International Platforms, International Prejudice in the Platformization of Crafting

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Abstract
The platformization of crafting in an unequal world encourages discriminatory attitudes toward ethnic Others. Imagining that the “magic circle” of a subcultural platform can insulate users from racism is deeply misguided. We examine this thesis through a mixed-methods approach combining an online survey assessing perceived experiences of racism online and willingness to communicate with people of different ethnicities, discourse analysis of crafters’ online posts, and ethnographic interviews. As the e-commerce platform Etsy allowed “manufactured goods” to be sold in their marketplace as handmade, Western crafters channel their frustrations with a broken platform economy into racist sentiment against Chinese crafters. This study explores the implications of these Orientalist sentiments as a reinforcement of Western exceptionalism around originality and creativity, and it analyzes White fragility and the assumption of Whiteness within the crafting subculture.

Keywords
platforms, race/ethnicity, crafting, mixed-methods, political economy

Introduction
The story of the beautiful, idealistic, community-focused subculture that blossoms only to be co-opted by neoliberal global capitalism is well worn. Commentary on the rise of handmade, do-it-yourself (DIY) culture persists, as the New York Times asked, “Do the tight bonds of the community and its micro-economies trump the appetite of mainstream culture for the authenticity those bonds and economies represent?” (Green, 2008). Only the tense seems to have changed as time passes, as a recent Vox piece wondered, “Was Etsy too good to be true?” (Tiffany, 2019). This familiar narrative obscures the operation of race, idealizing the original subculture’s “tight bonds of community,” even though considerable research shows that these bonds are largely intra-ethnic and White (Dawkins, 2011; Pande, 2018; Portwood-Stacer, 2013; Wanzo, 2015). For example, indie knitter and yarn dyer Ocean Rose noticed the space [fiber arts-focused Instagram] was easier to navigate when I didn’t show . . . that I was a black person . . . When I didn’t show myself, people would assume that the picture was from a white person. (Quoted in Saxena, 2019)

Such experiences show how heavily online crafting’s community spaces default to an assumption of Whiteness.

This subcultural whitewashing intersects significantly with market-based economic aspects of contemporary crafting. Despite crafting’s small-batch artisanal vibe, a great deal of capital flows through its online spaces—US$3.9 billion in merchandise sales during 2018 alone (Etsy Employees, 2019). Etsy, the largest and most well-known platform dedicated to selling handmade items and craft supplies, is consistently in the top five most-visited marketplace sites in the United States along with Amazon, Walmart, eBay, and Target (Statista Employees, 2018). Like most platforms for creative content, however, these proceeds largely accrue to a very small number of “stars,” leaving the bulk of the crafters mixing income from multiple jobs, relying upon spousal support, restricting time spent on their handmade business, or approaching selling their crafts to make the hobby pay for itself rather than generating income (Close, 2015; Duffy, 2017; Postigo, 2014).

This reality sits in stark contrast to the rhetoric around creative platforms. Popular discourse and the platforms’...
own marketing materials position them as populist alternatives to “Hollywood and the television networks, who could be painted as the big bad industries,” places where anyone’s creations might garner widespread acclaim and support (Gillespie, 2010, p. 353). The contradiction gives rise to frustration and anger among crafters. In 2015, Rich McCormick profiled Three Bird Nest, then one of the highest selling Etsy shops in his article, “How to make a million dollars on Etsy—buy from Alibaba and run your store like eBay.” Owner Alicia Shaffer explained how her shop bought basic finished items from wholesale suppliers like Alibaba, embellished or decorated the items by hand, and finally created the photographs, keywords, descriptions, and other information to list these “handmade” items on Etsy. This single article tied together the political economies of three distinctly different global platform giants and painted a target for struggling crafters to vent their feelings. To them, what this headline and production process said was simple and vicious: Etsy promised to be a marketplace for creative handcrafters, but those garnering attention and sales did so by cheating.

The brunt of this anger is often borne by crafters of Asian descent, as “cheating” becomes overwhelmingly associated with Chinese platforms, especially Alibaba. China becomes a symbol of both economic threat (cheap and convenient manufacturing) and ethical dystopia (the end of respect for creative, original, human work). This Reddit exchange about increased shipping expenses from China to the United States (Figure 1) illustrates how complaints about selling “non-handmade” items on Etsy intimately ties to racialized ideas about who can legitimately create original handcrafts:

Three Bird Nest’s items were mass-manufactured and thus did not belong on Etsy. Discourse imagining “authentic” crafters as White—and especially as not Chinese—pervades digital crafting spaces with self-reflexive repetition, yielding threads like “Someone else complaining about sellers from China.” The global distribution of Etsy sellers based outside of the United States (38% of all Etsy shops) (Figure 2) indicates how strongly ideological this discourse is: Not even 1% is based in China.

Throughout, we explain how crafting’s political economy and participatory cultures are interwoven with digital platform discourses and problematic attitudes toward ethnicity. By combining qualitative and quantitative approaches, we demonstrate both nuance and breadth of racial prejudice bound up with the platformization of crafting. We conclude with the importance of addressing race as a central theme to improve digital platform society.

**Theoretical Framework**

There are three major theoretical frameworks to which this study contributes. A key conceptual element is defining “platformization,” which we argue incorporates both promising and troubling aspects of games and play, and problematic ideas about race.

**Creative Digital Platforms**

Creative, fulfilling do-what-you-love work is a popular contemporary dream (Duffy, 2017; McRobbie, 2016; Ross, 2009). Platforms brand themselves thusly, internally to employees and externally to society (Gillespie, 2010; Postigo, 2014). They act as the “genial party hosts” or game masters in an environment allegedly set up to empower the

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*Figure 1. Screenshot of discussion on Reddit.*
individual to go as far as their dreams, talents, and #hustle can take them (Close, 2015). Etsy’s tagline “We make it easy to find your thing” collapses productivist dreams of creative entrepreneurship and consumerist dreams of scoring the right creative product. Critics note that reality does not match the dream, arguing a few shining success stories encourage a great deal of super-exploitative aspirational labor that leaves people without assistance when things go wrong (Duffy, 2017; McNutt, 2018; Ross, 2009).

In an age where full-time office jobs are increasingly replaced by temp work, many see the entire landscape of possible work as precarious (Close, 2015; Neff, 2012). Subcultural platforms represent a special space within mainstream culture and economy. Lynn, a steampunk jewelry maker in Tennessee, explained to Close that she initially saw Etsy as a “special place where you have a chance since it promotes handmade” as its brand without forcing crafters to compete with superstores like Walmart and Amazon. What Neff (2012, p. 16) terms venture labor, “the way in which people act like entrepreneurs . . . even when they are not actual owners” has spread beyond the largely white-collar, college-educated professionals she studied to a global population who recognizes the benefits of self-determination (Gray & Suri, 2019).

That success is difficult can add to its allure. Platformization overlaps temporally and conceptually with “gamification,” the application of game-based principles to social processes (Deterding et al., 2011). Games regularly employ social media logics of programmability, popularity, connectivity, and datafication (Dijick & Poell, 2013) with formal game-design elements, such as badges, but they intersect with platformization in gaming’s cultural logic and underlying worldview. Games are paradoxical in that players encounter failure while playing, and yet “we appear to want this unpleasantness to be there” (Juul, 2013, p. 4). It allows us to earn our eventual reward, reinforcing traditionally American ideologies of meritocracy and bootstrapping (Weeks, 2011). Creative work similarly remains a dream job for many despite its well-known stressfulness, long hours, poor benefits, and economic precarity (McRobbie, 2016; Ross, 2009). Despite critiques of these aspects of creative and other gig-based labor, working hard and putting in the hours (“grinding” in game terms) reifies the idea that success is both deserved and imminent (Gill & Pratt, 2008; Weeks, 2011).

**Crafting Subculture**

Platformization defines the platform as a “magic circle,” a specially delimited space-time where “into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life it brings a temporary, a limited perfection” (Huizinga, 2014, p. 10). This is particularly true

![Figure 2. Graph showing locations of Etsy shops outside the United States (Statista Employees, 2019).](image)
Crafters often bemoan that the slow, expensive process of making things by hand is devalued by mainstream society. As Nancy, a quilter in North Carolina, told Close, “I don’t think a lot of people want to put [resources like time and quality materials] in.” Similarly, fiber artist Sahara in New York City argued that “people don’t understand why you would want to put so much time and effort into something like a coverlet. That doesn’t align with our values.” As craft archeologist Elizabeth Wayland Barber (2013) puts it, “[Etsy] artisans have run head-on into the problem that led to the Industrial Revolution: Making things by hand is slow.” Crafters described to Close how they hit a point where they could not make things any faster or at any greater volume (Close, 2015). Some crafters raise their product prices to luxury prices just to make minimum wage.

Craft is an interest-based subculture, a beloved hobby, and a countercultural movement—not just a job. Crafters like Nancy and Sahara do not want to re-align themselves with mainstream society’s values. They want to change them, or at least to forge a space where their values are supported, such as in craft platform forums. At in-person craft fairs, Close often heard crafters comparing notes on how long their items take to create, bemoaning the mainstream devaluing of their work. Craft platforms, both digital and in-person, were highly valued as magic circles where customers would also be “creative people” who shared crafting’s subcultural values (Close, 2015). Creating and consuming handmade craft, “along with farmers’ markets and fair trade items, became[s] part of a set of ethical and self-aware purchasing behaviours” (Luckman, 2013, p. 255).

The subcultural value crafters place on creativity feeds anger about “re-selling” practices. Buying inexpensive mass-manufactured goods and selling them in artisanal marketplaces seems to evade the practice of creativity while benefiting from the “handmade” brand’s economic premium. This view ignores the importance of what Palm and Kees call “listing labor” in favor of elevating the labor of physical making. However, it is consistent with much crafting scholarship, which often praises the philosophical and even spiritual qualities of making things by hand (Gauntlett, 2011; Sennett, 2008).

Beyond resellers, craft subculture reserves a particular loathing for the “knock-off”—when someone purchases a crafted item, copies it, and sells it at a lower cost and greater volume than the original crafter can manage—or re-sells the item as a luxury art object, making significantly more than the original artisan (Dudley, 2014; McRobbie, 1998). The breadth and flow of the digital platform environment make this dynamic particularly pernicious. Tami, a comedian and mug-maker based in Los Angeles, told Close that crafting became a sustainable income when one of her mugs, a fan art design inspired by Arrested Development, was posted to Reddit and her order volume increased. However, her husband also found people on Reddit producing Tami’s exact mug design through a factory print-on-demand center and selling it for a significantly cheaper price. Angela McRobbie (1998, p. 85), commenting on the fashion industry, argued that

this raises the question not so much of what the real designers can do about it or how can they protect themselves, but rather, if copying is common practice in the fashion industry, on what basis can the designers survive?

Platforms suggested an answer—a magic circle that verified real creative values and staked out a protected space for the subculture to thrive. They instituted policies about what could and could not be sold as handmade while performing the support work of managing a digital space. Pursuing an alleged copyright violation in court is expensive, time-consuming, and of doubtful outcome, but digital platforms encourage users to report site violations like re-selling and knock-offs with a simple click. This (in theory) flags the listings for human review and deletion. Whether platforms did so or not often served as a key metric by which users evaluated them.

Orientalism and Contemporary Racism

However, as both game and platform studies have pointed out, magic circle theory and the associated image of platforms is an overly formalist framework, blinding users to the way problems can be constitutive of the circle itself (Consalvo, 2009; Gillespie, 2010). For example, believing that a game’s magic circle allows each player to finish justly ranked according to their skill requires forgetting that the starting footing is never even (Paul, 2018). If online crafting platforms are magic circles, then those who disrupt them by “winning” (i.e., selling items and making money) while not playing by the rules are cheats, spoilsports, and killjoys. The problem is not with the game, but with these aberrant players and the game masters who refuse to eject them. This logic that Internet systems are neutral carriers of messages only twisted by the “glitches” of individual bad actors connects perniciously to racism and global economic inequality (Nakamura, 2013, 2017; Yee, 2014).

While magic circles in gaming subculture also reinforce sexism, crafting is a different story, with scholars largely celebrating it as potentially radical and liberatory (Black & Burisch, 2010; Levine & Heimerl, 2008) in terms of gender.etsy celebrates how women make up 87% of the 2 million active sellers in 2017 (Etsy Employees, 2018). But perhaps because of the progressive gender relations, commentators dismiss even the possibility of racism. This follows patterns in fan culture, another female and queer-aligned space, in which “racial identity becomes an additional element that may be overlooked or footnoted—an exception to the rule in the otherwise progressive liberal spaces of fandom” (Pande, 2018, p. 111). In a roundtable on politics of craft, Collins noted that domestic American
manufacturing revival might draw on an “anti-China backlash” (Bryan-Wilson et al., 2010). Bryan-Wilson immediately stated that there was a “reinvigorated ‘made in the USA’ movement [stemming] not from xenophobia but from localism and sustainability,” removing the possibility that xenophobia and concerns over local sustainability could co-exist.

Crafting can be usefully compared to alternative food movements. Crafters are often included in organic produce farmer’s markets, with stalls selling handmade scarves, statues, and plant stands next to those selling baked breads and vegetables. Studies of alternative food movements find that people of color participate at significantly lower levels than the demographics of the market areas (Dawkins, 2011; Guthman, 2008). These physical and discursive spaces are coded white through phrases like “look a farmer in the eye” or “if they only knew where their food comes from” that assume a professional White subject with universal values of what constitutes good food (Guthman, 2008). Slocum (2007) posits how rhetoric of “doing good” through informed, ethical consumption replicates colonialist discourses of White man’s burden, resonating with Black fiber artist Sahara’s explanation of why “you don’t see a lot of people of color in making.” She used community gardens as an example, explaining,

I grew up in the South Bronx, I grew up with goats. Everyone had a garden . . . Then by the 70s the entire culture was crushed, all this “ghetto ghetto ghetto.” You’re told what you’re doing isn’t shit . . . “you’re not down south anymore, you need to get a job and buy food” . . . Now it’s “come join my program.” Like “What? No, I don’t want to join your program.”

Orientalism and anti-Asian prejudice stand in a unique relationship to these broader dynamics of race. Objections to the labor of Chinese people in particular have persisted throughout American history. In the early 20th century, unions heavily supported restrictions to Chinese immigrants and their ability to work (Roediger, 2005, p. 80). This “trade union opposition to the Chinese stressed the connection between their ‘slavelike’ subservience and their alleged status as coerced ‘coolie’ laborers, schooled and trapped in the Chinese social system and willing to settle for being ‘cheap men’” (Roediger, 2005, p. 79). These same objections re-appear in video game subcultures. “Gold farming,” brisk real-money trade in virtual game currencies and character improvement, purportedly destroys economies within the game’s supposed magic circles, with players harassing suspected farmers (Chan, 2009; Nakamura, 2009; Yee, 2014). Despite evidence of the practice across the global South, Yee (2014) found that “many academics and online gamers believe that almost all gold farmers are based in China” (p. 83). “Chinese” and “gold farmer” became synonymous in game-based platform spaces, much as “Chinese” and “re-seller” in crafting platforms.

Crafters tend to regard these imagined Chinese workers with a sense of pity. Edward Said famously articulates the separation between the “Orient” and the “Occident” in Western cultures to maintain Occidental superiority. This translates into seeing Westerners as individuals, but Asians as homogeneous. The common stereotype of “exploited Asians,” as one critic of Three Bird Nest expresses, combines the idea of the model minority (who works hard), the yellow peril (who come in an undifferentiated mass), and the White man’s burden (to care for the “uncivilized”). The “burden,” in this case, generally takes the form of a simple boycott approach: if we don’t buy the goods made by exploited workers, the unjust system will collapse—nor will we be complicit. But empathy generated by even this highly flawed logic disappears once the so-called Chinese sellers enter the intimate space of platformization’s magic circle (Brislin, 1988).

Method

Digital platforms and contemporary craft are a resolutely international sphere. This presents challenges for researchers studying racism, as understandings of race differ significantly between national contexts. In addition, racism in digital spaces takes many unique forms, from identity tourism to bias in algorithmic search engine results, that differ from traditional measures of in-person prejudice (Keum & Miller, 2017; Nakamura, 2002; Noble, 2018). Understanding nuance and specific context is essential—a strength of qualitative research like ethnographies and discourse analyses. At the same time, quantitative methods, like surveys, allow researchers to grasp breadth to draw connections and comparisons. Mixed-methods allows both a nuanced and a broad-view understanding of craft platforms. We distributed a survey across both English- and Chinese-language crafting platforms that incorporates three externally validated scales for measuring racism and intercultural communication apprehension. We combined this with data from Close’s extensive ethnographic work with American crafters and discourse analysis of a recent, popular thread on Reddit.

For the survey, we selected the more recently conceived and validated Perceived Online Racism Scale (PORS) as our main instrument for detecting and measuring experiences with racism among crafters and on craft platforms (Keum & Miller, 2017). A limitation of the PORS scale, however, is that almost all of the items refer to experiences with blatant racism rather than more subtle or covert racism such as color blindness or microaggressions (Keum & Miller, 2017). As Keum and Miller note, the Internet is infamous for toxic discourses of overt prejudice and hostility. However, like many feminine-coded spaces, craft locations and platforms enforce an ideal of politeness (Bury, 2005; Pande, 2018). Crafting forums are also often heavily moderated, so overt racist messages may be removed at a higher rate than elsewhere, limiting their spread but potentially leaving behind more subtle racist discourse.
To explore the extent of subtler racism in digital crafting, we included the Interculural Willingness to Communicate (IWTC) and Personal Report of Interethicn Communication Apprehension (PRECA) scales, which measure the survey participant’s hesitance, apprehension, and reluctance to communicate with people of different ethnicities and cultures. They assess attitudes that may lead to racial microaggressions, such as whitewashing or disproportionately ignoring posts by crafters of color. These data are further nuanced through the discourse analysis of a popular Reddit thread in which users discussed their concerns about what they perceived to be a growing number of Chinese sellers on Etsy. Reddit, an open online discussion platform on which users can discuss a multitude of topics in dedicated “subreddits,” is a useful site of inquiry that supplements in-person interviews and surveys. Unlike in-person interviews, this method allows crafters a high degree of anonymity and replicates the conditions under which crafters interact online day-to-day, minimizing much possible social desirability bias. Unlike a survey, analyzing the Reddit thread discourse provides us with rich, independently generated data not constrained by limited response options.

The data sets analyzed for this article include 176 completed surveys collected from self-identified crafters living around the world, more than 90 recorded hours of film and audio interviews with 27 crafters across the United States, and online discourse in platforms associated with crafting subculture. The survey results were collected between April and May 2019, and the participant observations and interviews were conducted from 2013 to 2016. The analyzed thread began on 6 May 2019, and responses continue to be posted until 7 May. While there are a number of possible threads, blogs, Instagram stories, and other materials in crafting subculture that demonstrate both subtle and blatant racism, we chose to focus on this one thread because of the recency of the conversation to the time of this writing, its recency, and the participant observations and interviews conducted from April to May 2019, and the participant observations and interviews were conducted from 2013 to 2016. The analyzed thread began on 6 May 2019, and responses continue to be posted until 7 May. While there are a number of possible threads, blogs, Instagram stories, and other materials in crafting subculture that demonstrate both subtle and blatant racism, we chose to focus on this one thread because of the recency of the conversation to the time of this writing, its recency, and the ability to follow a sustained, persistent conversation. It originated on the highly visible /r/AskReddit, outside the Etsy or crafting-specific subreddits, in answer to the user question “What has been ruined because too many people are doing it?” One central finding in the validation of the PORS was the increased import of “drive-by” exposure to racism in digital platforms, as a user need not have posted or been replied to directly to see problematic upvoted, trending, or shared content. This particular post was highly visible on Reddit with 39.7K upvotes (at the time of writing on 17 May), indicating how many users actively expressed a net positive reaction to the question.

We believe research conducted in online spaces like Reddit (which is a publicly accessible forum) should be transparent and thoughtful around ethical decision-making. The Association of Internet Researchers (AOIR) guidelines urge researchers to consider a user’s intention and imagined reach of a post—not to restrict academic ability to critique but to ensure that information “flows appropriately,” particularly when it may cause harm. Similarly, the fandom-related Organization for Transformative Works (OTW) recommends transparency and asking permission when using even publicly accessible works of fan creators. However, research should not ignore toxic discourses like racism, sexism, homophobia, and fascism, threatening to silence research that might be critical of its object, particularly along racial lines (Spacey, 2018). Therefore, as Fuchs (2018) suggests, it does not make ethical sense for aggressors to dictate whether researchers can quote and analyze hateful discourses. Hence, we include the link to the original Reddit thread but replace usernames with pseudonyms to add some degree of privacy screening. Interview participants opted to be recognized by first name and shop name. When quoting evidence of racially problematic attitudes, however, we have disassociated the quotations from names in this text.

Results
Survey
We conducted an online survey through Qualtrics in both English and Chinese, promoted on social media and crafting subculture sites in those languages. Of the 176 respondents, 46.6% identified as White, 20% as East or Southeast Asian, 8.5% as Black, and 5.7% as Hispanic, Latino/a, or Spanish. A notable group were the 11.9% who responded that they were biracial White and Hispanic/Latino/a/Spanish (W/HLS). Female respondents made up 58.5% of the sample, 36.9% identified as male, and the remaining 4.6% as gender non-binary, transgender, or “it’s complicated.” This population reflected a much larger percentage of male-identifying users than many studies of crafting subcultures.

We ran an analysis of variance (ANOVA) between the self-reported racial identities of respondents and the PORS score. Higher PORS scores, up to a maximum of 70, indicate the individual perceived more racism in online crafting environments. We found three notable between-group differences. There was a statistically significant difference (mean difference \(MD=10.333, p=.008\)) for personal experience of cyber-aggression between Black and W/HLS crafters. There was also a statistically significant difference \(MD=11.029, p=.001\) between East Asian and W/HLS crafters. Finally, we also found a statistically significant difference between White and W/HLS crafters \(MD=7.585, p=.007\). This indicates that White, East Asian, and Black respondents all perceived greater personal experience with racism on crafting platforms than did W/HLS respondents. East Asian respondents reported experiencing the greatest degree of online racism overall, although this difference was only statistically significant in relation to W/HLS. That W/HLS respondents perceived significantly less racism online than did White crafters is particularly intriguing, which we will discuss below.
We hypothesized that greater investment in the capitalist marketplace within crafting subculture would tie to higher levels of apprehension about communication with those of different ethnicities. Considering on-going legal debates about whether platform workers are independent contractors or employees of platform companies, as well as crafters’ own strong sentiments on this point in interviews, we interpreted this greater investment as crafters considering themselves to be employees of their platforms, rather than independent people who use the service. To test this, we ran an independent t-test to look at the significance of the difference of PRECA scores between those who identify as employees of an online service and those who identify as independent workers.

In Figure 3, those who identify themselves as an employee of the platform have a mean score of 40.03, compared with 34.40 for those who see themselves as independent workers who simply use the service, yielding a near 6-point difference with two-tailed significance of p = .000. Hence, there is a strongly significant difference between the intercultural communication apprehension of self-identified employees versus self-identified independent contractors. Given that “platform” is increasingly influential in the offline world as well, we also ran an independent t-test on this point for in-person platforms such as fabric shops or craft fairs (Steinberg, 2019). This yields similar results, as seen in Figure 4.

Our hypothesis that greater investment in the capitalist marketplace of craft, as expressed by considering oneself a platform employee despite not drawing a regular salary or being in a formal employment relationship, would correlate with higher discomfort in communicating with people of different ethnicities was confirmed.

**Qualitative Study: Discourse Analysis and Ethnographic Interviews**

The survey demonstrates that crafters of all ethnicities except those who identify as biracial W/HLS feel they experience a significant degree of racism within crafting platforms while suggesting that some of this racism, particularly the more
subtle variety (like microaggressions), is connected to crafters self-identifying as platform employees. This should give platform and craft scholars, as well as gig economy activists, significant pause. Platform companies like Etsy heavily promote user identification with the platform. For example,etsy invited several crafters to join company executives in ringing the bell to open trading on the day of Etsy’s highly anticipated Initial Public Offering. Etsy customers, including crafters and shop owners themselves, often remark “I bought it on Etsy” rather than naming the individual crafter’s shop, indicating a deep investment and sense of ownership in their companies, even when—as is the case for crafters and other gig workers—there is no such formal relationship in such venture labor (Neff, 2012).

In this section, we interrogate the ideological underpinnings of both overt and covert racist attitudes, particularly Orientalism, in platform-based crafting subculture through qualitative methods. On 6 May 2019, CuriousRedditor 1 posted the question “What has been ruined because too many people are doing it?” to the popular question-and-answer subreddit. Responder 1 responded, “Etsy,” writing,

Back when Etsy was in its heyday it was really awesome finding unique artists doing unique things all over the world. I loved that I could find things for any niche interest I could dream of . . . and felt like I had a real chance at selling the crafts I’ve loved making for years. Nowadays a lot of it is Chinese resellers and people selling things they “made” that you can tell were just like 2 things they bought and glued together. It was kind of fun at first back when Regretys was a thing (FJLs unite!) but now I feel like I have to be super meticulous when I’m shopping on there to make sure what I’m looking at is indeed either a vintage or handmade item and that it’s not something from Alibaba or Wish with a 500% markup. Not to mention trying to stand out among all that crap if you’re trying to sell things.

In this one post, which generated 19.9K upvotes, Responder 1 expresses two key points. First, there is frustration with the platform’s current state that they blame on “Chinese resellers” who have not put in appropriate time and effort. This frustration comes also from a perception that they now “have to be super meticulous” at what used to be joyful and inspiring. Second, the post shows strong adherence to crafting’s subcultural value on time-consuming, unique handmade work—they even put “made” in scare quotes to emphasize their disdain for products assumed not to be handmade. These were common sentiments in interviews. The very successful crafter couple Jess and Will, for instance, bickered over whether new crafters had an obligation to check what was already selling well on the site—and then to do something different. They also debated whether less technically proficient crafts were simply garbage or were following a different artistic tradition. As Jess put it, “Ok, Duchamp did the urinal, but he wouldn’t stick hot pink cottonballs to toilet lids with messy hot glue.”

Two major themes emerge: distinction between authentic crafts and knock-offs, and bitter dissatisfaction with capitalist logics, with crafters invoking “Chinese culture” as the root cause of problems with the platformization of crafting. This erroneous framing defangs what could otherwise be potent political critiques, placing problems with crafting platforms and race as something “out there” rather than in crafters’ control (Nakamura, 2013; Pande, 2018; Yee, 2014).

The first theme asserts a distinction between “real” crafts and Chinese knock-offs, usually focusing on the user’s personal experiences of being harmed by copycats. For example, Responder 2 replies to Responder 1,

I had a side gig making and selling jewelry on Etsy and was bringing in about $1500 a month until they started letting people sell manufactured goods a few years back. Some of my designs got stolen and sales plummeted so much it wasn’t worth it anymore.

Similarly, Responder 5 posted, “Same!! I my [sic] t-shirt design was being sold as a design to be resold on mugs, t-shirts, everywhere! Infuriating! I gave up after I found that out.” Responder 3 specifically identifies themself as a “real artist,” drawing a rhetorical distinction between themself and assumed-to-be-fake Chinese artists on Etsy. Responder 6 posts,

. . . historically the Chinese have always been very pro intellectual property protection—when it serves them! It’s just that in recent history their society has failed to match western design/mfg. powerhouses like the US/EU so the shoe is on the other foot so to say. As such the Chinese use cheating, stealing/copying, and corner cutting as methods to bridge the gap.

Referring to “the” Chinese people rhetorically unifies an extremely large and diverse group, demonstrating the Orientalist trope of seeing Asian people as a mass rather than individuals. Interestingly, the census of global Etsy sellers strongly suggests most knock-offs are actually sold by Western crafters ordering from Chinese-owned platforms like Alibaba. Some users, perhaps reflecting the more restrained norms of communication in the craft subculture (though not that of Reddit), use the term “people” to describe those who “ruined” Etsy. However, their implied meaning is clear: They respond directly and without correction to other users, like Responder 1, who do explicitly call out “Chinese” sellers, indicating a basic desire (by at least some crafters) to avoid writing explicitly anti-Asian words but not from holding the beliefs those words imply.

These posts employ Burke’s (2013) concept of identification to create “us vs. them” mentality through continually referring to Chinese people as “their,” “they,” and “them.” For example, Responder 7 posts, “What is it with Chinese and literally stealing everything they get their hands on,” to which user Responder 8 states, “I guess cultural reasons. Cheating is extremely common in their society and I guess that extends to things like [making knockoffs].” Crafters disidentify with Chinese individuals by constructing them as Others. Even in posts attempting to explain such cultural
differences empathetically, users still maintain their primary identification with fellow Redditors. For example, Responder 9 posts,

I’ve hosted a lot of Chinese students, they will copy an example essay and turn it in. In their mind this isn’t stealing . . . They don’t come from an individualistic society where making your own thing is better than making someone else’s. They are from a group based society. If you do better than the person who taught you, now they are shamed. But if you do exactly what they taught, they are honored and you are honored.

Interestingly, while Responder 9 initially uses the Othering “they” to depict Chinese students and individuals, their language then shifts to “you.” This rhetorical move encourages the reader to identify with the Chinese student, while the poster takes on the role of expert cultural interpreter. Such a move initially seems more sympathetic, but it asserts Western dominance in understanding “Chinese culture,” reinforcing the notion that originality and creativity (individualist activities) are only the purview of Western cultures. As another example, Responder 11 writes,

Copyright is a very western concept. Many other places on earth only have copyright laws in the first place because the west pressured them. Even then, they don’t [sic] really enforce them because it just doesn’t [sic] fit with their culture.

This discourse demonstrates Said’s conceptual separation of the Occident and the Orient, not only through an assertion of the superiority the Occident but also through a rhetorical consubstantiation of the non-Chinese identity (Burke, 2013). The idea that Chinese crafters might be reading the thread does not seem to occur.

Crafters who felt that selling their original craft was no longer worthwhile did express frustration around Etsy’s policy changes. In October 2013 at the start of Close’s ethnographic fieldwork, then-CEO Chad Dickerson announced in a Town Hall with sellers that the platform now defined “handmade” as including work designed by crafters but produced by ethical manufacturers. Many echoed Gary’s opinion that “rather than identify[ing] the manufacturers and the factories and saying ‘okay, we’re going to get rid of them’, [Etsy] just changed the definition of what was actually handmade.” Many crafters migrated to other platforms or protested by changing their user images to pictures of their hands. But in follow-up interviews months later, many found themselves back on Etsy. Critics of platform companies often suggest that users have the ultimate power—just stop using the platform. However, this ignores the power of branding, a key aspect of platformization as two-sided markets must forcefully assert their unique value as they do not create the products and services to which they give access (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Nieborg & Poell, 2018). Hence, the crafters could decide to move platforms. They could not dictate that their customers move platforms too.

In this first theme, it was not Etsy the platform, but “people,” that is, Asian crafters, who bore the brunt of crafter displeasure. The second theme among responses to the original Reddit post attends more directly to questions of platform political economy and capitalism’s failures. However, while many posts contextualize Etsy’s “ruin” through capital, they focused on capitalism’s intersection with so-called Chinese culture, not digital platforms. For example, Responder 12 posted, “Unfortunately it’s all about the almighty dollar,” and Responder 13 sarcastically replied, “Woo. Chinese economic model. Scam everyone’s ideas and designs and pump it out in a slave factory.” Anti-Chinese sentiment makes the obvious disconnect between China and “the dollar,” American currency, disappear.

Chinese users’ activities are re-framed in economic terms as “stealing” that threatens real (read Western) crafters. Responder 10 writes,

Once upon a time China was so economically and politically dominant they never would have dreamed of selling fakes . . . But those days are done . . . What’s valued in China is success by any costs; not originality. Originality doesn’t get you good grades or put food on the table, so why bother? Beg borrow and steal, lie, cheat and win, that’s the prescription. It works too. That’s why we’re all fuming about it.

That crafting is not simply social but also a marketplace matters greatly here. Posts express not just frustration with knock-offs but anxiety about how the existence of mass-produced items might devalue their own creative handmade craft. For example, Responder 4 wrote, “A friend of mine was selling really amazing vinyl wall stickers. That lasted about 6 months before all of her designs got ripped off and sold at a fraction of the price.” These responses emphasize economic consequences. One crafter made a variation on this point in an interview, explaining,

one of the things Etsy came out with when they changed their policy was “Are you afraid of the competition.” Uh, well, no. I’m not afraid of the competition. I’m afraid of making my brand look bad by selling on a site that allows this.

As Yee (2014) noted in the parallel case of video game subculture, “economic stress caused by inevitable resource competition is blamed on a vulnerable minority” (p. 91).

Only certain bodies (Western, English-speaking, non-Asian) are seen in this discourse as able to craft authentically. Chinese crafters are perceived to steal from “real” crafters simply by existing. This discourse polices not only who can economically benefit from crafting but also who spiritually owns authenticity, originality, and creativity. This analysis supports and augments the quantitative data showing that East Asians perceive high degrees of racism in crafting platforms. While racism certainly exists toward other crafters of color, as we discuss further below, prejudice against Chinese crafters (and other East Asian and Asian American crafters
symbolically lumped in with them) is uniquely endemic in crafting’s platformization. Shallow Orientalist interpretations of Chinese culture seem to justify hostility toward East Asian crafters, blaming them for troubles actually driven by platformization in a world driven by extreme economic inequality.

**Beyond Orientalism**

In this section, we turn our focus to brief qualitative expansion on the survey results from White, Black, and White-Latinx crafters. As we argued in reviewing the literature on crafting subcultures, scholars and commentators often ignored race in crafting, as it challenged the narrative of crafting supporting progressive gender relations. But just before we put out our survey, Karen Templer, a popular White fiber crafter (knitting, crocheting, etc.) on Instagram, posted about her upcoming trip to India and compared it to “colonizing Mars” (Saxena, 2019), prompting a broader discussion of racism within the subculture than previously. Much of this discussion took place on the Instagram photo-sharing platform, where “hundreds of people of color have shared stories of being ignored in knitting stores, having white knitters assume they were poor or complete amateurs, or flat-out saying they didn’t think black or Asian people knit” (Saxena, 2019). Indeed, Black knitter and artist Lorna Hamilton-Brown remarked at regular knitting conference “In The Loop” that there were not many Black knitters in attendance. One of the academics present responded, “black people don’t knit, they crochet” (Sloan, 2018). Unlike the hyper-visibility of East Asian crafters discussed above, Hamilton-Brown (2017, p. 12) argues that this discourse stems from the “white gaze,” wherein the mostly White academics and crafters who analyze knitting universalize their own position rather than considering who they are not seeing in their archives.

It is not at all surprising, then, that Black crafters reported experiencing racism in online crafting spaces. What might seem surprising is that White crafters perceived that they experienced significantly more racism in online crafting platforms than did biracial White-Latinx crafters. We argue that White crafters’ relatively higher PORS scores relate to their difficulty in seeing themselves as raced, as White people often feel persecuted or attacked when discussing race with people of color, a phenomenon DiAngelo (2018) termed “white fragility.” PORS scale items relate to the respondent’s perception of racism, for example, “Received replies/posts hinting that what I share online cannot be trusted due to my race/ethnicity.” Respondents who subscribe to myths like “reverse racism,” which posits that efforts to expose and eliminate racism against people of color in turn racially discriminate against White people, might score themselves highly on such an item.

An example of White fragility as a response to these discussions was the creation of a video by White indie yarn dyer Maria Tusken, explaining that “a social justice issue . . . infiltrated Instagram . . . I would say it was very hostile, and people were being attacked and threatened and accused of things”; she was taking a break from the platform (Tusken, 2019). The “attacks” she refers to are exchanges in which some crafters told others their behavior or creations were racially problematic, not physical violence or the compromise of personal information (doxxing). After the video, Tusken wrote that she “felt like the most hated person in the world” but was comforted by exchanging smiles with a Vietnamese cashier in her local grocery store, “talk[ing] a bit about the weather as she rang up my items” (Tusken, 2019). This follows a pattern where White women respond to discussions of race with people of color by crying foul and centering their own feelings, effectively stopping conversations and requiring consolation from their interlocutors (Accapadi, 2007; DiAngelo, 2018; Kordesh et al., 2013; Spanierman et al., 2012). Tusken (2019) similarly centers the feelings of Karen Templer, writing that “racism is of course a good thing to condemn. However, I do think it is wrong to start going after small businesses . . . for innocent things like writing about one’s excitement to travel to India.” “Condemning racism,” in this formulation, is less important than the possible impact of critiquing a White woman’s small business.

We posit White-Latinx crafters may be less impacted by White fragility, leading to the significant difference between White and White-Latinx crafters’ PORS scores. This finding highlights the importance of pairing quantitative and qualitative approaches rather than, for instance, interpreting a higher PORS score as definite indication that the participant experienced racism.

**Limitations and Future Research Directions**

There are, of course, a number of limitations in this research and countless future directions in which the study of platformization and race can expand. Despite advertising on Chinese social media platforms such as Weibo and providing both Chinese- and English-language surveys, the vast majority of our respondents were US-based. Only seven survey responses were from individuals who indicated that they live in a country other than the United States. The ethnographic work focused specifically on crafters who considered themselves American living within the United States. Future studies could focus explicitly on crafters outside the United States to center those perspectives. Similarly, our discourse analysis focused intensively on only one thread, largely created by English-literate crafters. Future work might compare discourse on crafting platforms across linguistic boundaries. In addition, while we attempted to measure racism within and across national borders to reflect the global nature of platformization, we were unable to find truly appropriate scales for this measurement. The PORS is a solid tool for measuring perceptions of racism, but “racism” itself is a highly US-centric concept.
Finally, we focused on race and ethnicity with limited intersectional consideration. In particular, we focused on bias against Chinese crafters specifically because of the anti-Chinese sentiments found in the ethnographic work as well as the prominent problematic cultural narratives about Chinese people and goods. Future research could fruitfully include other non-Western cultures and further emphasize the intersections of race with sexuality, ability, class, and gender in this subculture.

Conclusion

Looking closely at the case of handcrafting and e-commerce illuminates how race functions as a central dimension of the platformization of cultural production. The situation is more complex than the familiar optimistic claims of DIY production that marry work and passion. The strength of our mixed-methods research allows us to analyze the nuances and complexities of racist discourses while also verifying how widespread and significant these discourses are.

The shine has decidedly worn off several prominent crafting platforms. Close first spoke to Gary, a silver origami jewelry artist, after he “put a big manifesto on . . . my company Facebook page about . . . why I’m leaving Etsy.” But rather than seeing Etsy’s problems as symptomatic of platformization, he and many other crafters had high hopes that a competing platform would prove more supportive. If, as we argue, the platformization of crafting is tied to the strengthening of racial animosity with crafters blaming ethnic others for problems within the platform’s magic circle, this is a problem that will persist despite waning fortunes of any one particular platform.

The correlation between thinking of oneself as an employee of a craft subculture platform and being more hesitant interacting with people of different ethnicities is very troubling. Much activism in the platform and gig economy spheres centers around the argument that platform users are in fact employees rather than freelancers. These activists seem to believe that movement toward sustainability can happen without confronting race and racism. Our results suggest this is fundamentally misguided. If it is not addressed, the contemporary gig and platform economy activists will likely repeat and reinforce mistakes made and harms perpetuated, particularly against East Asian people, through the history of American labor unions.

The frustration with crafting’s platformization makes sense. In purely economic terms, the market is unsuited to supporting good work as the subculture defines it. Compensating crafters in the global North for the time it takes to create handmade goods pushes those goods into the category of luxury objects, alienating many crafters from their own work. But this frustration must be uncoupled from the easy answer, that the system is fine but the people are broken. The problem is not East Asian crafters “cheating.” Black crafters’ absence, or White crafters confronting their privilege. The problem is believing that a platform, any platform, can support global citizens equally without first addressing the deep structural inequalities that divide us.

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Notes

1. We in no way intend to suggest that working conditions in East and Southeast Asian factories (and other factories across the world) are unproblematic. There are unquestionably very serious abuses of human rights.

2. https://www.reddit.com/r/AskReddit/comments/blf1l9/what_has_been_ruined_because_too_many_people_are/

3. Pseudonym, as are all Reddit usernames that follow.

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