for Marie Curie Cancer Care, toys to sell to benefit their chosen local charities and so on…? (Rudgard, 2018)

Gaunt added that older, life-long knitters are “presumably uncool un-regenerated ‘unwoke’ old bats… frightful old dinosaurs” (Rudgard, 2018). Although *The Telegraph* undoubtedly amplified this dispute for entertainment, it provides an individual account of the way older knitters feel that they are being overlooked and devalued in contemporary narratives about the craft.

Connected

New knitting is imagined as a social, public and networked activity. The practice of knitting in the context of get-togethers in public places – ‘stitch ‘n’ bitch’ or ‘knit ‘n’ natter’ – connects with the broader reinvention of crafting as a social phenomenon rather than private pastime. Gauntlett (2011) emphasises the social connections that are engendered in twenty-first century craft culture. Group knitting takes place in informal venues such as pubs, cafés, libraries and shopping malls (Dawkins, 2011; Shin & Ha, 2011; Kelly, 2014). As Parkins (2004) states, “new knitting is performed publicly; it is something one is *seen* doing” (p. 430). Connectivity is also experienced online via the social network Ravelry.com – “the facebook of knitting” – launched in 2007, which has over 8 million members worldwide (Orton-Johnson, 2014, p. 310). Orton-Johnson (2014) argues that the participatory web culture now integral to new knitting provides a host of benefits for users such as connecting groups, sharing skills, exhibiting projects, facilitating events and the performativity of publicly displaying a traditionally private activity. Indeed, Minahan and Cox (2007) have explored such networked knitting as a radical cyber-feminist project.

As with the construction of new knitting as young and cool,

understandings of connected knitting are predicated on the disavowal of conventional, private forms of domestic knitting. National media attention focuses disproportionately on young groups and while Ravelry.com has diverse users of all ages, its image is such that Orton-Johnson (2014) argues it challenges the popular association of knitting with “old-fashioned, gendered and domestic tedium” (p. 306). This re-imagination of knitting as a digital, socially networked practice can divest non-networked domestic knitting of value. Similarly, while Gauntlett (2011) optimistically emphasises the connectedness of twenty-first century craft, he neglects much consideration of its limitations, particularly the technological know-how and cultural and economic capital required to engage in new on- or off-line craft communities. Gauntlett (2011) does not consider the difficulties faced by older people (or the impoverished, Black and Minority Ethnic, queer or impaired groups) in accessing such cultures, or how craft communities operate their own hierarchies and structures of inclusion and exclusion. This is not to say that more traditional knitting practices and contexts are inclusive but the re-imagination of craft as essentially social, public and networked speaks only to certain craft practitioners and conceals the ways of life and structural forms of exclusion of other groups.

Woke

As WI branch President Stephanie Ore blogged, new knitting is ostensibly politically conscious, an attitude now expressed colloquially as “woke”. In 2017, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defined “Woke” as: “alert to racial or social discrimination and injustice”. The concept has also acquired negative connotations: wokeness is characterised by ostentatious displays of political awareness via social media, without real substance. In this way, claims to wokeness resonate with “slacktivism” (Christensen, 2011) – a depoliticised simulation of political activism that is essential to the circuits of “communicative capitalism” (Dean, 2005). New knitting is part of this debate. Political knitting, sometimes in the form of craftivist yarn-bombing, guerrilla- or graffiti-knitting, which installs knitting in public places, is frequently the topic of news reports and social media sharing (Close, 2018). *The Telegraph* reports that the young women of the Shoreditch Sisters WI “knitted a vulva blanket as

part of a campaign to raise awareness of female genital mutilation" (Rudgard, 2018). The choice of female genitalia is characteristic of the reinvention of knitting as woke: both the knitted object and the act of knitting it are transgressive and eye-catching. On a larger scale, in 2017, the Pussyhat Project (https://www.pussyhatproject.com) entailed the knitting of thousands of pink hats for the Women's Marches that took place around the world to protest against US President Donald Trump's misogynistic comments about grabbing women "by the pussy" (Black, 2017). In the USA, the Pussyhat featured on the cover of *Time* magazine (February 6, 2017) and *Teen Vogue* heralded it as "the ultimate feminist symbol" (Draguca, 2017). In the UK, the Pussyhat was shortlisted for the Design Museum's Fashion Design of the Year award (https://designmuseum.org) and exhibited by the Victoria and Albert Museum. As *The New Yorker* commented, the Pussyhat is "a woke hieroglyph" (Russell, 2017).

While the Pussyhat and similar political knitting projects are important aspects of contemporary protest for women, it is notable that the awareness-raising and charitable knitting long practiced by older knitters – for premature baby care units, breastfeeding training, dementia patients, refugees, cancer campaigns – have not received such media or institutional respect, nor been publicly hailed as woke. As such, the media and popular cultural discourse of new knitting depoliticises the craft of older knitters. Of course, older women participated in the Pussyhat Project (as well as other craftivist protests and public knitting projects) and it was arguably the skill of these experienced knitters that enabled so many hats to be manufactured so quickly; however, only their association with a movement designated woke by socially networked, media-savvy younger activists rendered them visible. Close (2018) finds that political knitting can reproduce class, ethnic and gender privilege. Here, new knitting sustains "the postfeminist stereotype of grandmothers: politically inert but domestically skilled" (Close, 2018, pp. 878-9).

As with other characteristics of new knitting discourse discussed above, research has given privileged status to woke knitting. Studies have investigated knitting's political role but have not considered older women's charitable knitting (Kelly, 2014; Mann, 2015; Black, 2017; Close, 2018). Again,

the emphasis is on public displays of eye-catching knitting with awareness-raising agendas, rather than domestic knitting for practical or altruistic purposes. No academic studies have been conducted in relation to organisations such as Knit for Peace (http://www.knitforpeace.org.uk), which has over 200,000 knitting contributors in the UK and each year sends £5 million-worth of hand-knitted items to homeless shelters, refugee camps, occupational therapy units and women's refuges. According to images on its Twitter account (@knitforpeace), the knitters are largely older women, yet even if younger knitters do contribute, Knit for Peace's image is not in line with hipper knitting organisations like the Pussyhat Project. Overall, the construction of new knitting in media and popular culture as young, cool, connected and woke, and the concomitant preoccupation of scholars with some of these notable, attention-grabbing characteristics of the craft, have combined to invisibilise older women and women who may not perform knitting in these ways. This article acknowledges and gives voice to these neglected knitters.

Research Methods

The research took the form of one-off 'knit 'n' natter' focus groups in three locations in Britain: Chester and Manchester in North-west England and Wrexham in North Wales. We use the name 'knit 'n' natter' rather than the more well known term 'stitch 'n' bitch' because several of our older participants disliked this label. Research ethics related to informed consent, participant anonymity and confidentiality of data were adhered to. Our university granted ethical approval for the research. There were 15 participants: 14 were female; one (Sarah) identified as gender neutral and requested the pronoun "they". We did not stipulate any (adult) age limit to participation to avoid the presumption of differences between younger and older knitters based on divisive media representations of hipsters-versus-grandmas. Participants ranged from 25 to 69 years of age and the mean age was 44.1 (SD 14.2). Ten of the participants were aged 35 or older, which corresponds to market research that indicates that the typical consumer of knitting materials in the UK is 35 or above. The mixed age sample fulfilled our aim to avoid a limited focus on knitters in their twenties though we

acknowledge that many young knitters may not conform to new knitting stereotypes and, equally, older women may be involved in the trendy articulations of knitting outlined above. Advertisements for participants were placed on local fora on Ravelry.com and on physical noticeboards in supermarkets and leisure centres. This strategy was intended to capture both online networked and non-networked knitters.

All of our participants identified as White British (12) or White Other (3). It must be acknowledged that our research attracted no Black or Minority Ethnic (BME) participants. While little attention has been paid to older white female knitters, BME knitters have been entirely neglected (Hamilton-Brown, 2017). This does not mean that white people are the ethnic group most likely to knit, only that questions must be asked about how to access diverse research participants to challenge knitting's "invisible aesthetic of whiteness" (Close, 2018, p. 880).

Three 90-minute focus groups took place in 2015 in accessible rooms on a university campus or private bookable space. We contrived our own 'knit 'n' natters' rather than accessing pre-established groups to attract participants who were not necessarily predisposed to group knitting and – following methods utilised successfully by previous research – to simulate the openness and relaxed conversational flow of a social scenario (Prigoda & McKenzie, 2007; Shin & Ha, 2011; Kelly, 2014). By adopting this research design we may have excluded knitters who were particularly solitary, immobile or adverse to group knitting. We stipulated that participants should have been knitting for at least six months and were welcome to bring their own knitting to the focus groups. The majority of participants had been knitting since childhood and brought works-in-progress. We both learned to knit to a basic level and, like previous researchers (Prigoda & McKenzie, 2007; Burke, 2018), achieved a degree of insider status, whereby participants chatted about our knitting and felt we shared the same interest.

Findings

Thematic analysis of the focus group transcripts led to the identification of three themes that diverged from the popular construction of new knitting outlined above. First, a significant number of participants understood knitting

predominantly as a private hobby and expressed disinclination towards group knitting outside the home. This led to the theme *domestic knitting*. Second, where knitters had thought about or experienced knitting groups, these were felt by some to be exclusive or competitive. This resulted in the theme *knitting hierarchies*. Third, rather than seeing knitting as a woke, feminist accomplishment, older participants in particular felt that it was not generally appreciated and out of synch with modern life. This generated the theme *unfashionable knitting*.

Domestic knitting

Contrary to new knitting's emphasis on group and public knitting, the majority of older participants across all focus groups expressed disinclination to knit in the presence of others who were unknown to them. The two senior participants in Wrexham, sisters Lorraine (64) and Joan (58), were particularly antipathetic when asked if they would ever join a 'knit 'n' natter' group outside their family:

> *Lorraine*: I don't think I'd want to. … We're comfortable with where we are, what we do… and we've got our own little group… and that's fine. … We wouldn't enjoy that, would we?
> *Joan*: I don't think I'd want to do that.

Lorraine qualified this with awareness that their disinclination might be due to age: "we're a little bit staid... We're old… And I think it's a generational thing. We're quite happy doing what we do, we don't need to have anybody else in… we're alright the way we are." Here, Lorraine and Joan assert their preference for knitting within the home but also apologise for this with a perception that their age sets them apart from younger people they consider to be more sociable knitters. However, this reticence was not restricted to older participants. While the younger women generally enjoyed social knitting groups, Serena (25, Manchester) was disinclined and expressed a sense of shame: "I am a closet knitter… I don't know why, I just don't… knit in public". Most participants were firm in their enjoyment of private knitting but were conscious that they fell short of the expectation for sociable group knitting emphasised in new knitting discourse. Burke's (2018) research indicates that pensioners enjoy the company offered by 'knit 'n' natter'; however, our older participants in particular did not share this view, indicating a diversity of

perspectives among older women who are usually represented homogenously in the figure of the knitting nana.

The reticence about ‘knit ‘n’ natter’ transferred to uneasiness about knitting in public more generally, which the older participants embraced only in certain circumstances. Younger members of the groups discussed happily knitting in pubs but older respondents were ambivalent. Hazel (69, Manchester) reported concerns about the negative image she might generate by knitting in public: “There’s certainly a lot of years when I wouldn’t… I would be, not afraid, but cautious about knitting in public.” Again, this was not limited to participants in their fifties or sixties. Participants in Chester were puzzled by the prospect of public knitting. When Emma (45) mentioned “taking your knitting to the pub”, Sarah (35) exclaimed, “What a strange thing to do!” These feelings suggest persistence of the notion that knitting in public causes discomfort or is “out of place” (Bratich & Brush, 2011, p. 237) despite news reports about group knitting in community spaces. This contrasted dramatically with the feelings of younger knitter Joanne (33, Manchester) who enjoyed public knitting’s confrontational aspects and saw this as a challenge to the granny-knitter image:

> I quite like people being shocked when I say that I knit. I quite deliberately go out of my way to make people feel uncomfortable about it… And like knitting in public and people going, “Oh you’re not a granny” and you’re like, “no, piss off”… I quite enjoy that, like being aggressive with people about it. … And I’m consciously trying to change what people think about knitters, like we’re not all grannies.

Joanne’s stance must be understood in relation to her reports of male harassment in the pub where her knitting group met. However, it also suggests self-awareness and confidence in her performance of a new kind of empowered femininity that depends on the reclamation and domestication of patriarchal public space as well as the rejection of stereotypes of traditional women’s work. Nevertheless, in line with the postfeminist sensibility explored by Jermyn (2016) and Gill (2017), Joanne reproduces a dismissive attitude towards non-hipster knitters – “grannies” – as she attempts to distinguish her hobby from old-fashioned, domestic textile handicraft.

Joanne’s assurance about knitting in public supports previous findings that young knitters are happy to show off their knitting in public settings

(Stannard & Sanders, 2015). Our older participants were not relaxed about this, nor necessarily cognisant of public knitting's purported pleasures. Kirsty (56, Chester) reported that knitting at a friend's house could be "a little bit stressful because people were sort of 'oh look at that'". In Wrexham, Joan (58) commented, "I don't suppose anyone knows about my knitting apart from those who count". Emma (45, Chester) shared, "I don't tend to talk to people at work about knitting or anything like that, it's just something that I do when I go home". When older participants did recount occasional knitting outside the home, they described it as a practical measure. Lorraine (64, Wrexham), who reported some eyesight trouble, discussed knitting on a coach trip "with good light through the window". Not only does this suggest unawareness of new knitting's optics, it also confirms that "the cachet of new knitting" (Parkins, 2004, p. 431) is not necessarily recognised by all hobbyists. In this case, our older participants' responses tended to differ from those of the knitters in their twenties and early thirties who were aware of the new connotations of public knitting as a radical act. This finding complements Burke's (2018) observation that older knitters are aware of and enjoy precisely the "old-fashionedness'" (p. 164) of their hobby and that this allows for creativity within safe, familiar boundaries. Moreover, work by Hagedorn and Springgay (2013) has questioned the false distinction between "personal gratification or community building" in amateur craft practice since "both appear to be dialectic cores to DIY cultures" (p. 13)

Almost all of our participants reported use of knitting social media but in Wrexham, although the older women generally recognised "the online thing, the Pinterest" (Joan, 58), they did not use it. Ironically, when Lorraine (64) found a bargain yarn on eBay, it turned out she had bought it from a close neighbour who delivered it within the hour:

> I went to the door and she'd got this parcel in her hand and I said, "hello". She said, "Have you ordered yarn off eBay?" I said, "Yes". She said, "Well I've brought it for you". I said, "Good grief, where have you come from?" She said "[place]", which was only… Just up the road.

This anecdote undercuts the discourse of new knitting as globally networked and emphasises Wrexham's local craft economies. It supports Edensor and Millington's (2012) thesis that traditional and situated forms of creativity tend

to be “eclipsed by the tastes championed by the ‘creative class’” (p. 158), which is middle class, urban, cosmopolitan and relatively young. On the whole, the knitters in our research considered their hobby to be a private, domestic pursuit and did not recognise the benefits of public groups or knitting outside the home, which dominate contemporary media and cultural representations.

Knitting hierarchies

Within new knitting discourse, knitting groups are represented as contexts of sorority. Research has emphasised the benefits to be gained from participation including female company and friendship (Shin & Ha, 2011; Kelly, 2014; Stannard & Sanders, 2015; Burke, 2018). However, for some of our participants, ‘knit ‘n’ natter’ groups were hierarchical:

> *Jane (44, Chester)*: my friend always went to the Tuesday group and she said “come along” and that was fine until it got over-subscribed and then there was a hierarchy, then there was a decision as to who would get a place next week! … it was now a closed avenue to me.

The Chester participants felt generally that knitting groups were exclusive. Sarah (35) reported, “I’ve only been to a couple of knitting circles but I was on the outside of the circle.” The conversation continued:

> *Sarah*: There were two circles, the one that was there and the one that wasn’t… so it wasn’t very welcoming.
> *Kate (47)*: I’ve thought about the idea of going to a knitting circle or something like that occasionally… but I must admit the idea of there being a hierarchy of complexity or something like that would put me off it… part of what I like about doing it at home is that there isn’t anybody else to compare it with.

The dislike of hierarchies differs from new knitting discourses that either fail to acknowledge anything other than benevolence amongst female knitters or actively encourage the display of knitting accomplishments for peer approbation via social media or group meetings. Our Chester participants diverged from the postfeminist understanding of crafting as a conspicuous sign of self-fulfilment and relaxation and instead worried openly about the comparisons that could be drawn if they revealed their projects. Interestingly, where our younger participants spoke positively about knitting groups, they seemed unaware of the potential social elitism:

> *Charlotte (30, Manchester)*: in my workplace there's a knitting group… where it breaks down boundaries … knitting is a great sort of leveller, that you're talking about yarn and they are telling you that they have bought something in San Francisco or whatever, it's the new thing, or they've got some really beautiful alpaca and you're dead jealous. And it just sort of like works like social glue.

Here, Charlotte does not perceive her account's communication of economic and cultural capital and instead reinforces the affluence and cosmopolitanism of a middle-class habitus. Turney's (2009) work has considered the way in which the fetishisation of yarn encapsulates postfeminism's neoliberal emphasis on "personal pleasure, leisure and luxury" (p. 11), especially where this necessitates the purchase of expensive knitting materials. Charlotte's preference for natural yarns (which was shared by Joanne, 33 and Lorna, 40) indicates a departure from the conceptualisation of knitting as "an extension of thrifty housewifery" (p. 11) but overlooks the class-based exclusivity intrinsic to knitting groups that revolve around consumption. Charlotte's account also contrasts with Wrexham participants' descriptions of hunting down bargain synthetic yarns at local market stalls, furthering the sense of economic and class hierarchies in knitting.

The sense of hierarchy was reinforced by some older participants' views on knitting shows and festivals, which were popular with our younger knitters. However, the two senior participants in Wrexham had not enjoyed their visit:

> *Lorraine (64)*: it's a huge thing and it was buzzing, and all the crafts and stuff were there. And you were over-faced a bit with everything. And you could spend an absolute fortune. But you get so boggled with everything you lose focus, that was the problem.

This suggests that the purported benefits of social knitting are not apparent for everyone and some knitters dislike the distractions of bustling social events. On the whole, younger participants enjoyed group knitting and public craft events and did not notice the potential barriers to participation felt by many of the older practitioners. In this way, it can be argued that new knitting discourses that emphasise the sorority of group knitting do not account for all knitters' experiences and favour those with disposable income and the inclination towards socialising outside the home; characteristics that may be

more common to middle-class and younger crafters.

Unfashionable knitting

As described above, knitting is highly fashionable in contemporary Britain and accorded transgressive qualities linked to feminism and woke politics. Far from recognising knitting as an edgy act, our older participants were convinced that knitting was undesirable and were sometimes embarrassed about it. While young practitioners Joanne (33) and Charlotte (30) in Manchester spoke respectively of knitting as "feminist" and "counter-cultural", Kate (47, Chester) was self-conscious about her occasional lunch-break knitting at work:

> I'll turn away from the computer for half an hour… and I'll knit... And my office… is quite near to the [senior colleague's] office and I've noticed the looks as they go past … everybody was looking at me when I was knitting as if to say, "What's she doing? She's supposed to be at work, she's knitting."

While these "looks" may have been admiring or curious, Kate was embarrassed and sometimes felt upset and defensive:

> I can either take it quite personally and be very upset about it or, you know, or say "I'm knitting, that's all I'm doing." But … then you think "well this is not what somebody in my job is expected to do," or somebody that rides a bike or whatever is expected to do.

Here, knitting is a source of embarrassment for Kate, particularly because it signifies a departure from work and a return to non-liberated feminine domesticity. Kate's job was within a traditionally masculine sector and she felt that her embrace of a feminine hobby threatened her professionalism. Similarly, after talking about her life-long enjoyment of knitting, Hazel (69, Manchester) reassured the group: "I mean, I never not worked, I was also a professional". Sarah (35, Chester) too found that colleagues' knowledge of their knitting was sometimes a source of awkwardness in the workplace and hoped that participation in research might give knitting a status boost: "I think… maybe we can exploit your research to up the ante a bit… up the prestige of knitting." Here, knitting is understood as meaningful only where it is recognised by academic research, which has implications for the types of knitting practices that are chosen as the focus of scholarly inquiry. Rather

than understanding knitting as a manifestation of postfeminist domesticity, in which career women adopt domestic crafts for leisure purposes to demonstrate success and fulfilment in both the workplace and the home, our participants expressed doubts that their hobby was consistent with their professional identities. This suggests that while a postfemininst sensibility understands domesticity performed for leisure as empowered, not everyone perceives knitting in this way and for some participants (and their colleagues), knitting retains connotations of anachronistic housewifery.

The sense that knitting was outmoded transferred to the interpretation of knitted items. Joan (58, Wrexham) thought the items she made were passé:

> I don't know how it would be perceived now by the young set, having all the stuff from [retailer] TK Maxx and then they have this little matinee coat from me, they'd think, "Oh it's just so old fashioned." … I don't think the young women, the young modern women would actually appreciate a little matinee coat.

When asked if she thought people valued hand-knits today Lorraine (64, Wrexham) replied, "nowadays, no" and felt that knitting was "dying": "Nobody talks about it… People are not bothered about it, are they?" This is at odds with the vogue for knitted, vintage-style clothing amongst consumers and on social media, which Drix (2014) has highlighted as "vintage mania" that mobilises nostalgia to promote consumption and conceal gender conservatism. Nevertheless, Lorraine and Joan were unaware of the cultural value that has accrued to the hand-made. Lorraine shared that she "wouldn't feel confident" knitting an item of clothing for anyone outside of her immediate family because the hand-made quirks might not match other people's tastes. In contrast, Natalie (28, Wrexham) thought that knitting was "something to be proud of" and considered selling her creations online, a perspective which was much more in line with the hipster capitalist postfeminist construction of knitting.

Despite their unawareness of woke knitting and the currency of the hand-made, some participants knitted regularly for charities: Kate (47, Chester) donated dolls' clothes to charity shops, Jane (44, Chester) knitted for a Cystic Fibrosis charity, Sarah (35, Chester) for a local volunteer service, and

Hazel (69, Manchester) made warm clothes for charity boxes. However, they did not talk about their contributions in political terms. Hazel commented, “I don’t mind putting jumpers, cardigans, blankets, in a box and sending them off to… whoever, it’s not for me to say where they’re going to end up”. This unassuming comment could be interpreted as apolitical in line with the popular dismissal of older women’s charitable knitting examined above; however, this belies the time, effort and resources necessary for sustained altruistic knitting. Burke’s (2018) study of a pensioners’ knitting group found that her participants engaged in recycling but said that this was not done for environmental reasons. This commonality with the present study suggests a provisional link between older knitters and a reluctance to lay claim to political motivations behind crafting.

Many of our participants did not recognise the new fashionableness and cultural capital of crafting, nor its associations with political consciousness and contemporary instantiations of feminism. There was a feeling that knitting was not relevant to young, modern or professional women. Although several participants were active charity knitters, they did not articulate their altruism as woke, though the items they made and causes they supported were similar to those described in news reports about younger women’s hip political knitting.

Discussion

The research outlined above has shown that some knitters do not identify with nor appreciate the reinvention of their craft as young, hip, connected and woke. Instead, participants in this study were generally, though not all, older than contemporary media discourses of new knitting as a young person’s leisure pursuit allow for, preferred to knit in private domestic contexts and did not conceive of their charitable knitting as political even though it shared strong similarities with the woke knitting performed by edgier crafters. Although some of our younger participants shared characteristics of the hipster knitter represented in media accounts and reflected elements of a postfeminist sensibility, older members of our focus groups varied in their degree of distance from this construction of new knitting. For the most part, our participants were aware of the cachet of new knitting but did not fit into it themselves, in some cases reporting feelings of embarrassment about their

hobby or exclusion from or disinclination towards the new cultural practices of knitters who were perceived to be younger and cooler than they. Some of the knitters diverged significantly from the dominant discourse of new knitting and did not recognise it at all, instead feeling that knitting was out of synch with modern life. These findings suggest therefore that the knitters imagined in new knitting discourse do not exist in Britain in the ways that are suggested. This corresponds to research by Kelly (2014) in the USA who found that even knitters who adhered more closely to new knitting stereotypes were multifaceted and did not reproduce the hip knitter personae precisely or uncritically.

Nevertheless, as we have discussed, knitters who do not conform to the imperatives of new knitting have been marginalised and denigrated as "grandmas". Although this supposed shortcoming is crystallised in the stereotypical figure of the elderly lady and thus accrues to older female knitters in particular, young knitters who do not fit in to new knitting's hip and edgy aesthetics are similarly tainted. The imaginary anachronistic figure of the granny-knitter encapsulates elements of nostalgia and humour but she also articulates derision because the formulation of knitting she represents is seen as constitutive of non-liberated femininity associated with subjugated housewifery, domestic tedium and the past. As feminist Germaine Greer (2007) commented, "women have frittered their lives away stitching things for which there is no demand ever since vicarious leisure was invented…for centuries, women have been kept busy wasting their time." In hipster capitalist postfeminist culture, traditional domestic crafts have been reanimated as signs of feminine authenticity, self-fulfilment, productivity and feminist empowerment. In order to retain this radical distinction, the grandma-knitter must be evoked only to be disavowed, functioning as the antithesis to young women's meaningful, liberated craft practices. This polysemy indicates that knitting is now a site of struggle in new formations of gender in an ideological context where femininity and domesticity have become bound up with hipster capitalist postfeminist sensibility. This sensibility reimagines the home and certain domestic crafts as locations of fulfilment for women via the consumption of craft materials and production of ostentatious displays of hand-made domesticity, which are also construed as feminist acts and

projected into the public realm via social media, online marketplaces and group activities like ‘stitch ‘n’ bitch’. One consequence of this is the reproduction of the non-networked domestic sphere as a space of outmoded feminine frippery, which is detrimental particularly to older women who are more closely associated with the traditional home, may be disinclined or unable to participate in the fashionable social pursuits of younger practitioners, and equally reluctant to enter their knitting into the public domain via social media. In this formulation, domestic crafts are only meaningful when they are taken outside of the home (both literally and figuratively) by intrepid, self-aware, woke young women.

None of this is to say that new craft practices are detrimental to women. Research has emphasised the benefits of knitting and other textile handicrafts in various contexts. Nor do we suggest that conventional, non-hip knitting practices are inherently advantageous for women since feminist thought of the Second Wave thoroughly critiqued the housewife figure as a patriarchal construction generative of dissatisfaction and gendered oppression. Nevertheless, the mobilisation of new knitting’s ‘hipsters-versus-grandmas’ rhetoric reveals deeper cultural negotiations over what forms of gender are acceptable and desirable in contemporary society. Our research has shown that in these struggles, some women are dismissed as relics from another time and their experiences and perspectives are denigrated. The discursive opposition between hipster-knitters and nana-knitters reconfirms patriarchal, capitalist value systems founded on the binaries of public/private, masculine/feminine and youth/age. Thus, the findings of this research support Hollows’ (2008) argument that “feminism still needs to develop a more complex position on our relationship to domesticity” (p. 56).

Despite the repudiation of grandmas, the research presented here shows the persistence of conventional craft practices in contemporary Britain, not only but predominantly amongst older knitters. To varying extents, these knitters expressed perspectives that indicated that they had not been entirely interpellated into new ideological constructions of feminine crafting. Seen positively, this suggests that the ideological tendrils of hipster capitalist postfeminism have not ensnared everyone and that diverse, localised vernacular creativities that have not been appropriated by hegemonic cultural

forces are still at large in Britain today. On the other hand, many of our participants apologised in various ways for their deviation from the contemporary image of knitting, indicating a sense of falling short of expectations or not being up to the challenge. In some cases, this was articulated as a consequence of age, in others it was expressed as a personal failing. For some participants, knitting was embarrassing and at odds with their professional identities – they could not reconcile the imperative to embrace their hobby publicly with the legacy of the stigmatisation of women's work. This ambivalence amongst knitters in twenty-first century Britain indicates that the hobby cannot be understood solely through the lens of new knitting discourses that polarise hipsters and grandmas. As participant Emma (45, Chester) put it:

> There used to be the kind of one standard image of someone that knitted, which was a little old lady with blue rinsed hair. And now there's two standard images because you've got… hipsters and knitting circles in trendy cafes. Well, I don't fit into either of those, and probably the majority of people that knit don't fit into either of those, but it's still what people expect.

This study has aimed to address the hipsters-versus-grannies formulation of knitting and give voice to real knitters who have to negotiate their position in relation to these two powerful stereotypes. The research has particularly listened to older female knitters, a group that has been overlooked in popular discursive constructions of knitting and remains somewhat neglected in sociology and leisure studies research. However, some limitations to the research still need to be countered. Like much earlier research, this study was able to access only white knitters and it is important that more diverse research subjects are included to challenge the assumed homogenous whiteness of craft cultures. Likewise, the nuances of social class were difficult to unpick given that our participants were not particularly diverse in terms of socio-economic demographics. Overall, the research concludes that knitting is a fruitful object of inquiry for interpreting shifting notions of gender and domesticity in the twenty-first century and provides a useful source of critique of hipster capitalist postfeminist culture.

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