

4-21-2014

The Art of Commerce: Self-Stratification on Etsy

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Recommended Citation

Umsted, Natalie K., "The Art of Commerce: Self-Stratification on Etsy" (2014). *Master's Theses*. 545.
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The Art of Commerce:
Self-Stratification on Etsy

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment for the degree of

Master of Arts in Sociology

At the University of Connecticut

2014

APPROVAL PAGE

Masters of Arts Thesis

The Art of Commerce: Self-Stratification on Etsy

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2014

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my thanks and gratitude toward my advisor, Dr. Gaye Tuchman, and my advisory committee, Drs. Claudio Benzecry and Kim Price-Glynn. Your support and patience has allowed me to grow as a researcher and author throughout the thesis process. The detailed feedback and comments you have provided have been extremely valuable and they have pushed my thesis to a higher academic level. Thank you for your input and dedication.

I would also like to thank the entire Sociology Department at the University of Connecticut. The time I spent studying at UConn challenged me, and allowed me to grow not only as a student, but also as person. The patience and assistance I received from professors and administrators alike is very much appreciated.

Finally, I would like to thank my husband, Zach Umsted, who pushed me to keep working to complete my degree, even when I wanted to give up. His support is unparalleled, and he has always been there for me to listen to new theories, proofread the many drafts of my work, and provide emotional support.

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ABSTRACT

Scholars have long shown that there are gendered hierarchies within art worlds. This research examines how those hierarchies are forming on the online marketplace Etsy. Using qualitative methodology I examine 10 in-depth interviews with artists actively selling their artwork on Etsy. Additionally, I perform a qualitative content analysis of 50 artist profiles on Etsy. I find that offline cultural frameworks affect the ways these online artists project the value of themselves, their ability, and their art pieces. Offline practices, procedures, and attitudes influence the way we value our self, and thus affect the way we present our self online.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Art has long been evaluated through lenses which arrange pieces on a hierarchical spectrum. For over 200 years, art academies ruled the taste of this spectrum, helping to define artists versus craftsmen (Pevsner 1940). As the social structure of society evolved, so did the means of evaluating art, and in the nineteenth century, art academies began to yield to a system of art distribution and evaluation relying on critics, dealers, and exhibitions (White and White 1965). The institutions which rule the ‘taste’ spectrum are influenced by the values of society, and due to this, art created by women, people of color, and the lower-classes has been valued less, often considered “craft” instead of “art” (Nochlin 1988). Over the past two decades the Internet has changed the way we shop and the way we sell. Through this paper, I examine the gendered stratification of art within an online tool of art distribution—the marketplace Etsy.

Etsy is an online marketplace created in 2005, featuring handcrafted items. Items sold on the site range from paintings to wood carvings to wedding dresses to makeup. For this project, I have chosen to focus on painters who sell their work through Etsy. The main feature that distinguishes Etsy from other online markets is that, in addition to being a marketplace, it is a social network (Walker 2007). When joining the site, users create an online profile to share information about themselves such as name, gender, occupation, and inspirations¹ (Etsy 2011).

Throughout the following project I frame my research with two theoretical lenses: Bourdieu’s field of cultural production combined in association with the theory of the self. I use Bourdieu’s field of cultural production to understand how the Etsy experience is situated within a field of power. I explore how the site remains (like the art worlds before it) entrenched within sexism. When determining how to situate the Etsy experience in this framework, I considered

¹ Personal characteristics (such as class, race, age, or gender) and inspiration greatly impact the perspective of artists and the art that they create (Grams 2010; Beardsley 1965).

these central questions regarding the site: Who has the power to create culture and how does the artwork get interpreted as good or bad? No academy controls Etsy, and tells artists when they are good enough to begin selling. No gallery denies the artist space to display their work. The power to mark the work as good, poor, or mediocre, then, is controlled largely by the individual artist. When determining how the artwork is stratified, questions must be directed at the artists themselves: How do the artists value their work? and How do they demonstrate that value to the consumer? Symbolic interactionism and the narration of the self, when used in conjunction with the field of cultural production, is a good framework for better understanding how these artists situate themselves within the cultural field of power. In addition to the artist themselves, other Etsy consumers also have the ability to mark work as good, poor, or mediocre, and so in order to fully understand the stratification of art on Etsy, the consumer must also be considered.

Mead argues that the self is created through communication with others (1934). First, the self is an object to others, and then we take the perspective of others through language and become an object to ourselves (Mead 1934). Through this process, we form and display our identity. On social networks, people are able to craft their identity in a more detailed and specific way than ever before—choosing exactly how they will look, how they will sound, and how their associations are displayed to their audience. Online, you have the power to edit your self, create dual selves, or be another self entirely. Exploring how people identify themselves and their artwork shows how they situate themselves within the art world.

Through popular culture, the Internet is touted as being revolutionary (and sometimes terrifying) because it allows individuals to experience a fluidity of identity masked by anonymity. The concept of fluid identity was most simply put by Peter Steiner in the now iconic cartoon from *The New Yorker* in 1993: two dogs sit at a computer, one says to the other, “On the

Internet, nobody knows you're a dog" (Steiner 1993). Due to the ease of anonymity online, the "cyberself" does not necessarily have to match the "self." With this fluidity of identity one might assume that racism, sexism, and classism cease to exist online—or at the very least exist at a much diminished level.

However, with social networking's influx of popularity, how individuals present their identity is changing. On popular sites such as Facebook, users are encouraged to use accurate information about themselves—including their name, sex, age, location, relationship status, and institutional affiliations. Facebook pushed open the door to people representing their "real" self² online, as people "take [their] own name and seem to be more willing to part with personal information" (Ellis 2010: 38). This openness with the "real" self online has spread to other sites, such as the professional networking site LinkedIn, and to a lesser extent sites such as Etsy or Twitter. Despite sharing authentic information, an emotional void is left when people begin to rely too much on technology to fill their social and emotional needs (Turkle 2011). Also, although users may be sharing authentic information, the self they create online is still crafted through the lens of the 'other,' and people remain specific about choosing what information is shared, who it is shared to, and how it is shared.

Throughout this paper, I will show that offline cultural frameworks still affect the ways these online artists project the value of themselves, their ability, and their art pieces. Offline practices, procedures, and attitudes influence the way we value our self, and thus affect the way we present our self online.

To develop this thesis, I performed qualitative analysis from two data sources. First, I conducted 10 in-depth interviews with painters who sell their art on Etsy—I interviewed five

² The "real" self in this instance is used to mean that the user is providing accurate information about their off-line person.

men and five women. I then performed a content analysis on 50 artist profiles—10 profiles from men and 40 profiles from women. In my analysis of the data I used grounded theory and allowed the trends I will discuss throughout this paper to arise from the data I collected instead of entering my data collection and analysis process with specific theory to test. In chapter four I give a more detailed account of my research process.

In the analysis of my data, four trends emerged as ways that artists apply value to their work through their Etsy profiles.

1. The words that artists use to describe their art.
2. Where artists envision their art being displayed and who they envision buying their art.
3. The fiscal price of the artists' work.
4. The artists' explanation for why they are selling art on Etsy instead of through traditional means.

The ways in which these trends are applied by artists create clear gender stratification through the website. The men in my study were more likely to identify their work as fine art, and thus valued their work more highly than the women in my study, who had a greater tendency to identify their work as decoration. Through this process of self identification, artists have internalized the historical structure of art worlds, in which the works that women create are valued less than the works that men create (Lang and Lang 1990).

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The Gendered History of Artistic Production

Tracking the development of the art world shows that social structures surrounding art greatly affect the way art is produced and disseminated. From the 16th century through the 19th century, art academies were the key institutions used for defining the meaning of art (Pevsner 1940). Academies helped to define art fields, creating prestige among certain groups of artists, and establishing what is “art” versus what is “craft.” Pevsner (1940) also delves into the social importance of academies, stating they were places where artists could learn from one another, gain skills by learning new styles and tastes, and acquire connections with patrons. In the nineteenth century, the academies became dismantled and were replaced by a new system of art distribution—one dependent upon critics, dealers, and exhibitions (White and White 1965). This shift was brought about by the Academy’s unwillingness to address the economic, technological, and social conditions of the nineteenth century (White and White 1965).

This history shows that cultural productions are created within, and are largely affected by, the larger social structure, and the social structure of the art field has changed throughout time, or as Becker (2008 [1982]: 6) puts it, “[the social systems] which produce art survive in all sorts of ways, though never exactly as they have in the past.” Online art communities are offering a new alternative to the art system that is built upon critics, dealers, and exhibitions. Artistic production is not static, but it is part of a fluid, changing system, and now, online communities are a part of that system.

Peterson (1976) explains that in order to understand cultural production, a sociologist must look within the community producing art itself instead of classifying the art based on larger social systems. Within production, there is a conflict between producing an economically

profitable work (which is the goal of art “mediators”: producers, agents, owners) and producing an artistically valued work (which is the goal of the artist) (Bourdieu 1993). On Etsy, the seller fulfills both the role of the artist and the role of the “mediator.” Yet, if the goal is still to make their art profitable, this conflict (between economic and artistic goals) continues to exist; however, on Etsy this conflict is internal—within the artist—instead of an outward conflict between individuals.

In his seminal book *Art Worlds*, Howard S. Becker greatly expands the conversation on the sociology of art. He discusses much of the social existence that surrounds artistic production, including the places in which artists congregate, the resources they rely upon, and the other people who help produce a piece of art (editors, social support, producers, critics). He introduces the term “art world” to sociology; an art world “[consists] of all the people whose activities are necessary to the production of the characteristic works which that world, and perhaps others as well, define as art” (Becker 2008 [1982]: 34). This expands the work of Bourdieu (1993) and Peterson (1976) because Becker puts a greater emphasis on the production of art throughout his project.

Becker (2008 [1982]) explains that almost all artists want a way to distribute their work. Even if artists do not seek financial reimbursement for the time and materials they dedicated to the artwork, they at least want a mechanism with which they can share their artwork with people who will appreciate the work. Often, artists use mediators (agents, galleries, playhouses) in order to distribute their work; however, these mediators may create a conflict of interest, as their primary goal is often financial instead of artistic—an issue also raised by Bourdieu. Thus, as an artist creates a piece of art, they must also plan a place for their piece to fit within the established art world, or, as Becker (2008 [1982]: 94) states, “art works always bear the marks of the system

which distributes them.” This does not mean that all art is corrupted by money-mongers, but it does mean that artists must learn to find a distribution system “which serves them best or constrains them the least” (Becker 2008 [1982]: 95). Etsy has provided a new mode of distribution for artists. On Etsy, the act of defining what type of art can be sold (and the value of that work) is removed from the hands of corporations, galleries, or critics, and given to the producers and consumers.

The literary and artistic field of production is entrenched within a field of power, which is further situated within class, gender, and race relations (Bourdieu 1993; Parker and Pollock 1981; Nochlin 1988). This structure defines the population deemed fit to create culture as well as our interpretation of artistic productions as good or bad. Focusing on the denigration of women’s art, Parker and Pollock explain that art historians have created a hierarchy of art forms:

In this hierarchy the arts of painting and sculpture enjoy an elevated status while other arts that adorn people, homes, or utensils are relegated to a lesser culture sphere under such terms as “applied,” “decorative,” or “lesser” arts. (Parker and Pollock 1981: 50)

This stratification between fine art and applied art began during the Renaissance, the division undoubtedly reflecting social class and power, as well as gender ideology. Parker and Pollock (1981) explain that this gender stratification continues to exist, and can be easily seen in the lack of respect for many women’s crafts today. Nochlin (1988: 150) agrees, depressingly explaining, “in the arts as in a hundred other areas, are stultifying, oppressive, and discouraging to all those...who did not have the good fortune to be born white, preferably middle class and, above all, male.” The reason that most great artists are white men is not because black, women, or black women artists have not created great art, but rather that the social worlds of art have made it impossible for these marginalized artists to be recognized as great (Parker and Pollock 1981; Nochlin 1988).

Men and women artists do not experience art and art worlds in the same way because styles and mediums have been, and continue to be, greatly gendered. Artistic hierarchies have been built upon sexist beliefs, affecting women's place in the art world. Lang and Lang (1990) studied women etchers from the Victorian era and found that these artists had to establish their success through different means than their male counterparts—through forming organizations and networks for distributing their work. Even with these networks, women artists remained less recognized than men, and throughout their lifetime women artists had their morality and femininity called into question—simply for being artists (Lang and Lang 1990). This research, paired with work by Tuchman (1989) on women novelists, and Wolff (1984) on women artists, indicates that women have historically faced greater challenges than men in producing, publishing, and distributing their art. My work builds upon this research, exploring how gender hierarchies have become internalized by women artists and how that plays a role in the way they value their work.

Lifestyles of Women Artists

Previous research shows that finding the correct balance between work, leisure, and life is a challenge for everyone. This is a particularly difficult challenge for women, as society expects them to contribute more than men in child care and housework (Hochschild 1989; Gerson 2010). These expectations have led to men and women systematically leading different lifestyles.³

Women have entered the paid labor force, but men have not entered the unpaid labor force at home to the same extent (Gerson 2010). This results in families with both spouses

³ My use of the word lifestyle is based on Stebbins's (1996) definition. He defined a lifestyle as "a distinctive set of shared patterns of tangible behavior that is organized around a set of coherent interests or social conditions or both, that is explained and justified by a set of related values, attitudes, and orientations and that, under certain conditions, becomes the basis for a separate, common social identity" (Stebbins 1996: 101).

working during the day in the paid labor force, and when women get home they are expected to do a “second shift” of work in the home, including both housework and emotional labor (Hochschild 1989). Hochschild (1989) explains that these different household expectations arise from gendered socialization and differing views on the collective needs of family life. Although younger women tend to express an ideology that this is not what should happen, even current research shows that this is still a viable trend (Gerson 2010). One of the reasons this system is so hard to break is because neo-traditional attitudes are enforced both culturally and institutionally, making it easy for new families to fall into old patterns (Gerson 2010). These differences continue the stratification of gender roles, and cause men and women to lead distinctly different lifestyles through their work, both in- and outside the home.

Recent work in the sociology of gender continues to center on how women balance the paid and unpaid labor fields; this is particularly evident in Kang’s (2010) work focusing on women manicurists and Hondagneu-Sotelo’s (2001) book discussing the lives of domestic workers. In order to understand the everyday lives of women, we need to understand the nature and context of their work, and how their work plays a role in their everyday lives.

Although not all artists on Etsy work on their art on a full-time basis, this does not mean that their art is not work. In their studies of serious leisure, Stebbins (1996) and Stalp (2007) both found that even the non-professional artists⁴ they spoke with took their art very seriously and allowed their art to take up a significant amount of their time, energy, and money. Because it is an important part of people’s lives, social relationships are built upon and influenced by art production. Creating art plays an integral role in the way people form their identity and their relationships with others, as well as being a tool for maintaining mental well-being (Nemser 1975; Reynolds 2010; Stebbins 1996; Stalp 2007). Artistic creation is not always centered on

⁴ Stebbins interviewed amateur barbershop singers and Stalp interviewed quilters

quality, but is often centered on the social aspects of creating art (Reynolds 2010; Stebbins 1996).

Community is an important element of artistic production (Stebbins 1996; Stalp 2007). The artists interviewed by Stalp (2007) felt the need for a supportive community centered on their quilting because their family members often did not understand or appreciate their quilt work. In contrast, Stebbins (1996) discussed the family members and friends of barbershop singers as being very involved with the production of barbershop even if they did not perform barbershop themselves—taking an active role in creating costumes or sets, collecting tickets and fees, and marketing events. Quilting and barbershop are two types of art that are very gendered, and this was also the case in the interviewees of Stalp and Stebbins; Stalp interviewed almost entirely women, while Stebbins interviewed almost entirely men. Because art is interwoven with relationships in the community and in the home, Stalp (2007) also found that it was a cause of conflict in women’s home lives. The women she interviewed struggled to rationalize their need to have time and space for quilting, as they often felt their spouses and children did not understand their hobby (Stalp 2007).

The struggle the women in Stalp’s study experienced is related to the gender socialization and family expectations which Hochschild (1989) and Gerson (2010) discussed. Women artists use different tactics to try to “have it all” and maintain priorities to balance work, family, and art; however, many women end up feeling like they have failed in balancing one or more of these aspects (Nemser 1975; Stalp 2007).

As can be seen through these studies, understanding the role work and leisure play in our lives helps sociologists understand much more than just cultural production. Understanding how

people find balance between work, leisure, and family in their lives helps us understand the complicated relationships between families, communities, and social worlds.

Online Consumption

In this project, I investigate the self worth and identity of women and men painters selling their work on Etsy. Just as it is necessary for me to understand the production of art and culture, it is also important to understand the venue through which these artists sell their art. One of the goals of Etsy is to create a community, and previous sociological research on online communities paints a confused picture of what an online community looks like, or if one can exist with the same depth online as offline.

Sociological research exploring the development of the Web 2.0 frequently delves into the concept of the “prosumer,” or a person who both produces *and* consumes material within participatory web culture⁵ (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010; Laughey 2010). This is seen through mashed-up videos/music and blogs, where the prosumer is not necessarily turning a profit (seen in sites such as YouTube, Mashup, or BlogSpot), and through sites which allow for the buying and selling of possessions (seen in sites such as eBay, Craigslist, or Etsy). Ritzer and Jurgenson (2010) explain that while the prosumer has always existed within capitalism, the shift to using Web 2.0 tools has allowed prosumption to become a greater trend. As we move towards greater prosumption, certain goods and services (particularly online) are created by unpaid labor and are free for the consumer. Not only is Etsy a site that allows for prosumption, but the architecture of the site is actually built around this concept. Etsy is a for-profit organization, collecting a percentage of each sale made, but it allows users to link stores together, and, when visiting an Etsy member’s profile, you not only see feedback from items they have sold, but you can also see feedback from items the store owner has bought, highlighting that sellers are also buyers. On

⁵ In mass media studies, this consumer is also sometimes referred to as a producer (Bruns 2008).

Etsy, shoppers also have the ability to directly contact a fellow seller/shopper. Laughey (2010) believes that the strength of online shopping sites comes from this “intricate mix of mediated interactions (personal) and mediated quasi-interactions (public)” and that when sites strike a good balance between public and private interactions users feel they have a voice. The scholars I have discussed thus far believe that prosumption provides shoppers with more “user authority” and power within capitalism because of increased seller-buyer interactivity (Laughey 2010; Ritzer and Jurenson 2010).

Others doubt that users ever truly have a voice in any online community. Stivers (2004) asserts that new pathologies arise from technological society—most notably that of loneliness—because true relationships are not being born. He discusses how, over the last century, consumption as a way of life has increased, and never more so than with the introduction of the home computer (Stivers 2004). Due to this, “modern technological societies operate at a high tempo,” meaning that we live and work more quickly than ever before—forcing us to live exclusively in the present (Stivers 2004: 35). According to Stivers (2004), operating at a high tempo rushes our decisions, reduces our privacy and deteriorates our relationships. Turkle (2011) agrees, asserting that technology impedes deep, personal relationships. Zukin (2005) agrees with Stivers and Turkle, as she discusses how online shopping detaches the shopper from the experience of shopping. She states that “what the Internet [accomplishes] is to minimize the social space of shopping...electronic shopping promises to filter out all the social ‘noise’ and bother of going out to shop” by helping shoppers avoid mean sales clerks or long lines (Zukin 2005: 232). She also asserts that there is less trust between shoppers and online vendors. Etsy uses a model which attempts to combat the loneliness of internet shopping, by combining an online marketplace with an online social network. Trust is built between producers and

consumers because buyers can read the biography of artist they are buying from, converse directly with them via built-in tools, and view the seller's own interests and hobbies. Etsy has created a structured attempt to create a community out of its users.

CHAPTER THREE: THEORETICAL LENS

In this thesis, the two most central questions are: (1) Who has the power to create culture? and (2) How do artists value their work? To answer these questions, I use two theoretical lenses: Bourdieu's "Field of Cultural Production" and Symbolic Interactionism.

Producing Culture within a Field of Cultural Production

Art is created within a cultural field. In order to understand art production and the creation of culture, we must not only understand a piece of art, but the whole system that creates that art—the art history, the critics, the dealers, the patrons. We must understand art as a "*manifestation* of the field as a whole" in which all functions of the field help to produce the value of the art (Bourdieu 1993:37). This is very similar to what Becker (2008) discussed in his analysis of art worlds, in order to understand art, it is important to understand the system that produces that art.

Bourdieu explains cultural fields as spaces where stratification cannot be solely explained simply by economic or class structures. He argues that fields are structured social spaces with their own rules and stratifications (Bourdieu 1993). There are multiple fields we need to recognize in order to understand the stratification of different art skills and the amount of prestige they gather. In the general field of art, there is fine art (painting, sculptures) and there is craft (pottery, quilting, scrapbooking). Further, within the category of fine art, there is additional stratification between those who produce gallery-quality work and those who do not. The rules and structure of the field of art stratify this so that some forms of art are more respected than others—fine arts are more respected than crafts. Delving further, there is also a field of painting within the field of art. Some styles and types of painting generate more respect than others; here the divide happens more clearly between fine art and decoration. For example, while paintings in

general are more respected than quilts in general, within painting, there is also stratification. Fine art paintings are those that are designed to be thought provoking and garner more respect than decorative paintings, which are paintings designed to fulfill a decorative need. Women have long been pushed to the disrespected-end of these fields (Becker 2008[1982]; Lang and Lang 1990). Those general arts which have typically been created by women are more frequently designated as craft instead of art (i.e. quilting) and within painting, the genres which women have lead have been deemed the least thought provoking (i.e. flower art).

Value of the Self

Mead argues that the self is created through communication with others (1934). First the self is an object to others, and then we take the perspective of others and become an object to ourselves—it is through this process that our identity is formed (Mead 1934). Online, we truly become an object to ourselves, carefully selecting what we sound and look like. The idea of the self is further developed by Cooley (1902), who—like Mead—emphasizes the social and interactional necessity for the self to develop. In his famous concept of the looking glass self Cooley describes our ability to see ourselves:

As we see our face, figure, and dress in the glass, and are interested in them because they are ours, and pleased or otherwise with them according as they do or do not answer to what we should like them to be; so in imagination we perceive in another's mind some thought of our appearance, manners, aims, deeds, character, friends, and so on, and are variously affected by it. A self-idea of this sort seems to have three principal elements: the imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his judgment of that appearance; and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification. [...] The thing that moves us to pride or shame is not the mere mechanical reflection of ourselves, but an imputed sentiment, the imagined effect of this reflection upon another's mind (Cooley 1902).

The looking glass self shows how our own opinions—and our perception of the opinions of others—shape not only our actions, but also our feelings of ourselves. These feelings of ourselves affect how we think of ourselves and how we value ourselves.

Through online profiles, users carefully craft their ‘self,’ so that they appear as they want others to see them. As a user creates a profile, they go through the elements Cooley identified in his creation of the self—they imagine writing or uploading something that represents themselves, they imagine the judgment others will have of that appearance, and then experience a feeling, such as pride or mortification—and that feeling results in the decision to either upload or delete the content. Online profiles give the user a great deal of control over how others see themselves and their art work, and so by viewing these profiles and content, we can come to understand how the artist values themselves and their artwork, and how they project that value out to others.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH DESIGN

In order to gain the fullest understanding of artists on Etsy as possible. I collected data from two sources. (1) I performed, transcribed, and coded 10 face-to-face, semi-structured interviews. (2) I coded 50 Etsy artist profiles (including information from their autobiography, customer feedback, and store information).

The population for this study consists of painters (oils, watercolors, and acrylics) living in Connecticut who sell their own art on Etsy. There are a few reasons why I chose Etsy as the online marketplace from which to pull my sample. First, starting in 2005, Etsy was created within the era of “Web 2.0,” unlike some other popular online marketplaces—including eBay. I wanted to choose a site created within this era because Web 2.0 technologies place an emphasis on creating communities online, and this site gives the artist power to create their own space online within Etsy. This was important to me going into the study because I am interested in understanding how individuals experience Web 2.0 (Do they feel like empowered users? Do they feel a sense of community?). Second, Etsy—unlike other popular online marketplaces—puts an emphasis on items being handmade, which makes it harder for large corporations to enter the site’s marketplace and sell mass produced items (which happens on sites such as eBay, Craigslist, and Amazon Marketplace), and this made the site easier for me to navigate and find real artists selling their own art. The final reason I chose Etsy as my research site is because it is rapidly growing, both in number of sellers and number of buyers (for example, 394,511 new members joined Etsy in March 2011 alone, just before I began collecting data).

I chose to focus on a specific type of art because, as made obvious by previous research on cultural production by Bourdieu (1993) and Becker (2008 [1982]), the field of cultural production is stratified in a hierarchy. Due to this, artists who make different styles of art/craft

may have greatly differing experiences gaining and maintaining respect as an artist, thereby shaping how one is viewed as an artist both professionally and personally. In order to keep this project at a size reasonable for a Master's thesis, I chose not to focus on the hierarchical organization of art worlds, but instead keep my research centered on questions that help to better understand how artists (and women artists in particular) are navigating the online marketplace. Additionally, differing forms of artwork require substantially different time commitments, which may greatly vary how the production of art affects an artist's lifestyle and home life.

In this study, I collect data from both women and men, to better know what differs by gender, instead of just what differs by study. I decided to do this because the results from Stalp's and Stebbin's studies seemed to differ greatly, particularly in terms of how their participants related to their families, the art community, and themselves. However, since both of those studies had research taken primarily from women or primarily from men, neither could conclusively state how things were different for women or different for men, when compared to the opposite gender.

In-Depth Interviews

Performing in-depth interviews in order to understand individual perspectives (and to uncover larger social patterns) is a tool of measurement frequently used in qualitative sociology. According to Stalp (2007), using in-depth, unstructured interviews encourages participants to share their own voice and helps to minimize differences between participant and researcher. In performing my interviews, I used an interview guide (see Appendix B); however, the interviews were unstructured—I used the guide more like a checklist than a formal interview guide, allowing participants to talk about issues in the order of their choosing, and asking follow-up questions when appropriate. Interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour, and were

audio-taped. To protect the participant's privacy, their actual name and the name of their business were not used in transcripts made from the interviews, or in any presentation or publication.

Although I focus on women artists, I also collect data from men in order to make any comparative observations. My sample size for the interview portion of this project was 10 individuals; I interviewed 5 men and 5 women. I believe that 10 interviews is appropriate for the size of this project based on previously published theses⁶, and because "qualitative interview studies collect more material from fewer respondents" (Weiss 1994: 32). Utilizing qualitative interviews provides many benefits to my research as it facilitates a holistic description about the processes going on, the order they are occurring, and how they are interpreted (Weiss 1994). Quantitative research can provide valuable information; however, it cannot explore the individual perspective in as much depth as a qualitative analysis (Weiss 1994).

In order to collect a sample from my population, I collected all of the zip codes within Connecticut⁷ and randomly selected 10 of them. I then entered the randomly selected zip codes into Etsy's "Shop Local" option and searched for paintings within that zip code. From each zip code, I selected one painter for my study. If a zip code did not have a painter selling their work through Etsy, a new zip code was selected. If one zip code had multiple stores, I compiled them into a list and randomly selected one. Once I found a store/individual that matched my criteria, I contacted the artist using a recruitment script (see Appendix C) through their Etsy profile. If the artist did not reply, I sent out a second recruitment script (see Appendix D) about a month after my initial contact. If they were willing to be interviewed, I worked with them to set up a time

⁶ Goodman (2008) utilized 10 research participants for his study. Peluso (2006) utilized 11 research participants for her study.

⁷ My study is limited to artists in Connecticut due to the limited access I had as an interviewer to travel beyond the state. Additionally, artists situated in this region have greater opportunities to present their art through traditional means (in art hubs in New York City and Boston) than artists living in other regions of the United States.

and place for a face-to-face interview. Before performing the interview, I repeated the details explained in the recruitment script, and asked them to sign an informed consent form (see Appendix E). I repeated this process until I secured 10 interviews, with 5 men and 5 women.

Content Analysis of Etsy Profiles

To supplement my interview research, I also collected data by performing a content analysis of artist profiles on Etsy. Everyone who participates on Etsy is asked to fill out a public profile. Sections included on this profile are similar to other social-networking sites in that they ask users to fill out their name, birthday, gender, and other demographic information, as well as fill out an open-ended “Biography” section. Additionally, these profiles also carry some of the traits of online marketplaces, including sections in which customers can leave feedback, and users can list their favorite shops and favorite items. It is perhaps in this section of the website construction that it is most obvious that Etsy is trying to be more than just an online marketplace and is really trying to blend the lines of online social network and online marketplace.

In performing interviews, much of what I learned about the artist is how they came to be an artist, how they came to begin wanting to sell their art, and how they began selling their art online. After spending some time on the Etsy website, I realized what a treasure trove of information was contained within artist and store profiles. Artists have literally written out explanations of who they are and how this relates to their art.

My sample size for this content analysis portion of my project is 50 profiles; I analyzed 40 profiles of female painters, and 10 profiles of male painters. I collected this sample in a similar way to how I collected my sample for my interviews, again only collecting profiles from Connecticut artists and using the same zip code system to find artists across the state.

A Grounded Approach

In order to interpret my results, I used grounded theory, which is building theory from the data and working up to generating new theory. Using grounded theory allowed me to perform an inductive analysis which is “driven by the data” (Lofland et al 2006: 195). As I conducted interviews, transcribed, and worked with the data, I was constantly coding, trying to link what the data is saying with sociological categories and concepts (Weiss 1995). After the interviews and profiles were transcribed, I coded them by hand, reviewing their stories grouped into categories such as gender, profitability on Etsy, age, education, artistic process, self-value, and value of art. Through this process, I found a pattern of women describing their art and themselves as artists as less accomplished than their male counterparts. This pattern forms the basis of my thesis; the following pages include the examples of where I saw this pattern. There were some conflicting cases, which I also discuss to some degree throughout the body of my research.

CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS

Throughout my research, I identified four ways that artists place value on their work. The overarching theme in this valuation is that men place a higher value on their work and women place a lower value on their work. This can be seen through (1) the words that artists use to describe their art, (2) where artists envision their art being displayed and who they envision buying their art, (3) the fiscal price of the artist's work, and (4) the artist's explanation for why they are selling art on Etsy instead of through traditional means.

This chapter takes a closer look at the ways that artists value their art by exploring these four concepts in detail. Each section will include a description of how the process is used to value art as low or high quality, as well as an evaluation of the gender structure of the process. Unfortunately, due to a lack of data, I will not be able to evaluate valuation of art through a race or class lens, because it was very difficult to infer race or class from Etsy profiles. In this study, I found that men tend to identify their work as more valuable, while women identify their work as less valuable. Previous studies have shown that society has created this dichotomy, and my research builds on that research by showing that this dichotomy has been internalized by the artists themselves.

Art Description

On Etsy, each profile consists of several components, many of which can be utilized to describe the artwork of the Etsy user. Each person selling art has two profiles: a personal profile and a store profile. One section frequently used to describe artwork is the "About" section on the artist's personal profile. This is a free form section in which the artist can write anything—about themselves, their artwork, their profession, their family. Frequently, artists describe a history of themselves in this section, including information about how they became artists, their education,

and their inspirations. A second section frequently used to describe artwork is the “Shop Announcement” section from their store profile. Here artists write about the type of art included in their store, as well as any discounts or specials they may currently be running. Finally, there is a “Description” section in which the artist can write a description of each individual piece of art, this description accompanies a photograph of the artwork and frequently includes technical descriptions of the art creation or a description of the artist’s influences in creating the piece of art.

Art Description: Establishing their Art as Fine Art

One of the most basic ways people place value onto their artwork is by describing it as fine art. Some people simply describe their art as “fine art.” Others do this through canonizing themselves and their art through experiences using education, associations, mentorships, awards, and gallery showings to justify their status as a “fine artist.” In coding my interviews, I found examples of both men and women who established themselves and their artwork through describing it as “fine;” however, men did this much more frequently and generally with less reservation than women.

Nearly all of the men whom I collected profiles from and interviewed identified their art as “fine art.” Chad Schaff did this through describing his training in his “About” section, writing,

Chad began formal art training in California with painter Mary van der Hoeven. He returned to New York City where he studied at NYU with painter and printmaking Juan Gomez-Quiroz and earned BFA and MFA degrees from the State University at Buffalo where he studied with Seymour Drumlevitch. His work is in the permanent collection of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery and numerous private collections.

Chad establishes himself as a fine artist through his education and his association with other fine artists. Henry Gunderson simply tells the reader his art is “Gallery Quality Fine Art” in his description of the painting. Michael Rossborough establishes himself by telling the buyer he has

a degree in fine art. Of the profiles I coded, 7 of 10 men (or 70%) explicitly identified their artwork as fine artwork. These men had varying degrees of training—three had art degrees, two had no formal training, and the other two did not list their training—and yet none of them hesitated to establish their art as fine.

On Etsy, there are also women who describe themselves as fine artists. For example, Maria McDonald identifies her work as fine art. In the painting descriptions, the first words written are “Fine Art for the [room or location where she envisions the art being displayed].” She does this with every piece of art she has listed on Etsy, so that as the user is scrolling through her profile, they are repeatedly reading, “fine art” over and over. Even in her store’s name, she separates her store from craft stores by naming it “MMcDonaldFineArt.” Like the men above, she identifies as a fine artist. Unlike the men, she almost seems to be fighting for this status. Her use of “fine art” throughout the entire site suggests she feels a necessity to identify her work as fine. I also find it notable that in the name of the store and in her “about” section she hides her gender by only listing initials; this is something female artists across genres of art have done for centuries in order to have their art gain further exposure, and through MMcDonald it can be seen that this strategy is also used online.

Another woman discussed her art as fine by the outside world, even though she did not see it as fine herself, Clarissa Urness writes,

I got my shop started after I received my first Fine Art Talent Award from the University of Connecticut. I had entered my watercolor painting, 'At the End of the World,' into the yearly art competition. I didn't think I would win since I'm not even a Painting or Illustration major, only an Art History major. I've taken 4 semesters of Oil Painting class during high school as well as an intense 3 day course in Watercolor. Besides that training, I have no other art training and have taught myself a lot from practice and mistakes... The art gallery that I previously had my work in closed down so I have no venue currently, except Etsy.

Despite receiving a fine art award and having shown her work in a gallery, Clarissa does not identify her artwork as fine, but instead lists its limitations, admitting that she does not have extensive training, degrading her degree as less relevant than other art degrees, and saying that she has only learned from mistakes. She identifies things that legitimate her as an artist—having shown in a gallery, having an art education, and winning a fine art award—but she writes in a self-effacing way that illegitimizes her status as a serious artist. Her description of herself shows a lack of confidence in herself to be seen as a fine artist.

Similar to these artists, quilters have long internalized devaluation of their work. Although quiltmakers have a large array of artistic resources, and although much of their work is comparable to that of modern art, quilters tend to use casual language in describing their work, “scarcely doing justice to the complex effects they achieve” (Becker 2008 [1982]). The casual and self-effacing language used limits the respect that quilters receive for their work, despite quilting being a very serious and artistic aspect of many women’s lives (Becker 2008 [1982]; Stalp 2007). In the same way, women painters on Etsy who describe their work in a casual or decorative way run the risk of their art being viewed as a non-serious work, even if it did take considerable skill and artistic ability to create.

There were a few women who identified themselves as fine artists without the zealotry of Maria McDonald or the self doubt of Clarissa Urness, and presented themselves simply and confidently as fine artists. For example, Helen Kymer’s store is simply called “Helen Kymer Original Fine Art” and then she has a short sentence about the fine art societies of which she is a member; Teresa Chisenhall explains that she was “classically trained in figure drawing at California College of the Arts;” and several other women mention their BFAs and MFAs in the description of themselves. Yet, only 9 out of 40 (or 22.5%) women identified as fine artists. Of

these nine women, seven had art education and the other two did not discuss their education, none of them described themselves as self-taught. When compared to the men who described themselves as fine artists, the gender discrepancy in whether or not an artist calls their work fine was apparent. Women who define their art as fine rely on educational and institutional recognition as a fine artist before they consider themselves fine artists. Men were more likely to self-assess as fine artists with or without institutional recognition.

Establishing art as fine art is a value statement about your art because fine art can encompass any sub-genre of art, from folk art to cubism to realism. When an artist writes that their art is fine art on Etsy, the intention of that artist is to send a clear message to the buyer or viewer of the piece about the quality of their work. Looking at artists who describe their work (either through the description of the piece itself or through a description of themselves) as fine, a clear gender dichotomy emerges. As established by Lang and Lang (1990), women have long had to fight hard to become legitimized as artists, and by looking at who considers themselves fine artists shows that this struggle has become internalized. No self-taught women artists in my study described their work as fine, while some of their male counterparts did. A far fewer percentage of women than men described their work as “fine” at all.

Art Location

One trend that surprised me going into this study was the frequency that artists described who they envisioned buying their art and where they envisioned their art being displayed. Often, sellers seemed to be doing this as a marketing tactic (i.e. wouldn't this painting look great in a nursery?), but in doing so, they also place value on their art pieces by labeling them as decoration and not a fine art. Over the next two sections I discuss how the location of the art is

related to the value given to the art. The women in my study devalued their work to the category of decoration much more frequently than the men.

Looking into the audience and location of the artist's work is one way to determine whether or not the artist sees their work as a fine art or if they see it as a decoration. Fine art has more cultural value than simple decoration. By stating that a piece of art belongs in a kitchen (with oil and water and smoke) or in a bathroom (with hairspray and steam and water), the artist sets their work up as something that is not to be treated well or revered. Alternatively, some artists use their description of the future location to designate their art as fine art; instead of envisioning it being purchased for a mother's day gift, they envision it being purchased by collectors; instead of being hung in a kitchen, they envision it being hung in an educational institution.

Art Location: Where will the work be displayed?

The first thing I looked at when researching where the artist envisioned their art being displayed was the location they thought their art would end up. This conveys value to the reader or buyer because it shows whether they think of their art as decoration (something that will wind up in a non-collector's home) or whether they think of their art as fine art (pieces that will be collected by knowledgeable individuals or institutions). Fine art is different than simple decoration. When an artist describes their art as being a decoration, they devalue their work through limiting who they envision could or would buy or have interest in their art.

The women in my study were much more likely to list their artwork as a decoration than men. Of the men in my study, only two discussed where their painting would or should be hung. The first, Michael Rossborough stated in a painting description that, "this item has been bought by my school!" Since his art is being hung in an educational facility, the artist gains legitimacy

as a fine artist with this statement. Chris Campbell, on the other hand, described his art as a decoration that would “look great in any music lovers home!!” Chris envisions his art being hung as decoration, which devalues the painting from “art” to “decoration.” He was the only man in my study to do this.

Conversely, women were much more likely to view their paintings as something that would be used for decoration. For example, Kelly McCaskey describes her artwork as “perfect for a nursery, bedroom, salon, or meditation room,” Maria McDonald says that her work is “Fine Art for the kitchen,” and Clarissa Urness writes that her work would look good “in a nursery, a library, a bedroom, or a living room.” All of these women point to where their art can be hung domestically as a decoration. Another location that women frequently imagined their art being used as decoration was office spaces. Debra Horden stated that her work “will make a statement in any office,” and Kelly McCaskey says that her work was designed “to adorn your desk at work.” This was a fairly common practice among women selling art on Etsy, with 15 out of 40 (or 37%) women describing their art as a decoration, compared with only 1 out of 10 men (or 10%) describing their art as a decoration.

Art Location: Who will buy the work?

Heavily related to the prior section, the artists also discussed their envisioned audience—who would buy and see their art. Audiences that construed a high value for the art work were institutions, collectors, and other artists. These are people who are thought to be knowledgeable about art and so saying that this is your audience makes your art seem more valuable. Audience descriptions who gave the art a lower value are children, gift recipients, or others who are not described as being within the art world. Associating your artwork with those who are not knowledgeable about art devalues artwork from fine art to decoration. Men had a greater

tendency to list their audience as those within the art world, while women frequently created an audience for their work comprised of people outside of the art world, again, devaluing their work so that it is not seen as fine art.

Men had a greater tendency to classify their audience as those who would want to collect fine art. For example, David Eisel described his art as being “proudly collected across the world,” calling his buyers collectors. Likewise, Chad Schaff states that his art is “in the permanent collection of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery and numerous private collections.” Of those in my study, half of the men explicitly defined their audience as collectors, institutions, or those otherwise affiliated with the art world. None of the men in my study noted their audience as being outside of the art world, the closest would be Chris Campbell who described his art as being perfect for a musician’s home, however, since music is another form of art, he is still selling his work to someone who respects and understands art, and not to someone who is truly outside of the art world.

Kevin Lautner went a bit further than the other artists, explicitly discussing who his audience was and who he wanted his audience to be, on a description of a flower painting he wrote,

In an attempt to appeal to a broader “audience” at my last show, I made a few relatively conventional paintings; and this is the only one I have left...I wouldn’t say that this painting was some kind of torturous effort on the part of an artist more accustomed to painting whales, disease, and Jazz musicians; but I will say that I won’t be painting another non-commissioned flower any time soon.

Through this statement, he insinuates that *his* audience appreciates art more than those that would enjoy flower paintings, with the tone of his writing exemplifying that he does not respect those who do paint flowers or enjoy flower art. This age-old prejudice against styles of art that are more feminine has been studied historically by Parker and Pollock (1981) who used the

history of flower painting to show gender stratification within painting genres. Flower painting began as a branch of still life, and over the eighteenth century, flower painting became a common genre for women painters. Many of these painters used flowers to “express a moral on the transience of worldly things, the vanity of earthly pleasure, the brevity of life” (Parker and Pollock 1981: 54). Despite this, critics bashed flower painting as a petty form of art, one twentieth-century commentator writing “Flower painting demands no genius of a mental or spiritual kind” (M.H. Grant qtd. in Parker and Pollock 1981: 54). Flower painting was ascribed secondary status within the field of painting because it was produced primarily by women. Through Kevin Lautner’s comments on how his audience is not those who would enjoy flower paintings, it is apparent these stereotypes have traveled into the art world of Etsy as well.

In my interview with Peter, he discussed who his collectors are and how he has been able to sell to them, explaining,

I had a show in Manhattan in Jones Cave, I had a show in Mass Avenue in Boston, different places—Jersey City, right across the Hudson from Manhattan, they have a contemporary Russian Art museum, so I had a couple shows there. Currently, the gallery in the Long Island, the West Hamptons, presents my work. It’s a pretty good place; they call themselves an investment gallery. They sell Picasso, they sell Chagall, and Matisse⁸. One day I came by and I was shocked, because the director had 2 of my pieces right behind his desk, with Picasso to the side.... It was very flattering to be in such good company. It’s a nice place, the downside of it: the West Hamptons is seasonal, so most people are there for the summer only, from Memorial Day to Labor Day, for the rest of the year it’s pretty empty in there. It’s not a big crowd. However, the owner of the gallery came by the opening for this show. He was impressed... Before, they used to show 1 to 2 pieces of mine. But now he’s sold a large body of my works together. He expressed interest in getting some new pieces for his new penthouse in Vegas. He also offered me the entire gallery whenever I felt like having a show.

Through this discussion, it is apparent that he views his art as fine art, and thinks of people who buy his art as collectors. Gaining the exposure of these galleries and showings has been important to Peter in establishing himself as a fine artist, but even before he had success at the

⁸ The gallery sells signed prints from these artists.

gallery in the West Hamptons, he always thought of himself as a fine artist. Originally from the Ukraine, he came to the United States through an art program, where he had low wages, but was given the time and space to work on his craft. He teaches and does other work to supplement his income, but still considers his work fine art. When selling his art on Etsy, he still refers to his buyers as collectors. Throughout his career, Peter had defined himself as a fine artist and always thought of his buyers as collectors, even of his early work, which has helped to build the legitimacy of his work as fine art.

Women artists, meanwhile, were less likely to state that their art belonged in galleries or in the homes of art collectors, and more likely to state that their art would be appropriate for children or to be given as a gift; 15 out of 40 (or 37%) of women labeled their audience as non-art world participants; meanwhile, only 7 out of 40 (or 17%) of women identified their audience as art world participants. This de-values their work from fine art to decoration.

A few women described their art audience as children. For example, Amy Simmons stated that one of her pieces “would look great in a nursery or children’s room.” Cara Francis also states that her art audience is children, stating that her piece would “look beautiful in a little girl’s room.” Olivia Friedrichs also states that one painting “would probably look great in a nursery or children’s room.” Exposing children to art at a young age is by no means a bad thing, however, establishing your artwork as children’s artwork makes your artwork valued more as decoration than as fine art—in the same way that a Disney Channel Original Movie is valued as entertainment, not art house cinema.

The most common non-art related audience mentioned was to give the art as a gift due to a specific holiday or because of the subject of the art. I did not include artists who simply stated that their art would make for a great gift, because fine art can be and frequently is gifted, instead,

I only included gifts that were associated with a specific season or suggested specifically due to the subject of the painting. For example, Laura Landers stated that her spring-themed picture would be a great Mother's Day gift. Likewise, Helen Kymer suggested that her winter-themed art would "make for a great holiday gift." Amy Simmons described a picture of a kiwi as being a great gift "for the kiwi lover in your life," and a picture of an owl as being a perfect gift "for anyone who fancies owls." Susan Brickman describes her art as being "a wonderful gift for the animal lover on your list." Rachel Mariner says that her painting of a teapot is "great artwork to give to your fellow tea-lover!" Through classifying their art audience simply by the subject of the artwork, these women devalued their art from fine art to decoration. Fine art is art which is created for aesthetic and intellectual purposes, and it is judged not only for its beauty, but also for its meaning. By classifying work by subject or season, it is implied that there is not greater meaning beyond the subject—the kiwi is just a kiwi, the winter scene is only to be hung during the winter. Imagine if Monet marketed "Women in the Garden" as great for Mother's Day, due to its spring theme, or if Andy Warhol designated his Campbell Soup art as perfect for the kitchen. Labeling art in such specific, domestic ways limits the meaning buyers and viewers take from the art piece itself.

There were some women who described their art audience as people associated with the art world, but still at a lesser rate than men; 5 out of 10 (or 50%) of men described their audience as collectors, while only 7 out of 40 (or 17%) of women described their audience as collectors. The women who discussed their collectors did so in a slightly different way than men. The men in my study, as discussed above, just stated that their artwork was collected, while the women who discussed their collectors discussed having or wanting to have a relationship with their collectors. Melanie Friessen said that her focus as an artist was "on developing one on one artist

to collector relationships,” Kate Redmond stated that she hopes “that collectors of my work can be touched in some way,” and Michelle Hull exclaimed, “I love my art collectors!” I do not see this as inherently changing the valuation of the artwork, but it does show that even among men and women who all view their work as fine art; they seem to view the art world differently. For women, the art world seems to take shape in a community, while for men; the art world is still viewed as a more formal structure.

Fiscal Value: How much is it worth?

The most black-and-white way to evaluate how much an artist values their work is through the price tag. All of the artists on Etsy invest time and money into their work. Looking at how the artist valued their original artwork shows a clear gender dichotomy. The table below shows the median and mean of pricing for original artwork by the artists in my study. To get these numbers, I first found the average price of each artist’s original work, and then found the men’s average and the women’s average, so that one artist listing many pieces would not skew the numbers.⁹

Table 1: Average Price of Original Art

	Men's Art	Women's Art	Difference	Difference in Percent
Median Price	\$ 175.53	\$ 105.00	\$ (70.53)	40.18%
Mean Price	\$ 203.37	\$ 157.23	\$ (46.14)	22.69%

Notes: Men's Art N=9, Women's Art N=31

These averages show that women have listed their artwork for a significantly lower price than their male counterparts. Looking at the pricing of artwork gives us an idea of both how they think customers will value their work (assuming the work is priced to sell), and how much the

⁹ The numbers in this chart are not controlled for the size of paintings listed. There was a wide scope of sizes of paintings, both in the men’s art and the women’s art. The size of a painting can greatly affect the price of a piece of art.

artist values their work, because the artist puts a significant amount of time and energy into creating each piece of art. Throughout the previous sections, interpreting how artists show that they value their work and define their work as valuable was done through a less structured coding process, but here, it is apparent that women are placing less value on their work because they are literally pricing it at a lower value than their male counterparts.

Why Etsy?

The previous sections have all focused on how artists demonstrate the value of their art to their customer. The following findings sections of this thesis take a more internal look at how the artist values their work.¹⁰

The clearest way to find this internal value was through listening to the stories artists tell about themselves—the most frequent story I heard was how people came to begin selling their art on Etsy. Despite media hooking onto stories about people becoming extremely successful on Etsy, most of the artists on Etsy do not find extraordinary success. None of the artists I interviewed relied on Etsy as their primary source of income. Etsy is not a venue of traditional success. Because of this, the stories about how people came to sell their art on Etsy lets us know a lot about how they value themselves as artists and where this confidence (or lack of confidence) comes from. Two story arcs emerged from my study regarding how people come to sell on Etsy: (1) After facing rejections in traditional venues, the artist came to Etsy to find a place of acceptance and community and (2) After missing or rejecting an opportunity in a traditional art world, the artist came to Etsy because it felt like a practical decision.

¹⁰ The data in this section was a bit harder to code from the profile data collected, since it was not something very many artists discussed on their Etsy profiles, most of the data for the next two sections comes from the interviews I conducted with artists.

Why Etsy?: Finding Community

The story of artists feeling unaccepted in traditional markets and then coming to sell art on Etsy was very frequent throughout my interviews, and also a more frequent story for women than for men. Women discussed feeling rejected in school or by galleries, and then decided to try Etsy. The ending to these stories almost always felt positive—whether the artist was successful at selling art online or not, because being on Etsy helped them establish value in their artwork that they otherwise did not have, through the opportunity to interact with other artists and find an online art support system.

One artist, Gretel, discussed feeling misunderstood and rejected because of her artistic inclinations growing up, but starting on Etsy made her feel more validated,

Well, in high school, I realized that my peers weren't very supportive. In that kind of art school environment I found that it's really competitive amongst kids. Even if they were doing different kind of art work. So that sort of gave me a bad impression of going into the art world professionally. The teachers were supportive but also very judgmental. Like if you didn't know how to draw perfectly or do something. They would sort of, humor you. I don't know... [Then, in 2008] my friend, Pat, who I used to work with had an Etsy shop. She told me there were artists on there. So I checked into it, and I made a shop. I liked the site. I liked that there were so many different kinds of handmade things... I think I've sold 5 things. It's really exciting when I sell something. Especially when they tell you why they like it. It's always interesting to see what they like. But, it's nice just to have it there.

In her story, first she discussed feeling rejected by peers and teachers at her art school, then discovered Etsy as a place where she did not need to feel rejected. Gretel had only sold five things in three years on Etsy, but having her art displayed there, and having others say what they like about her art helps her feel validated as an artist.

Marie Hamilton also used Etsy as a place to feel greater validation, after having felt rejected by an art teacher,

I went to a master class with an art teacher, at the Hartford Art School. And the teacher was an art teacher for 50 years; my thinking was "this guy should know his work." It was

a master class, so we just discussed our pieces, and you had to qualify to get in; in other words, you had to have a good amount of art behind you. So I brought in some pieces that were really from my heart. And one of them had won a big award at a prior showing. It was a piece that I really connected with and was really abstracted. It showed, or represented the kind of art I wanted to create. And this teacher ripped them apart. I was dumbfounded, this had been someone I respected. Now, I know there is always something you can improve upon, that's why I brought it in. He had nothing good to say about it. So at the end I asked him, "Well, what's good about it?" And he said, "Forget it." He said, "What have you done that you've sold?" And I said, "Watercolors, but I don't want to do watercolors." And then he said, what he wanted me to do was monochromatic watercolors, from my memory. So I did. I did a monochromatic watercolor in shades of brown and grays. It was the opposite of what I wanted to do. And I brought it in and he said, "That is what I think you should be doing." And I said, "I hated doing this, I am not going to do anything more like this." And he said, "Well then you shouldn't be an artist." I left the class, I couldn't go back. But that was now, maybe, 12 years ago. And he's still in my head. I am still struggling to get back to where I was in design.

Marie went on to discuss Etsy as a place where most people are accepting of her work and are encouraging instead of disparaging. Like Gretel, Marie had faced rejection from an art institution, and Etsy became a safer place to express herself and share her work with an art community.

Why Etsy?: Missed Opportunities

For some, Etsy is a place to come and sell art after missing opportunities in other venues, telling the story, "I would have been successful, but... and so now I'm on Etsy." In this way, artists define Etsy as a place where unsuccessful artists go when they are desperate. This story arc I frequently heard in my interviews with both male and female artists, but a little more frequently with male artists.

The move to Etsy was a practical one for Wayne. Having been a life-long artist, but not having found mainstream success, Wayne found he had art piling up in his basement and storage room. Since no one was putting his art in galleries or museums, he decided to create a digital museum for himself. He describes the museum below,

The museum's sort of changed over the years... It changes styles and that sort of stuff. Lately I just have paintings and photographs. But I also do sculpture, like I said, mixed media, drawings.... So, it's a museum atmosphere where I would have different galleries for the different types of art I create. I wanted to get my art out there.

His move to Etsy was an extension of this museum. He wanted the option to sell his work online, and wanted the potential to reach a broader audience than he did with his own personal site, he explains,

I wanted to get a store going, so I decided to go to Etsy, because this way I don't have to create the whole thing on my site. I just pay them a little fee and they have a bigger audience already.

Etsy was a practical extension of his online venue, which he created because he didn't think his work had been appropriately recognized by society. Having not been recognized, he decided to open his own museum, and then his own Etsy shop.

Moving to Etsy was also a practical decision for Meredith, who teaches high school art full time, but also likes to be able to pursue her own goals as an artist in addition to teaching. On coming to Etsy, she said,

My work was always for sale when I had some shows. I don't always find the time to physically go out and find places to put my work up. And in Connecticut it's a little harder—there aren't as many places. Or a place will be open for a year, then it will be closed. Then you're like, "Maybe I'll try there." Then it's closed when you get there. On Etsy, you can just put it up, whether you sell it or not, it's always there. Also, I'm not really a good salesperson, so it's a different way of selling.... [Also] when kids are taking a nap, you can go on there. Logistically it's easier on Etsy [than showing in a gallery] with kids.

For Meredith, Etsy was a practical solution to getting exposure for her artwork. Her missed opportunity came because she was busy with kids and her job, and because she lacked the social skills needed to be successful in traditional venues.

This story arc occurred only once in the Etsy profiles I coded, from Kevin Lautner. In his description of himself, he says that he has been an artist his entire life, but also describes forgoing an opportunity, writing,

I've been an artist all my life, since I first began scribbling comics and cartoons in a cheap, ill-suited Mead composition book. I was always drawing and, naturally, as time passed, my artistic leanings became a bit more serious until I decided I'd probably try and attend an art school instead of a liberal arts college. Eventually, I was awarded a scholarship to the Columbus College of Art and Design. I left that school, however, to pursue writing...

In this description, his moment of “missing” an opportunity was deciding to leave art school.

Even though he did not complete his art education, he validates his status as an artist by mentioning that he was awarded a scholarship to attend art school. He insinuates that perhaps, if he had not left art school, he would have been a successful artist through traditional means. Later, he explains why he came to Etsy,

As children get older, cost-of-living continues to rise and—for most of us—working wages stagnate or decrease, everyone tries to find ways to accrue some desperately needed supplementary income...Online ventures were, of course, a logical step to take.

Here, he makes it apparent that he did not come to Etsy out of interest in the site, or the community, or because he was first an Etsy shopper, but because he “desperately needed supplementary income.” The use of the word desperate makes it clear that this was more of a solution than it was a choice, and insinuates that he would not choose to sell on Etsy if he were not desperate to make additional income.

These stories help us to understand how artists feel about their artwork when beginning to participate on Etsy. When someone sees Etsy as a practical solution to finding an art audience, it simply shows that they have not had widespread success, not that they have been made to feel their art is not good enough. Some of these artists have had success, and are simply using Etsy as an additional tool. People who start on Etsy with positive notions about the quality of their work

are likely able to better convey this quality to shoppers and other viewers of their site—because internal self-value has an effect on external self-valuation (Pelham and Swann 1989).

CONCLUSION

Through this study, I saw repeated instances in which women failed to define their work as valuable while their male counterparts tended to value their work highly. Across the board, women placed a lower value on their work, using a variety of indicators (description, story, pricing) to measure this trend. On Etsy, artists take over roles previously held by critics, art institutions, and others who place value in fields of cultural production, and they themselves place their work in the field of cultural production through the descriptions of their work. Women artists have a tendency to place and label their work as less valuable within the field of cultural production, while men have a greater tendency to place and label their work as more valuable. I believe this is related to self worth, created from influence from the institutions the artists were trained within and historic precedence.

I was hopeful, in beginning this research, that I would find Etsy to be an art world flipped on its head—after all, Etsy is a place where craft is respected and women outnumber men. However, in the cases that I studied, historic precedence seemed to overrule the new marketplace format. The art posted by women artists was given a lower value than art posted by men through both descriptions and pricing. Etsy promises a space where anyone can create culture—but the respect that cultural production receives continues to be influenced by the art field it is produced in, and that art field includes a deep, sexist history.

One of the first questions I had, upon seeing that women artists were devaluing their artwork in multiple ways, was “Why would they do that?” On Etsy, each artist has control over how their work is described, because they post their work themselves and describe it themselves. Online social networks provide the platform for carefully edited self presentation—with every photo, creation, and word carefully crafted so that the person networking appears exactly as they

would like people to see them. Although the art they create is created within an art field, there is not a source of power controlling that field, pigeonholing artists into certain stereotypes. The explanation then, is that the artists pigeonhole themselves. The power to mark the art as good, poor, or mediocre lies within the artist, and the artist has placed themselves into these categories because of the social history of the production of culture.

How we imagine people see us and our work effects how we value ourselves and our work. Paired with the historic gendering of the art field, then, it is not surprising that women value their artwork lower than men value their artwork on Etsy. Some women discussed specific instances of rejection, which are sure to affect how they see and value their self—and thus themselves as artists and their artwork. Even women who did not express specific instances of rejection or criticism are still creating art within a field of cultural production which has (and continues to) devalue women's work. These personal and historical renderings pave way for the creation of an art world capable of recreating gendered stratification without one sexist institutionalized practice—because the artists themselves are reproducing the stratification through their expression of themselves.

Etsy provides an opportunity for women in that there are no institutionalized barriers to women valuing their work as equal to men—the barriers are internal, and created long before anyone creates an account. Thus, to change the way women are viewed as artists, women need to be allowed to take themselves seriously as artists at an earlier age, so that they are not filled with negative self objectification of themselves as artists. Women are capable of creating thought-provoking, highly valued, fine art, but unless the artists themselves see their work that way, it will be hard for others to see their work that way.

This study was limited in a number of ways. Race and class, in addition to gender, play a huge role in the creation of the self, and if I were to continue this study, adding these components would be my top priorities. It was difficult to find information on people's class background and race on Etsy, because these were not categories that the social networking platform tracked. If I were to continue working on this project, I think I would try to do additional interviews, or include additional sites where art is sold or distributed to try to diversify my sample. This study was also limited by its geographic location. All of my participants (both those who I collected data on online and those who participated in interviews) were from Connecticut. Since artistic cultures vary regionally, my study cannot be widely generalized.

Perhaps the greatest limitation in this research is the lack of focus on the consumer in the Etsy experience. Through my research collection, I collected some data on Etsy consumers, including reviews of artworks purchased, however, in the data I collected, Etsy buyers seemed to live by a "if you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all" rule. In the hundreds of comments I collected, there were no negative reviews, and only one "neutral" review. If I were to continue this research, I would try to branch out my research design in order to get a fuller understanding of the role the Etsy shopper plays in giving the artwork value, perhaps through interviews with people who have bought art on Etsy.

Through this research, I explored the influence of gender in selling art online. My desire to study this topic was driven by an interest in gender stratification, cultural production, and social media. As a member of the so-called "Net Generation" I have seen first-hand the anxieties, pleasures, and challenges that come with expressing the self in such a direct way throughout so many parts of our lives. Taking a closer look at how historic paradigms are shaping the way

people create their “self” online could be an intriguing challenge not only on Etsy, but on other social media platforms as well.

This research shows that even within institutions which are not promoting gendered stratification, a gendered hierarchy can emerge. Moving forward, continued research should be performed on how women are internalizing low-value in their self, so that we can better understand how to best counteract those thoughts and depictions so that gendered hierarchies can be disabled both externally and internally.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

What is Etsy?

Etsy is an online marketplace featuring handcrafted items that was created in 2005 by 25-year-old Robert Kalin. He became inspired to create a more personal shopping experience after a trip to Wal-Mart where he observed shoppers selecting factory-made, mass-produced, impersonal merchandise (Etsy 2011). He had the idea that the shopping experience should also be a source of community, and he believed that this sense of community could be created on the web, so long as the way networks were created allowed people to have both a local and a global shopping experience (Etsy 2011). Etsy is a for-profit agency; however, it has a different business plan than most Web 2.0 start-up companies. Instead of relying on revenue from advertisements, the site makes money by charging \$.20 for each product listing and 3.5% of the final price of each sale (Walker 2007).

The founders of Etsy believe that part of creating an alternative shopping experience is creating a customer/seller community (Etsy 2011). In order to foster this, Etsy has set up tools to help beginning artists and sellers. These events range from “Etsy Lab” which are facilities that offer lessons in crafting to entrepreneurial workshops, which help teach sellers how to successfully manage their businesses (Etsy 2011; Walker 2007). Additionally, Etsy offers members the ability to list local events (such as craft fairs or workshops) to invite other members of the Etsy community to attend (Etsy 2011; Walker 2007). Further, the site has set up a Facebook-like profile system, which allows users to interact with and get to know one another beyond a sale (Etsy 2011). The emphasis on community and personal relationships is the main distinguishing feature when comparing Etsy with other online marketplaces (Walker 2007).

Artist Interview Guide

1. Art Community
 - a. Tell me how you became an artist.
 - i. At what point did your interest in art begin?
 - ii. Did you have any people who influenced you to pursue art? (teachers, parents, siblings, etc)
 - iii. Did you go to school for art? If so, where?
 1. What was it like being an art student?
 - a. Did you run into any problems?
 2. What made you decide to go to school for art?
 - b. Tell me about your creative process. What are your inspirations?
 - c. Do you attend art events? (i.e. artist receptions, special exhibits, competitions, classes)
 - i. What is your role? Do you host these events? Are you an artist at these events?
 - ii. What are your relationships like with others in the art community? Do you know other artists? Are they friends, family, acquaintances?
 1. Others who own galleries/ online stores? Other artists?
 - d. Have you ever shown your art publicly?
 - i. Can you describe this event (or a typical event, if you have done many shows) for me? What was your experience at the event?
 - ii. How was your art received?
 - e. Tell me how you got involved in selling art.
2. Etsy.com
 - a. Why did you chose to sell on Etsy?
 - i. How long have you been selling art there?
 - b. What made you decide to open a store online?
 - i. Why did you chose to sell on Etsy?
 - ii. Do you sell your art through any other websites?
 - iii. Do you use any other websites to share your work? (a blog, Facebook, MySpace, personal website, etc)
 - c. Can you describe your experience selling art on Etsy.com for me?
 - d. Can you describe a typical business interaction for me?
 - i. Do you follow up with your customers after they have made a purchase?
 - ii. Are there regular customers who make multiple purchases from your store? Or are most transactions made by first-time buyers?
 - iii. How do you communicate with your customers? Through email? Or phone? Or face-to-face? Other?
 - iv. How do you handle customer dissatisfaction?
 - e. Are most of your customers art collectors or more casual buyers? Or a mix?
 - f. Do you know any of your customers personally? How did this relationship develop?

- g. Looking on the Etsy website, I can see that they feature some workshops on business and meet-up events (Etsy Labs) for artists. Have you ever attended any art events that you heard about via Etsy?
 - i. Why did you go? Or Why haven't you gone?
 - ii. What was this event like?
 - h. If you could change anything about Etsy or selling art online in general, what would it be? Why?
 - i. Is this your primary source of income?
 - i. If not, what other work do you engage in for pay?
 - j. Do you have a relationship with other small business owners? (Who, What, How)
 - i. Do they own online or physical stores?
 - ii. Are these other artists? Friends? Family?
 - k. Were you encouraged by others to open your own business? (Who, What, How)
 - l. Do you have a background in business?
 - i. Formal education? (degrees or paid classes)
 - ii. Informal education? (Family, Friends, Self-Taught)
 - m. On Etsy, sellers are both making their own product and running their own business--they are not only doing "Doing it Yourself" but also doing it all. How do you feel about the DIY movement? Do you wish you had more help or do you like being independent?
3. Art Creation
- a. What type of materials do you most often work on?
 - i. Why? How did you come to like these materials?
 - b. What space do you have for your artwork?
 - i. Do you have a studio? Do you work outside your home? Do you have a space within your home? How big is it? Is it big enough?
 - c. How often do you work on your art? Everyday? Once a week? Once a month?
 - d. Can you describe a typical day for me?
 - e. Why do you consider what you create to be art?
 - f. Has the type of art you create changed over time? (materials, style, taste)
 - i. Why/How did this change happen?
 - g. Where do your inspirations come from?
 - h. Do you find yourself emotionally attached to your work?
 - i. If so, does this make pricing your work difficult? How do you settle on a price?
 - i. What is your goal as an artist?
 - j. Do you do any other types of art, outside of painting? (poetry, performance, music, quilting, sewing, etc)
4. Home Life
- a. Are you married?
 - i. How does your husband/wife feel about your art?
 - 1. Supportive? Conflict?
 - a. How does he/she support you?
 - b. Is he/she an artist?
 - i. Do they understand your work?
 - 2. What type of work does your husband/wife do?

- b. Do you have children?
 - i. How many? Ages?
 - ii. Do they live at home?
 - 1. How do you navigate being a mother/father and providing care, while still doing your own work?
 - 2. Do you use daycare/babysitting?
 - iii. How do your children feel about your work?
- c. Is there anyone else who lives in your home?
 - i. Roommates? Parents? Other?
 - 1. Supportive? Conflictive?
- d. Overall, do you feel you receive adequate or inadequate support from your immediate circle of friends/family?
 - i. Why/Why not?
- e. Women outnumber men on Etsy. Why do you think this is?
 - i. How do you feel as a woman/man on Etsy?
- f. How do you feel about the position of women in the art world today?
- g. As a female/male artist, have you ever experienced discrimination in the art world?
 - i. Would you introduce any reforms or do you have any suggestions for ways to improve the position of women in the art world?
- h. Overall, do you feel you receive adequate or inadequate support from society?
 - i. Do you feel respected as an artist?
 - ii. Do most people understand your work?
 - iii. Why/Why not?

Is there anything that I haven't asked you about selling art or creating art that you would like to tell me about?

Thank you for your time.

Appendix C

University of Connecticut Participant Recruitment Email

Subject: UConn Artist Research

Dear [Participant's Name],

You have been selected to participate in a research project conducted through the Department of Sociology at the University of Connecticut. The study is focused on people who sell art online in Connecticut. A key focus of the study will be exploring how, when, and why participants began selling art, and how they interact with their customers, other small business owners, and the art community at large.

As a participant in this research you will be asked a series of interview questions. Your interview will take approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour, and will be audio-taped. To protect your privacy, your actual name and the name of your business will not be used in transcripts made from the interview, or in any presentation or publication.

Possible benefits for participation in this study include the opportunity to discuss your involvement in small business culture and the art community with an interested researcher. There is minimal risk related to this study.

The information may be published in an academic journal, or presented at scholarly conferences. Your participation is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw from participation at any time or to choose not to participate at all, and by doing so, you will not be penalized. Risks are minimal and there are no direct benefits for participating in this research.

If you would be interested in participating in this study, or would like more information regarding your participation or the study generally, please respond to Natalie Umsted at natalie.umsted@gmail.com or on her cellular phone at 515-320-2798. You can also contact the Office for Research Compliance, University of Connecticut, at 860-486-8802, for answers to questions about rights of research participants. The UConn IRB approved this study, Protocol #H11-129.

Thank you,

Natalie Umsted

Department of Sociology
University of Connecticut
344 Mansfield Road
Storrs, CT 06269
515-320-2798
natalie.umsted@gmail.com

Appendix D

University of Connecticut Participant 2nd Recruitment Email

Subject: UConn Artist Research

Dear [Participant Name],

Hello! I contacted you a few weeks ago asking if you would consider participating in a qualitative research project on Connecticut Artists. I have not heard from you yet, so I thought I would just send a note asking if you would please consider participating for my thesis project.

I am a student at the University of Connecticut and I am currently working on completing my Masters Degree there in Sociology. I am interested in the lives of artists: how people came to be artists, how art speaks to their identity, and how they produce/sell their art. I think it is interesting that you sell art online, and I would love to have a chance to talk with you about it.

For my project, I would like to do an in-depth, face-to-face interview with you. I would like to know the role that art currently plays in life, and how it has shaped your life course. I am interested in how you go about creating art, how you go about selling or distributing your art, and the types of people who have helped you or hurt you along the way. I want to talk about the social network/online marketplace Etsy and how you came to participate within that community. In my project, I want to center the voices of artists and let your stories be told. The interview would take about an hour of your time, and I would gladly drive to whatever location is convenient for you to do the interview.

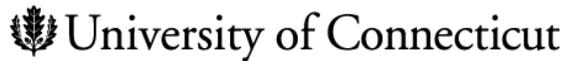
Please let me know if you would like any more information on my study, or have any questions for me at all. You can contact me either through email at natalie.umsted@gmail.com or through Etsy's message system. The UConn IRB approved this study, Protocol #H11-129.

Thank you,

Natalie Umsted

Department of Sociology
University of Connecticut
344 Mansfield Road
Storrs, CT 06269
515-320-2798
natalie.umsted@gmail.com

Consent Form for Participation in a Research Study



Principal Investigator: Dr. Gaye

Student Researcher: Natalie K. Umsted

Study Title: The Art of Commerce: Painters on Etsy

Introduction

You are invited to participate in a research study which examines people who create and sell art online in Connecticut. A key focus of the study will be exploring how, when, and why participants began selling art, and how they interact with their customers, other small business owners, and the art community at large. You are being asked to participate because you are an artist selling your art on Etsy.

Why is this study being done?

The purpose of this research study is to better understand the role that the online marketplace is having on the production and distribution of original art. This study will help provide a clearer understanding of how the Web 2.0 is affecting the art world. Additionally, we will be addressing how issues of race, class, and gender are materializing within the virtual marketplace.

What are the study procedures? What will I be asked to do?

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked a series of interview questions.

Questions in the interview center around lifestyle of artists, how they participate in the online community Etsy, and why, how, and when they decided to start selling their art online.

Your interview will take approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour, and will be audio-taped. To protect your privacy your actual name and the name of your business will not be used in transcripts made from the interview, or in any presentation or publication.

What are the risks or inconveniences of the study?

We believe there are no known risks associated with this research study; however, a possible inconvenience may be the time it takes to complete the interview.

Your interview will take approximate 45 minutes to 1 hour. Your participation is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw from participation at any time or to choose not to participate at all, and by doing so you will not be penalized.

What are the benefits of the study?

You may not directly benefit from this research; however, we hope that your participation in the study may allow for a greater understanding of the Web 2.0 marketplace.

Will I receive payment for participation? Are there costs to participate?

There are not costs and you will not be paid to be in this study.

How will my personal information be protected?

Your confidentiality will be maintained in the following manners. A pseudonym will be used in all transcripts, presentations, and publications. The audio tapes and paper interview transcripts will be kept in a secure location in the SI's residence. Interview transcripts on the computer will be kept on a password-protected computer and locked-file of the SI's residence.

Research records will be labeled with a code. The code will be derived from your first and last initial followed by a sequential 3 digit code number that reflects how many people have enrolled in the study. A master key that links names and codes will be maintained in a separate and secure location. The key to the code, linking an individual participant to his/her code will be destroyed within one year of the completion of data collection (latest date: January 1, 2013). All audiotapes will also be destroyed within one year of the completion of data collection (latest date: January 1, 2013).

All electronic files (e.g., database, spreadsheet, etc.) containing identifiable information will be password protected. Any computer hosting such files will also have password protection to prevent access by unauthorized users. Only the members of the research staff will have access to the passwords. Data that will be shared with others will be coded as described above to help protect your identity.

You should also know that the UConn Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the Office of Research Compliance may inspect study records as part of its auditing program, but these reviews will only focus on the researchers and not on your responses or involvement. The IRB is a group of people who review research studies to protect the rights and welfare of research participants.

Can I stop being in the study and what are my rights?

You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. If you agree to be in the study, but later change your mind, you may drop out at any time. There are no penalties or consequences of any kind if you decide that you do not want to participate. You do not have to answer any question that you do not want to answer.

Whom do I contact if I have questions about the study?

Take as long as you like before you make a decision. We will be happy to answer any question you have about this study. If you have further questions about this study or if you have a research-related problem, you may contact the principal investigator, Gaye , at 860-486-4190 or the student researcher, Natalie Umsted, at 515-320-2798. If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research participant, you may contact the University of Connecticut Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 860-486-8802.

Documentation of Consent:

I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. Its general purposes, the particulars of involvement and possible risks and inconveniences have been explained to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time. My signature also indicates that I have received a copy of this consent form.

Participant Signature:

Print Name:

Date:

Signature of Person
Obtaining Consent

Print Name:

Date:

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