



Close Knit: Using Consumption Communities to Overcome Loneliness

Journal:	<i>European Journal of Marketing</i>
Manuscript ID	EJM-02-2019-0145.R4
Manuscript Type:	Original Article
Keywords:	Consumption communities, Consumer Identity, Self-Help, Loneliness, Social Support

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1. Abstract

1.1. Purpose

This paper highlights the role of consumption communities as a self-help support group to ameliorate loneliness. We suggest that the self-help element of consumption communities has been overlooked due to a focus on communities pursuing hegemonic masculinity. Instead, we focus on a female-led and -dominated consumption community.

1.2 Design/methodology/approach

A longitudinal ethnography was undertaken with the aim of understanding consumer behaviour in a 'hyper-feminine' environment. Participant observation, depth interviews and netnography were carried out over five years within the Knitting community, focusing on an Irish Stitch 'n' Bitch group.

1.3 Findings

A dimension of consumption communities has been overlooked in the extant literature; this female-led and -dominated community functions as a self-help support group used as a 'treatment' for loneliness. It also demonstrates all the characteristics of a support group.

1.4 Practical implications

This study offers a framework with which new studies of community consumption can be examined, or existing studies can be re-examined, through lenses of loneliness and self-help support groups.

Marketers have an opportunity to build supportive consumption communities that provide a safe space for support where commerce and brand-building can also occur. Groups aimed

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3 at ameliorating loneliness may wish to consider integration of the consumption community
4 model.
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9 *1.5 Originality/value*

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12 Calls have been made for a reconceptualisation of consumption communities as current
13 typologies seem inadequate. This paper responds with a critical examination through the
14 lens of the self-help support group, while also taking steps toward resolving the gender
15 imbalance in the consumption community literature. The paper explores loneliness, a
16 previously underexamined motivator for consumption community membership.
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22 *1.6 Keywords*

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24 Consumer Identity, Consumption Communities, Self-Help, Social Support, Loneliness
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30 **2. Introduction**

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33 Loneliness is a pervasive problem in post-industrial nations. The past few years have seen a
34 plethora of global studies which stress the growing issue of unhappiness, and in particular,
35 loneliness in society. Examples can be seen in the US (Polack, 2018), Canada (Angus Reid
36 Institute, 2019), Japan (DiJulio et al., 2018) and the UK (Hammond, 2018). All of these large-
37 scale polls display similar findings – we have never been more lonely, younger demographics
38 are lonelier (Howe, 2019) and young women are lonelier still (Office for National Statistics,
39 2018), although gender differences in loneliness levels have been argued in the past (Borys
40 and Perlman, 1985). Overall, it is suggested that one in twelve people is severely impacted
41 by loneliness (Cacioppo and Cacioppo, 2018). In addition, loneliness has a cost; *“The lonely
42 are not just sadder; they are unhealthier and die younger”* (The Economist, 2018). All of this
43 has led former U.S. Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy to suggest that loneliness is an
44 epidemic of the current era (McGregor, 2017; Murthy, 2017).
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49 The drive to belong and to form relationships is fundamental and pervasive in humans
50 (Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Maslow, 2013). This need for *“lasting, positive and significant
51 interpersonal relationships”* (Baumeister and Leary, 1995, p.497) is innate in humankind and
52 is frequently expressed as Community. As traditional geographically-bound communities are
53 in decline leading to increased social isolation (Bauman, 2013; Field, 2016; Putnam, 1995,
54 2001), people now choose the communities they want to be aligned to, rather than being
55 defined and segmented more traditionally by demographic, race, class or religion (Cohen,
56 2013). Despite the decline of the traditional community, we still seek what Cova and Cova
57 (2002) describe as *“quasi-archaic values: a local sense of identification, religiosity,*
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3 *syncretism, group narcissism and so on*" (Cova and Cova, 2002, p.4). This lack, this
4 loneliness, has led to people searching for alternative means of achieving socialisation
5 processes and of forming bonds. Evidence suggests that some consumption communities
6 (Cova and Pace, 2006), also termed marketplace cultures (O Sullivan and Shankar, 2019),
7 may serve to ameliorate loneliness (Agrawal and Ramachandran, 2017), but there is limited
8 literature exploring how this might occur is limited.
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14 Several theories of contemporary consumption communities have been suggested, most
15 notably, Tribes, Subcultures of Consumption, and Brand Communities. These terms, along
16 with Marketplace Culture and Consumption Communities as over-arching terms, have
17 become confused and muddled in the literature as they are used interchangeably and in
18 situations dissimilar to the original definitions. Even following the admirable attempts by
19 Thomas et al. (2013) and Goulding et al. (2013) to clarify the variety of and distinctions
20 between various types of community described in the literature, calls have been made for a
21 full critical re-examination of the concept and for the establishment of a new foundational
22 theoretical lens (O'Sullivan and Shankar, 2019).
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27 One possible reason why some marketplace cultures and consumption communities fail to
28 be well encapsulated by the existing typology is that the most esteemed papers in this area
29 have overwhelmingly focused on male consumers and further, most work on gender and
30 consumer behaviour focuses on "masculinities rather than femininities" (Maclaran, 2015,
31 p.1734). The Harley Davidson Owner's Group (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995), the
32 Mountain Men (Belk and Costa, 1998), skydivers (Celsi et al., 1993) white water rafters
33 (Arnould and Price, 1993) and Tough Mudders (Scott, Cayla and Cova, 2017), for example, all
34 represent hyper-masculine pursuits, tapping into ideals of hegemonic masculinity and
35 symbolically constructing consumer identities which are rugged, powerful and slightly
36 dangerous. Even seminal work on female identity in consumption communities has focused
37 on women's roles within these "hyper-masculine environments", 'rife with machismo'
38 (Martin et al., 2006, p. 189) or on pursuits like roller-derby which have been variously
39 theorised as parodying or aping hegemonic masculinity (Thompson and Üstüner, 2015 and
40 Carlson, 2010 respectively). Hence while the literature on masculinities comprehensively
41 documents the nature of male identity and its relationship to consumption, the absence of
42 studies in female-led and – dominated consumption communities has led to agreement that
43 femininity is still decidedly under-theorised (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Martin,
44 1998; Pyke and Johnson, 2003; Schippers, 2007). This absence persists despite the growing
45 recognition of the importance of gender and feminism in the academic discourse in
46 marketing and consumer behaviour (Bettany et al., 2010) as we enter feminism's fourth
47 wave (Maclaren, 2015).
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54 One might question whether the findings from these 'hyper-masculine' contexts should be
55 applied to female consumers and those engaged in typically feminine pursuits. Rather than
56 consider women in 'a man's world' as in Martin et al. (2006), or those engaged in 'gender
57 tourism' (Thompson and Holt, 2004), female and feminine consumption should be
58 considered in a 'feminised sphere' (Jantzen et al., 2006).
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3 Those studies which have touched on female-led and -dominated cultures offer a tantalising
4 glimpse of how these groups might differ from the hyper-masculine. Shankar's (2006)
5 chapter on book groups, for example, mentions not only shared sentiments and a collective
6 bond, but also the common witticism 'a drinking group with a book problem', suggesting the
7 consumption holds less meaning than the community. Schau and Thompson (2010) identify
8 a need to actively negotiate liminality as a key meaning behind the Twilight brand
9 community which is also exceptionally female. This points to the idea that these groups may
10 function as something more than the playful (O Sullivan and Shankar, 2019), transitory
11 (Goulding et al., 2013) meaning previously ascribed to consumption communities.

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16 We suggest that the issues in conceptualisation of consumption communities may arise
17 from a dual oversight, a lack of study in female and feminine spaces and a lack of attention
18 to the fundamental human condition of loneliness. Further, loneliness itself appears to be
19 gendered as young women report the highest degree of loneliness. Thus, our research
20 examines the extent to which young female consumers utilise consumption activities,
21 experiences and practices to combat loneliness. Can consumption communities potentially
22 provide the antidote to loneliness, and if so, by what mechanisms?

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27 The article is structured as follows. First, we review prior literature on loneliness, self-help
28 and social support. We then present a discussion of the context of our study, a female-led
29 and -dominated knitting community, and describe our methodology. Our findings are then
30 presented. We detail the 'common predicament' (Jacobs and Goodman, 1989) of loneliness
31 which led the members of an Irish Stitch 'n' Bitch to seek out companionship. We then
32 detail how the consumption community functions as a self-help support group, in the style
33 of Alcoholics Anonymous or Weight Watchers (Moisio and Beruchasvili 2010), to ameliorate
34 loneliness by using the consumption group as a means of accessing social support. We
35 illustrate how consumption practices facilitate this support. We conclude with a theoretical
36 discussion and implications.

3. Literature Review

3.1 What is loneliness?

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51 Positive psychologists give subjective wellbeing, life satisfaction (Van Deurzan, 2008) or
52 even the more ephemeral "*authentic happiness*" (Seligman 2004, p. 14) as their objective.
53 Pascal Bruckner argues we now perceive feeling happy as a duty, a duty which, in his view,
54 breeds much discontent (Edmonds and Warburton, 2011). His belief is that happiness is by
55 its very nature fleeting, 'a moment of grace'. Bruckner goes so far as to suggest that success
56 '*leads to boredom and apathy the moment it is realised*' (Bruckner, 2011, p.4) and, thus,
57 achieving happiness will, in fact, lead to unhappiness. This duty to be perpetually euphoric
58 places a '*burden*' (Bruckner, 2011, p.2) on us, and this pressure to be happy prompts us to
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3 seek a *'therapeutic ideal'* (Bruckner, 2011, p.54) which has become an obsession with
4 perfection (Bruckner, 2011; Edmonds and Warburton, 2011).
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7 Both Bruckner and Madsen (2015) suggest that postmodern, fragmented society, with its
8 lack of traditional support structures like kith and kin and religious community, leads to
9 loneliness and unhappiness. Golpaldas (2016) suggests that traditional support structures of
10 family and community are disintegrating into dispersed social networks with fewer strong
11 ties despite an increasing number of weak ties. Thus, despite our increased connectivity, we
12 feel less connected. Without the *"intensive ties which have genuine meaning"* (Moustakas,
13 1961), the fleeting online connections with the idealised, Instagram-ready lives of others
14 only exacerbate prolonged, existential loneliness.
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18 Loneliness derives not merely from a lack of companionship but from a perceived deficiency
19 in the quantity or quality of relationships or interpersonal reality (Heinrich and Gullone,
20 2006). It is one's perception of, or judgement of, our interpersonal relationships as lacking
21 which give rise to loneliness. Weiss, who produced a multi-dimensional typology of
22 loneliness (DiTommaso and Spinner, 1997; Russell et al., 1984), similarly believed *"people
23 experience loneliness because of perceived deficits in relational provisions which refer to
24 companionship and emotional support provisions"* (Rosenbaum, 2006, p.65).
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28 Weiss (1973) differentiates between the social loneliness of lacking those weak ties and the
29 'emotional loneliness' of lacking intimate relationships. Moustakas (1961) focuses on
30 'existential loneliness'. Other authors differentiate between acute loneliness and prolonged
31 loneliness (Peplau 1985). All these distinctions amount to a consensus that we are, to use
32 Putnam's (1995; 2001) well-known phrase, bowling alone.
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35 *3.2 Community as an antidote*

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38 As Peplau (1985, p.269) says, *"social relationships are essential to personal health and
39 happiness... "friends are good medicine"*. Community, therefore, offers an antidote to
40 loneliness.
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44 Bell and Newby, as cited by Urry (1995), give three different senses of the concept of
45 community. The first is geographic in nature, referring to the boundaries of a physical
46 settlement, the second implies a social system, again local in nature but defined by personal
47 connections and links between members, and the third is *"communion, a particular kind of
48 human association implying personal ties, a sense of belonging and warmth"* (Urry, 1995,
49 p.10). Turner (1969) and Cohen (2013) moved the conception of community beyond locality
50 and toward meaning and identity instead. Community is symptomatic of a search for
51 belongingness, useful to engage in identity projects, and *"an expression of communitas"*
52 (Delanty, 2003, p. 32). Community is both cultural (the idea) and social (the practices), a
53 symbolically constructed reality (Delanty, 2003).
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58 Without traditional community supports, particularly in trying times, one mechanism people
59 may turn to is the support group. Disability support groups (Finn, 1999), Weight Watchers
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3 (Moisio and Beruchashvili, 2010) and Alcoholics Anonymous, for example, can provide
4 belongingness and serve as that 'good medicine'. These types of support groups have been
5 widely studied as they have been found to be beneficial and empowering for participants
6 (Høybye, Johansen and Tjørnhøj-Thomsen, 2005).
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10 Support groups previously examined in the consumption literature tend to have an explicit
11 anti-consumption orientation (as in Moisio and Beruschashvili, 2010), but literature has also
12 shown that consumption can be used in a more positive way, in an effort to resolve feelings
13 of lack of self-esteem and self-actualisation (Grunert, 1994; Moisio, 2007; Woodruffe, 1997;
14 Woodruffe-Burton and Elliot, 2005), rather than merely being problematic or pathological.
15 Thus, we consider the support group's fundamental characteristics abstracted from the lens
16 of pathology.
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22 *3.3 Community as a source of social support*

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27 Finn (1999), in exploring a self-help support group, identifies the existence of two types of
28 helping in a support group – '*socioemotional helping*' (Finn, 1999, p.223) and '*task helping*'
29 (Finn, 1999, p.224). In the case of Finn's field site, online disability support groups, task
30 helping referred to information provision around medical issues, rights, and assistance
31 provision. Task helping can be used to describe the 'community of practice' style
32 information and skill transfer (Wenger, 2011), but the socioemotional helping is identified as
33 the primary motivation for attending (Finn, 1999).
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38 Socioemotional helping is more commonly termed social support. The benefits of social
39 support are widely acknowledged in the literature (Nabi, Prestin and So, 2013; Taylor, 2011;
40 Thoits, 1995). Social support offers many benefits; it "*reduces, or buffers, the adverse*
41 *psychological impacts of exposure to stressful life events and ongoing life strains*" (Thoits,
42 1986, p.416), can be beneficial to physical and mental health during periods of lower stress,
43 and even contributes to longevity (Taylor, 2011). Research also suggests that women
44 provide more social support, draw more on socially supportive connections and networks
45 during periods of high stress, and may indeed derive greater benefit from social support
46 (Taylor, 2011; Taylor et al., 2000; Thoits, 1995). Thus, social support may be of more
47 importance in a female-led and - dominated consumption community than in those which
48 celebrate the hegemonic masculine.
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54 Hirsch (1980) and Pearson (1982) present similar schema to identify the mechanisms by
55 which social support is provided within a group setting. Utilising these schemas of social
56 support, in conjunction with Jacobs and Goodman (1989) and Shaffer and Galinsky (1989)'s
57 descriptors of a support group, a more complete model for the workings of a support group
58 is proposed. Moisio and Beruchashvili (2010) also emphasise the importance of story-
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telling, celebration and encouragement in the Weight Watchers self-help support group process, an element which is under-represented in previous support group literature. From combining these studies, a diagram is provided to illustrate the mechanisms of social support, and thus loneliness amelioration, expected in a self-help support group type of community.



Fig 1: Characteristics Expected in a Self-help Support Group Type of Community.

Dholakia et al. (2004) discuss the benefits of consumer participation in a consumption community, although they use as an example customers of Amazon.com where one might question the interconnectedness. Even so, they show some evidence of participants overcoming loneliness through receiving social support.

We therefore apply the lens of the self-help support group to the female-led and – dominated Knitting community to examine its effectiveness in ameliorating loneliness.

4. Methodology:

4.1 Research context: Knitting and Stitch 'n' Bitch

To fill the gap in the literature around a female-led and female-dominated consumption community, and to investigate if findings from the hyper-masculine environments might be generalisable to a “feminine” context, a consumption community which is overwhelmingly female and associated with femininity was identified. The context chosen was the knitting community.

Craft presents an ideal location to study a female-dominated consumption culture. Pristash (2014, p.3) states, “*It may only be a slight overstatement to say that the history of craft is a history of femininity.*” These crafts have moved in and out of fashion over time as the stereotypically ‘feminine arts’ have waxed and waned in acceptability (Parker, 2010; Stalp, 2015; Stalp and Conti, 2011; Turney, 2009). Needlework, in particular, became an essential part of gender performativity as well as a ‘suitable’ and viable means of financial support for women (Parker, 1984; 2010). The membership of Ravelry.com, the lynchpin of the global Knitting community, is estimated to be around 99.9% female and 0.1% male (Cherry, 2016). These traditionally feminine activities could be seen as performative of emphasised femininity (Schippers, 2007).

The acceptability of these feminine arts has changed with social movement. Quilting for example, which has occupied a particularly central role in the American female experience, moved from being considered the ‘*epitome of female patience, perseverance, good nature, and industry*’ (Showalter, 1986, p.232) to being considered ‘*obsolete, blinded, claustrophobically and perhaps dangerously isolated from the mainstream*’ (ibid, p.239). This rejection of ‘women’s culture’ arose from a rejection of subjugation and enforced domesticity by the second-wave feminists. Embracing a traditional feminine craft, thereby rejecting the idea that “*women should view the masculine as normative, that is, as the goal to be achieved*” (Hughes, 2002, p.34), is subsequently seen as a way to openly state that one values “women’s work”.

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3 Groenfeld (2010, p.259) explains that this new embrace of “women’s work” was particularly
4 due to third-wave feminist periodicals of the 90s and 00s promoting “*reclaiming and*
5 *repoliticising activities traditionally associated with the domestic sphere, particularly*
6 *knitting*”. Debbie Stoller, a prominent third wave feminist, PhD in Women’s Studies and
7 editor of BUST magazine, played a leading role and went on to publish the “Stitch ‘n’ Bitch”
8 books, “Stitch ‘n’ Bitch Handbook” (2003), “Stitch ‘n’ Bitch Nation” (2005), “Stitch ‘n’ Bitch
9 Crochet: The Happy Hooker” (2006), “Son of a Stitch ‘n’ Bitch” (2007) and “Stitch ‘n’ Bitch
10 Superstar” (2010), and popularised the idea of a Stitch ‘n’ Bitch group, collectively
11 understood to be predominantly female, ‘third place’ (not home or work), social spaces
12 (Minahan and Cox, 2006).
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18 Knitting was thus repositioned as both “*cool, as well as quiet, comforting and communal*”
19 (Parkins, 2004, p.429) and, in addition, as a feminist, subversive pursuit. Indeed, the years
20 just before the start of this study saw an “*explosion in the popularity of knitting*” (Wills,
21 2007, p.4) resulting in a 51% increase in the U.S. in women who know how to knit (Minahan
22 and Cox, 2006). The upward trend was not exclusive to knitting. Bratisch and Brush (2011)
23 use the term ‘*fabriculture*’ to describe the resurgence among younger women not just in
24 knitting, but in crochet, sewing, dressmaking, embroidery, quilting, and scrapbooking. These
25 ‘low culture’ genres which had been trivialised and denigrated (Stevens et al., 2007) were
26 thus reclaimed.
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32 The stereotypical image of a crafting circle is of a warm, nurturing environment for women
33 who support each other through thick and thin. This expectation of a “caring community” is
34 reflected in the literature (Green 1998; Minahan and Cox 2006; Piercy and Cheek 2004;
35 Prigoda and McKenzie 2007; Schofield-Tomschin and Littrell 2001) but little attention has
36 been paid to motivations for membership of these groups. MacDonald (2010) found that
37 many older knitters stressed the utility of knitting, the ‘*satisfaction of accomplishment*’ (vii),
38 reflecting Stevens et al.’s (2007) findings among female magazine readers, some of whom
39 felt the need to justify their ‘me time’ as useful or educational. On the other hand, Turney
40 (2018) discusses the rise of ‘ditsy ephemera’’s popularity with this new wave of crafters. She
41 compares the phenomenon of magazines dedicated to this kawaii esthetic to Victorian busy-
42 work. When the output is something “ditsy, cute, useless” (Turney, 2018, p.32), it may be
43 harder to identify the value to the women behind this expression of women’s culture.
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49 This surge in the popularity of fabriculture may have been a fad for some but for others
50 knitting has become central to their sense of self. While Kozinets (2001, p.68) entreats us to
51 “avoid granting subcultural status to what are essentially American leisure activities”, it is
52 clear that for many knitters the hobby has become an integral part of their identities. The
53 Knitting consumption community is thus ideal as a site within which to study consumption
54 within a female-led and -dominated community.
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58 Cova et al. (2007) discuss how a global consumption community is constituted of multiple
59 “local sub-tribes”. For this study, a local Irish sub-group is chosen as a representative sample
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3 of a wider global consumption community. The Local Stitch 'n' Bitch group is a sub-group
4 both of the global Stitch 'n' Bitch movement and of the modern knitting consumption
5 community. It is expected that the local sub-group will share some common meanings with
6 the global consumption community but will also develop its own meanings and,
7 consequently, have a specific local subculture (Cova et al., 2007). To determine which
8 aspects of the consumption community were local and which were global Ravelry.com was
9 studied for purposes of triangulation (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008; Mathison, 1988).
10 Ravelry.com fulfils multiple roles for the Knitting community offering space for both a
11 community of practice element, including a pattern database and immediate access to
12 knitting advice, and a social networking environment, with forum spaces for discussions on
13 both knitting and non-knitting topics. It also serves as an e-commerce and promotional
14 platform for those involved in fabriculture as a business.
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20 21 *4.2 Data collection* 22 23 24

25 In Cova and Cova (2002), the authors suggest that researching tribes should involve:

- 26 • Desk research including monitoring the media and netnography
 - 27 • Semi-structured or unstructured interviews with group members singly or together
 - 28 • Participant and/or non-participant observation at group events
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32 In the case of this study, all three of these suggestions were followed. In an effort to identify
33 Knitters, a Local Stitch 'n' Bitch in Ireland was studied. This group was founded in January
34 2007. Initially, members connected through Yahoo groups, then text messages and later,
35 through Facebook.
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38 This group overlapped and interacted with multiple other knitting and fabriculture groups in
39 the city (including Sunday Knitting Group mentioned in this paper) and these were also
40 explored to give a full and rounded picture of the culture. The group comprised 22 key
41 informants, all female, whose involvement with the group coincided with the period of
42 study (membership of the group was not static), anonymised with pseudonyms. Participant
43 observation was undertaken at weekly Stitch 'n' Bitch meetings beginning in 2010 and
44 concluding in 2016. Around 12 members might attend in a given week. The first author also
45 attended events in the Knitting community, both national and international, and worked as
46 the Marketing Manager for an independent yarn company (anonymised as Dyad Fibres).
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51 Semi-structured in-depth interviews of over one hour duration were conducted with nine
52 local Knitters, spinners and crocheters who identified with the Stitch 'n' Bitch movement.
53 The interviewees showed projects that held particular meaning or importance for them, and
54 in the case of at-home interviews, showed the first author their 'stash' (yarn) and supplies.
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58 Ravelry.com is a knitting database and social networking site with over seven million
59 members and since its establishment in 2007, has become and continues to be the central
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3 online organisational, social, and often, ecommerce hub for Knitters. Those seven million
4 members contribute millions of forum posts, avatars and photographs of knitted items from
5 tens of thousands of patterns. The sheer volume of netnographic data on the site had the
6 potential to overwhelm. For this reason, Ravelry was used for triangulation purposes only.
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8 Once initial themes in the data were identified, appropriate search terms were selected and
9 applied to the Ravelry forums to identify relevant posts. While this is slightly different to
10 Kozinets' guidelines for netnography (Kozinets, 2010; 2014), the methodology is designed to
11 be "*flexible and adaptable*" (Kozinets, 2010, p.5) and a "*blended ethnography/netnography*
12 *could take many forms*" (Kozinets, 2010, p.65).
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Method	Location	Details	Dates
Participant observation	Local Stitch 'n' Bitch	Ranged from full ethnographic notes/ partial notes of interesting data / no notes, full immersion – techniques chosen in advance.	2010 - 2016
Participant observation	Knit Camp U.K.	Notes taken (not full), Reviewed others' blog accounts.	09-15/08/10
Participant observation	This Is Knit Yarn Tasting	Notes made after event.	08/09/11 14/09/12
Depth Interviewing	Stitch 'n' Bitch Members	Semi Structured following McCracken's Long Interview techniques	Rachel – Pilot Interview (19/09/11) Aryanna (16/05/13) Beth (31/05/13) Jennifer (04/06/13) Danielle (11/06/13) Sarah (13/06/13) Siobhan (11/07/13) Cosima (11/12/13) Charlotte (18/07/14)
Member checks	Stitch 'n' Bitch members	Online discussions of themes arising, via group chats and private messaging	Example: Discussion re: ACR Gender paper (9/2/12)
Netnography	Ravelry.com	Searching for emergent themes in forums for triangulation.	Ongoing for the duration of the study
Close reading of media	Online and Offline	Examination of popular media's perception of the community	Ongoing for the duration of the study

Table 1: Outline of the Methods used in Data Collection

4.3 Data Analysis

The data collection and analysis were guided by an emergent design approach (Belk et al., 1989), iterating between the data and the literature. Initial literature reviews focused on

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3 consumption community, but also craft, femininity, feminism and craftivism based on
4 previous literature (Minahan and Cox, 2006). However, initial findings indicated that many
5 within the community rejected these meanings. The authors found no compelling evidence
6 of feminist activism or craftivism. As themes emerged, further iterative literature reviews
7 were carried out around therapy, social support and self-help. The authors moved back and
8 forth between the field and the literature as laid out in Spiggle (1994) as well as Glaser and
9 Strauss (2009), Strauss and Corbin (1994) and Miles and Huberman (1984).

16 5. Findings

19 The Local Stitch 'n' Bitch group displays many of the characteristics of a self-help support group
20 as discussed by Jacobs and Goodman (1989), Levine and Sandeen (2013) and Moisio and
21 Beruchashvili (2010). Both task helping and socioemotional helping (Finn 1999) are observed in
22 Local Stitch 'n' Bitch. The group members provide and receive support using mechanisms
23 described in Barrera (1986), Hirsch (1980) and Pearson (1982).

26 The key finding of the study is that members of the Knitting community are forming a
27 consumption-based support/self-help group to ameliorate loneliness.

32 5.1 Loneliness as a motivator

35 The data from Local Stitch 'n' Bitch reveals that loneliness and social isolation emerge as the
36 major reason for membership of the group.

39 Danielle explains *"I was missing my peer group and wanted to find people that I had something
40 in common with"* and Rachel tells us she *"wanted to find people to connect with"*.

43 Jennifer says

44 *"I hoped that I would get some friends and some contacts. People that I could, you know,
45 start friendship with and kind of so I wouldn't be so lonely."*

48 The group serves as a surrogate support system for the members, many of whom are isolated by
49 circumstance – as young mothers and/or immigrants. Several members had come to Ireland on
50 spouse visas and were unable to work outside the home.

53 Kira suggests that as 'outsiders',

54 *"Ex-pats, by definition, know what it's like to be lonely."*

57 Other members found themselves socially isolated through changes in their lives prior to joining
58 the group. Prior to the study Ireland's economy had been seriously damaged by the Great
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3 Recession and many young people had emigrated. Others found themselves unemployed or
4 underemployed and with time to fill.
5

6
7 *"...basically just before I joined Stitch 'n' Bitch most of my friends had left....and I had also*
8 *just broken up with someone, so I had a lot more free time and then I joined the group."*

9 (Siobhan)
10

11 Pearson (1982; 1983) suggests that self-help groups may be needed more by populations
12 undergoing developmental changes such as leaving college, relocating, emigrating and
13 motherhood. The members of Stitch 'n' Bitch are using the group as an aid to overcoming 'life-
14 disrupting problems' (Moisio and Beruchashvili, 2010). In the therapeutic support group
15 literature this is termed the 'common predicament', problem or concern (Jacobs and Goodman,
16 1989).
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20 In Stitch 'n' Bitch, we see the consumption community function as a surrogate support system,
21 often where kith and kin are absent. Pearson (1983) and Heller and Swindle (1983) discuss the
22 need for a "surrogate support system" where the "kith and kin" are absent or harmful. Many of
23 these women were 'starting over' in some way (Price et.al, 2017).
24
25

26 The physical practice of knitting is widely agreed to have benefits (Riley et al., 2013), and
27 Minahan and Cox (2006) identify "knitting together" as a social capital building exercise in
28 contrast to Putnam's "bowling alone" (Putnam, 2001). However, the group experiences an
29 amelioration of loneliness from the consumption community and consumption practices beyond
30 what could be explained by the relaxing nature of knitting. Sarah specifically describes the
31 group, rather than knitting itself, as her "*therapy*" saying that the group is important "*for [her]*
32 *mental health*". Danielle describes Local Stitch 'n' Bitch as "*very therapeutic*". This shared belief
33 in the power of the group is ubiquitous in Local Stitch 'n' Bitch, and creates a strong group bond
34 and sense of shared identity with an 'ingroup' and 'outgroup' mentality (Avery, 2012).
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40 So, while there is no shared pathology underlying the group as in AA or Weight Watchers, the
41 shared problem (loneliness and isolation), and the socioemotional helping provided by the
42 group, result in a shared belief that the group is therapeutic and has great value in the
43 members' lives as a surrogate support system. The lack of underlying pathology in the
44 consumption community removes the potential stigma of a support group. However, the group
45 shares many practices of the self-help support group which may explain how the consumption
46 community serves to successfully ameliorate loneliness.
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50 *5.2 Emotional Support*

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54 The presence of emotional support (Hirsch, 1989) is strongly identifiable in the data.
55 Danielle, for example, is very clear that she used the group as an emotional support, to help
56 her cope with the loneliness and isolation of being a young mother in a foreign country:
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“Just loneliness, em yeah ‘cos that was what I got out of it, what I needed to get out of it when I first started going, [Danielle starts to cry] wow well, emotional response, because I suppose that was a particularly difficult period ...

So yeah, that social contact for feeling less alone was something that I definitely benefited from, from the group and yeah, I don’t know if I particularly contributed anything to it, but I felt .. talking to people and that’s what I got from it and that’s what I got from it and that’s what it gave as well. Good feelings yes I attribute to that” (Danielle).

For Danielle, having immigrated to Ireland and fallen pregnant at 19, the group represents access to a peer group and a support structure that she is missing. She begins to cry when discussing this difficult time in her life and her use of Stitch ‘n’ Bitch as a resource to navigate it. She goes on to say that though she is currently not attending the group due to family commitments, knowing that Stitch ‘n’ Bitch is ongoing gives her peace of mind, if she “needs it”, it is there.

As discussed previously, many of the group members are without ‘kith and kin’ and they turn to Stitch ‘n’ Bitch and the relationships they build there as an emotional support system.

Amelia, a new arrival in the city, had little interest in knitting but met members of the group through an American ex-pat group and tagged along to Local Stitch ‘n’ Bitch. By purchasing some pink chunky yarn and a set of knitting needles, she gained access to a peer group and an emotionally supportive community. She attended every week that she lived in the city, often carrying her unchanging ‘knitting project’ of a few rows of plain stitch. Despite her minimal engagement with the hobby, the emotional support the community provided was accessed through a small purchase.

The acknowledgement that loneliness was a clear motivation for the participants was an unexpected finding from the study. The depth of emotional connection between the members was in stark contrast to characterisations of consumption communities or marketplace cultures as playful, transient or without obligation (Goulding et al., 2011). The other mechanisms of social support provision identified in support group literature were also apparent in the group.

5.3 Further Characteristics of Social Support

5.3.1 Reciprocal Helping and Tangible Assistance

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3 The support system is at its most tangible in the many practices of reciprocal helping
4 (Shaffer and Galinsky, 1989) and assistance that exist in relation to all aspects of community
5 consumption. While at the outset Local Stitch 'n' Bitch was not officially help-intended,
6 reciprocal helping (Shaffer and Galinsky 1989) exists within the consumption community.
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10 Danielle, who has a low-income family, receives lots of tangible assistance to enable her to
11 pursue her craft; Danielle then uses the yarn to make practical items for her children. These
12 gifts may come from within Stitch 'n' Bitch or from friends and family who understand her
13 love of knitting:
14

15
16 *"Most of the yarn I have I got as gifts or maybe people clearing out some stuff and*
17 *they say do you want some and I say yes sure, great you know, I'll take some of that"*
18 *(Danielle).*
19

20
21 Yarn is often gifted between members, if it is more suitable to another member's planned
22 pattern or, often, if the colour is felt to be more suited to another member.
23

24
25 When Cosima wanted to learn to spin yarn, Katja, in addition to giving her the tangible
26 assistance required to learn a new skill by providing her with the spindles and fibre
27 necessary for the task, also provided cognitive guidance by teaching her how to use the
28 spindle.
29

30
31 Outside the knitting sphere, members of the group continued to assist each other, with Leda
32 providing vegan-cooking lessons to Sarah, for example. On one memorable occasion, the
33 first author provided tangible assistance to a member of the group who was being assaulted
34 by a drunk in the pub. This story has become part of the shared repertoire of the group
35 through storytelling and, of course, has been enhanced over time, but several interviewees
36 mentioned it as an example of the group being there for each other:
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40 *"[Jennifer] really appreciated you defending her honour at that time"* (Sarah).
41

42
43 This ethos of caring and tangible support extends outwards into charitable acts for the wider
44 community. In the case of Local Stitch 'n' Bitch, this has involved knitting little hats for
45 Innocent Smoothies Age Action Ireland campaign, knitting blankets for premature babies for
46 the a nearby maternity hospital, and wraps for deceased babies for Féileacáin, the Stillbirth
47 and Neonatal Death Association of Ireland. The Knitters provide tangible assistance to each
48 other in multiple ways, engaging in gift giving, financially supporting member businesses
49 (yarn and otherwise), and assisting with childcare and other everyday tasks.
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53 The group members also try to support the wider Knitting community, particularly through
54 Ravelry. Aryanna states that when she has good fortune, she 'returns the favour',
55 supporting the community that has provided enjoyment and support to her:
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3 *“[I] was making good money and so I said I’m going to pay for a pattern and support*
4 *the .. the community [deliberate emphasis] cos I’d been taking free patterns for years*
5 *so I’ll pay for this one”* (Aryanna).
6
7

8 The group not only provides tangible assistance to other members of the local group, but to
9 other members of the wider Knitting world. They also work as a group to provide support
10 and assistance more widely in the community. Much of this tangible assistance is rooted in
11 the desire to be supportive of fellow members and to provide proof of emotional
12 involvement.
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15 16 17 18 5.3.2 Cognitive Guidance and Social Reinforcement 19

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22 Cognitive guidance is defined by Hirsch (1980) as providing information, advice or
23 explanation, while social reinforcement is offering praise or criticism for specific actions
24 (Hirsch, 1980; Pearson, 1983). Both elements are apparent in the Local Stitch ‘n’ Bitch
25 group. The group has a socially negotiated leadership structure based on social capital
26 derived from skill and commitment to the group. While in many cases the group engages in
27 joint cognitive guidance and social reinforcement, Sarah occupies a particular position of
28 authority.
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31
32 Sarah is termed ‘*the Mammy*’ of the group due to the high level of cognitive guidance
33 (Hirsch, 1980) she provides, particularly in terms of ‘task helping’ (Finn, 1999). This type of
34 task helping is reflective of community of practice behaviour (Wenger, 2011), where
35 knowledge is passed from ‘senior’ members of the group to newer or less skilled members.
36 This guidance has also led to Sarah being teasingly, but affectionately, called ‘*Knitler*’ by
37 Marian, one of her close friends in the group.
38
39

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41
42 Beth describes the process of learning to be a ‘Knitter’ from other members of the group:
43

44 *“People would be more excited about choosing projects to talking about yarn and*
45 *em, learning new skills really and I know Sarah and Kira were doing these little knit-*
46 *alongs where they’d be figuring out how to make a sweater kind of without a pattern*
47 *from scratch”* (Beth).
48
49

50 Sarah is regarded as a font of knowledge and ‘converts’ others from what she believes to be
51 an inferior form of knitting (on straight needles) to using circular needles. Sarah is the first
52 to change to circular needles, then interchangeable needles. Almost all members of the
53 group now use interchangeable needles, most commonly KnitPicks/KnitPros. Sarah herself
54 has since moved on to Hiya Hiyas, needles which she believes to be superior as they have a
55 swivelling join between needle and cable. She describes converting the other members to
56 her way of thinking through “*grim determination.*” Sarah uses social reinforcement (Hirsch,
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3 1980; Pearson, 1983) to spread her ideas through the group. The members copy Sarah to
4 affirm their group identity.
5

6
7 When Jennifer was in the USA, she drove over 150 miles to find a complete set of Hiya
8 Hiyas:
9

10 *"I saw [Sarah] and her Hiya Hiyas and I don't know I just wanted them ... I drove all*
11 *over Phoenix looking for these god damn needles, sorry, and about two hundred*
12 *dollars later I had them ... I probably drove a hundred and fifty miles in my Mom's car*
13 *by myself with the radio and I was delighted to do it"* (Jennifer).
14
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16
17 This 'pilgrimage' (Belk et al., 1989) demonstrates Jennifer's commitment to the group as
18 well as reinforcing Sarah's role as maven and trendsetter. Using the right tools affirms one's
19 identity as part of the group and underpins the sense of the group as a well-structured
20 community offering relief from loneliness.
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22

23
24 The community, here, is treated as a therapeutic safe space as in a support group, in which
25 to seek advice and 'praise or criticism for specific actions' (Hirsch, 1980), however the
26 support is facilitated by consumption practices. The high level of emotional support
27 provided and the ability to seek this guidance result in an environment of intimacy.
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30 31 5.3.3 Intimacy 32 33

34
35 Intimacy (Pearson, 1982; 1983) is by its nature a difficult support group characteristic to
36 identify. Demonstrations of intimacy may be so subtle as to be missed by all but those who
37 exchange them (for example touches of the hands after hugging goodbye, quiet
38 conversations within the main group chatter, or even 'knowing' smiles). Technology was
39 used to facilitate this at times; the first author, for example, has received messages during
40 Local Stitch 'n' Bitch meetings via mobile phone from members who were seated at a
41 distance that did not allow for a private conversation.
42
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46 Small intimacies such as a pat on the knee or on the arm are common in the group. Knitting
47 lends itself to such intimacies as tiny stitches are studied side by side when, for example,
48 looking for the source of a mistake, or in the cramped pub environment where as many of
49 the group as possible will squeeze together into a comfortable booth seating. The tactile
50 nature of the activity promotes this physical intimacy. This adds to the sense of community
51 and closeness, alleviates feelings of isolation and loneliness, and provides a support system
52 for the women.
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55 56 5.3.4 Socialisation External to the Group 57 58 59 60

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3 Members of the Stitch 'n' Bitch group regularly socialise outside set meeting times. Hirsch
4 (1980) and Pearson (1982; 1983) suggest that this is vital to the provision of support in a
5 group context. Shaffer and Galinsky (1989) suggested that in self-help groups "informal
6 member to member contacts [were] sometimes viewed as more therapeutic than the
7 formal group meetings." In Local Stitch 'n' Bitch, smaller groups or pairs meet for shopping
8 trips, yarn related or otherwise, for coffee and meals, as well as for larger life events such as
9 weddings or christenings. For many years, an annual potluck Thanksgiving dinner was
10 organised by the American members of the group.
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15 Cosima states that socialising with friends is her primary motivation for joining the group;
16 she is "contented" with her knitting but wants the "social interaction" of the group:
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19 *"Well I was quite contented from the knitting side, you know, to kind of use Youtube*
20 *and the internet, Ravelry, and that, but I wanted to get to know people outside of the*
21 *research department so it was a kind of a way of getting to know people who weren't*
22 *in my workplace" (Cosima).*
23
24

25 Beth recalls earlier organised social events she enjoyed which were not specifically knitting
26 related:
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28

29 *"One of my favourite things that we did as a group was a while ago, were the*
30 *Thanksgiving dinners that we had at one of the group founder's apartments ... it*
31 *wasn't actually based around knitting, I can't even remember if people brought*
32 *knitting..." (Beth).*
33
34

35 Often, meet-ups for Knitters centre on consumption experiences or SAE (Stash Acquisition
36 Experiences) in the Knitting parlance. Group outings to national knitting events have taken
37 place. Far from being problematic, as in AA or Weight Watchers, consumption is celebrated
38 and shared.
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42 The socialising element of the therapy builds a deep loyalty to the brands that facilitate the
43 social interactions of the group. Stitch 'n' Bitch members are loyal to 'their' pub. Similarly,
44 members of Sunday Knitting Group collaboratively created a jumper for the owner of the
45 bar/restaurant at which they meet, at his request. Sweaters are acknowledged to be
46 something of a labour of love in the Knitting community, due to the investment of yarn and
47 time. This gift, therefore, has meaning for the Knitters and shows the high value they place
48 on the business owner's facilitation of their group's socialisation.
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54 5.3.5 Storytelling, Celebration and Encouragement

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58 Storytelling is often an important part of the support group process. Narratives are how we
59 make sense of the world around us and of ourselves; it is quite natural then that they would
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3 therefore take a pivotal role in processing the experience of loneliness and in its
4 amelioration. Moisiu and Beruchashvili (2010) when discussing Weight Watchers mention
5 several types of confession (confession of pathology and confession of failure) and
6 storytelling (autotherapeutic testimonials). However, the confessional model is tied to the
7 spiritual and religious framing of overconsumption as sin in Weight Watchers, Alcoholics
8 Anonymous and similar programmes. Without this sin, there is no need for confession.
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12 Storytelling and testimonials in a different form, however, are observed within the Stitch 'n'
13 Bitch group. Cognitive guidance is sought on yarn, tools, and patterns. This guidance is often
14 provided in the form of consumer testimonials. A shared repertoire of tales from the
15 group's past are retold time and time again – how Sarah couldn't stand to be around wool
16 when she was pregnant, how Charlotte only ever made squares, how quickly Jennifer took
17 to knitting, producing expert level projects within weeks. These anecdotes are used to
18 entertain, to reassure, and to build a sense of community. Beyond the personal, knowledge
19 of the Knitting world is passed on. New knitters are warned of the Curse of the Boyfriend
20 Sweater, an urban legend that states that knitting a man a sweater will result in a breakup,
21 and they are introduced to the vital vocabulary and slang of Knitters through storytelling.
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27 As in the world of AA and Weight Watchers, achievements are celebrated and
28 encouragement is given for good Knitting behaviour. Knitters are asked to bring in finished
29 objects (FOs) to show off to the group. Their hard work is praised, their identity as a Knitter
30 is affirmed, and support is amplified by this.
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36 5.3.6. Open-endedness

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40 Although membership of AA or Weight Watchers may be open-ended and indeed lifelong,
41 there is a goal in mind: dealing with pathological consumption. In the case of Local Stitch 'n'
42 Bitch, membership is perhaps even more flexible and open-ended. Although members of
43 the group share a common predicament, once companionship has been achieved, loneliness
44 addressed, and emotional support attained, members can choose to leave, secure in the
45 knowledge that the group is there if they need it, as with Danielle, or continue to attend, as
46 with Sarah, who has been an active participant since the first meeting. When Cosima injured
47 her wrist and was unable to knit, she still attended the group. It is clear that in this group it
48 is *'not about the knitting'* (Sarah) but, rather, it is the support community that drives
49 continued attendance.
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54 Having established that this group essentially functions as a self-help support group through
55 consumption in a different way from those previously identified in the literature, and having
56 examined the mechanisms by which the group ameliorates loneliness in this female-led and
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3 -dominated consumption community, the use of brands to facilitate that experience are
4 now explored.
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6 7 *5.4 Consumption to Facilitate Self-Help* 8 9

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Stitch 'n' Bitch members use several brands to facilitate self-help and ameliorate loneliness. A selection of examples is given in the table below. These, in keeping with the entrepreneurial spirit suggested by Goulding et al. (2013) as characteristic of a neo-tribal consumption community, include brands created by members of the community itself. Support of these brands, Dyad Fibres and Prolethean Yarns, while providing tangible assistance to the founders also affirms one's commitment to the group. In the case of Dyad, a much sought-after and rare commodity in the Knitworld, association with the brand and access to the product added significant social capital to group members.

American brands such as Ravelry.com are used to demonstrate affiliation with the wider Knitworld. Purchasing the 'right' tools such as Knit Pro needles, and now Hiya Hiyas, demonstrate both financial commitment to the Knitting identity, and an acceptance of and reinforcement of Sarah's superior skills and knowledge and informal leadership.

Brand	Mechanism of the Support Group	Examples
Dyad Fibres	Tangible support, Social reinforcement	The group shops extensively from Dyad and promotes the brand through social reinforcement. In turn, some of the cachet of the brand is transferred to the group.
Prolethean Yarns	Tangible support	Alison and Cosima co-authored a pattern book with Aryanna to promote Proleathean Yarns, again in an exchange of tangible support. All parties receive additional social capital as published pattern authors as well as monetary compensation.
SnB Pub	Socialisation	The SnB pub provides a location for the Knitters to meet and becomes an integral part of the Local Stitch 'n' Bitch experience.

		When Charlotte and Kira visit, it is not enough to merely knit together, the knitting must take place in the pub.
KU Bar/restaurant	Socialisation	Members of Sunday Knitting Group display a similar loyalty to and affection for the KU Bar and Restaurant which hosts their meet-ups.
Knit Pro needles	Cognitive guidance, Social reinforcement, Story-telling	New members were gently guided to purchase these 'correct' tools to assume the Knitter identity. Their use was socially reinforced by re-tellings of Jennifer's pilgrimage across Arizona. Her determination to consume the correct brand is celebrated.
Hiya Hiya needles	Cognitive guidance, Social reinforcement	Sarah later guides members to see that, in fact, Hiya Hiyas are a superior tool and that to progress as a more serious Knitter, this brand must now be adopted. Again, this is socially reinforced consumption as more and more of the group switches over.
Knit Picks	Cognitive guidance, Social reinforcement, Celebration of consumption	Shopping from Knit Picks, a U.S. website which does not ship to Europe, was usually a joint online shopping experience relying on an intermediary located in the U.S. As shipping was free over \$100, members encouraged each other to 'spend up'. The parcel would then be brought to the meeting to be opened and its contents dispersed, with consumption being celebrated.

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<p>Events such as WonderWool, Knit Camp, Yarn Tasting</p>	<p>Task helping, Cognitive guidance, Social reinforcement, Socialisation</p>	<p>Events such as Wonderwool, Knit Camp, and The Yarn Tasting, are Stash Acquisition Experiences (and potentially skill and knowledge acquisition experiences too). However, they also allow socialisation between diverse groups of knitters and facilitate the spread of knowledge from one group to another in the form of task helping (teaching new techniques and ways of being a Knitter). Members return from these events with new knowledge to share and to reinforce the other members' connection to the Knitworld.</p>
<p>Ravelry.com</p>	<p>Task helping, Tangible support, Socialisation, Cognitive guidance, Social reinforcement</p>	<p>Ravelry.com is a social network and therefore offers opportunities for socialisation. More than this, it offers access to tangible support, cognitive guidance and social reinforcement from the whole Knitting world.</p>

Table 2: Examples of Brands Used to Facilitate Self-Help and the Amelioration of Loneliness

The use of these brands certainly facilitates the craft of knitting, but using the right tool also serves as a marker of the Knitters' 'in-group' status. Much in the same way that other communities might identify each other by a certain tattoo, jacket or ring, the Knitter can spot another by her insider knowledge of knitting needles. Within the Knitting community specifically, the brands serve an important role not just in affirming the Knitter identity but also in providing access to the therapeutic well-being on offer. The Hiya Hiya needles, for example, represent not just the highly skilled and discerning Knitter identity, but also the positive experience of social reinforcement. In this way, the brands come to symbolise and embody the amelioration of loneliness that the members associate with the community.

6. Discussion:

The key meaning to emerge from the data behind consumption activities in this female-led and –dominated consumption community is that members have essentially created a self-help support group through a consumption activity.

The members of this consumption community seek to ameliorate loneliness through consumer experience as in Woodruffe's (1997) work on retail therapy, but they cope with loneliness not just through purchasing but through the consumption community. This differs from consumption as previously explored in the literature in the forms of compensatory consumption (Grunert, 1994; Moisiso, 2007; Woodruffe, 1997; Woodruffe-Burton and Elliot, 2005) and spiritual-therapeutic consumption (Moisiso and Beruchashvili, 2010). There is no spiritual component, such as exists in spiritual-therapeutic consumption (Moisiso and Beruchashvili, 2010), possibly due to the lack of an underlying pathology. Membership of AA or Weight Watchers has a goal in dealing with pathological consumption and draws on religious elements such as confession and penance to achieve this goal. The Local Stitch 'n' Bitch community is not originally help-intended, but, rather, has an explicitly pro-consumption orientation. However, it possesses many of the same characteristics as a self-help support group.

In examining the mechanisms by which a self-help support group functions from both the therapy literature (Barerra, 1986; Hirsch, 1980; Pearson, 1982; 1983) and the consumption literature (Moisiso and Beruchashvili, 2010), it is apparent that many of these mechanisms are also utilised by Local Stitch 'n' Bitch. While addressing their shared predicament of loneliness, group members engage in reciprocal helping, tangible assistance, emotional support, cognitive guidance, social reinforcement, intimacy, socialisation, and story-telling, celebration, and encouragement. Thus, the consumption community functions as a self-help support group to ameliorate a common predicament of loneliness.

7. Conclusion:

Consumption communities potentially offer additional resources for people suffering from loneliness. As consumption communities are not tied to a particular affliction or addiction, they are less stigmatised than self-help support groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous and Weight Watchers. Nevertheless, while loneliness itself carries a stigma (Ho and O'Donohoe 2014) but joining a consumption community offers a way to repair the negative emotional state of loneliness without tarring oneself with the brush of 'a loner'. The consumption community is thus potentially more accessible and approachable than the officially help-intended group.

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3 This finding also further illustrates issues with the existing consumption community
4 literature. Though Goulding et al. (2011) makes an admirable effort to untangle terms which
5 have been used interchangeably and without firm definitional boundaries in the literature,
6 the Knitting community fails to be encapsulated by the typology established. It is neither
7 based around a single brand (as illustrated in table 2), oppositional (as illustrated by its
8 open-ended membership and member's willingness to attend and interact with other
9 groups) nor transient and playful, as illustrated by the members deep emotional
10 commitment to each other and the existence of a self-help support group. As such, it seems
11 that O'Sullivan and Shankar's (2019) call for a critical re-examination of the foundational
12 theoretical framework of these consumption communities is clearly supported by our
13 findings. However, the self-help support group type of consumption community is clearly
14 distinct from the 'play-community' type of marketplace culture. Perhaps this is because
15 O'Sullivan and Shankar (2019) too uses as its context the familiar "hyper-masculine" (Martin
16 et al., 2006) environments.

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24 This study considers the meanings that reside in a female-led and -dominated consumption
25 community without the 'outgroup' minority status (Avery, 2012) of a male-led and –
26 dominated consumption community. Rather, the nature and meaning of consumption
27 within a female-led and –dominated consumption community have been explored,
28 contributing in a novel manner to the work in this field by scholars such as Harju and
29 Huovinen (2015), Minihan and Cox (2006), Scaraboto and Fischer (2013), Schau and
30 Thompson (2010), Shankar (2006), and Thompson and Üstüner (2015).

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34 It is therefore proposed that the encouragement and support that women consumers give
35 one another in all female-led, market-mediated communities or sub- communities, including
36 roller derby (Thompson and Üstüner, 2015), motorcycle-riding (Martin et al., 2006), or the
37 fatshionista blogosphere (Harju and Huovinen, 2015; Scaraboto and Fischer, 2013), could be
38 re-examined using the lens of the self-help support group. Similarly, Shankar's book groups
39 (2006) and Schau and Thompson's (2010) Twilight fans could be re-examined from the
40 viewpoint of loneliness and the amelioration of loneliness. However, further research is
41 required to explore this possibility, particularly given the contrast this presents to findings in
42 Carlson's (2010) work on the sport of roller derby, where community priorities seem to be
43 centred on the activity, rather than the provision of mutual support (Carlson, 2010).

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49 There is a further intriguing possibility presented by some of the work on loneliness (Borys
50 and Perlman, 1985; Wiseman et al., 1995; Zasloff and Kidd, 1994) who suggest that women,
51 potentially due to gendered socialisation, may be better able to express loneliness. This
52 would imply that although hyper-masculine consumption communities profess to chase the
53 hegemonic ideals of physicality, competitiveness and even rugged independence, as in the
54 Mountain Men (Belk and Costa, 1998), underlying all of this 'play' is a drive to ameliorate
55 loneliness.

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3 Consumption communities generally then may provide a unique antidote to what is
4 becoming a global problem, loneliness. Marketers have an opportunity to build supportive
5 consumption communities that are not focused on a short-term profit goal but provide a
6 safe space for support where commerce and brand-building can also occur (as in the style of
7 Ravelry.com). The growing loneliness problem could, potentially, be addressed through
8 consumption communities. In the case of Stitch 'n' Bitch, the consumption community
9 clearly served a purpose in these women's life, relieving isolation and ameliorating
10 loneliness.
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15 This points not just to a marketing implication, but also to a policy implication. 'Men's
16 Sheds', for example, are considered "an exemplar for the promotion of men's health and
17 well-being by health and social policy-makers" (Wilson and Cordier, 2013, p.451). The use of
18 the consumption community as a self-help support group by the almost entirely female
19 membership suggests that a similar model may be required to counter isolation and
20 loneliness in young women. Groups engaged in suicide prevention programs for example, or
21 those charged with integration of refugees/displaced persons, may wish to consider
22 integration of the consumption community model into their curriculum or training. Further,
23 those brands aiming to build a consumption community, particularly if their target market is
24 postmodern consumers, the transitory, the globalised, the nomadic (Holt and Thompson,
25 1996), by recognising the loneliness amelioration potential of the community, marketers
26 may find in this model a useful tool to strengthen their consumption community strategies.
27 The provision of a treatment for the loneliness epidemic offers an insight into why the
28 bonds within consumption communities can have such deep meaning to their members.
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Close Knit: Using Consumption Communities to Overcome Loneliness

1. Abstract

1.1. Purpose

This paper highlights the role of consumption communities as a self-help support group to ameliorate loneliness. We suggest that the self-help element of consumption communities has been overlooked due to a focus on communities pursuing hegemonic masculinity. Instead, we focus on a female-led and -dominated consumption community.

1.2 Design/methodology/approach

A longitudinal ethnography was undertaken with the aim of understanding consumer behaviour in a 'hyper-feminine' environment. Participant observation, depth interviews and netnography were carried out over five years within the Knitting community, focusing on an Irish Stitch 'n' Bitch group.

1.3 Findings

A dimension of consumption communities has been overlooked in the extant literature; this female-led and -dominated community functions as a self-help support group used as a 'treatment' for loneliness. It also demonstrates all the characteristics of a support group.

1.4 Practical implications

This study offers a framework with which new studies of community consumption can be examined, or existing studies can be re-examined, through lenses of loneliness and self-help support groups.

Marketers have an opportunity to build supportive consumption communities that provide a safe space for support where commerce and brand-building can also occur. Groups aimed

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3 at ameliorating loneliness may wish to consider integration of the consumption community
4 model.
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9 1.5 Originality/value 10

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12 Calls have been made for a reconceptualisation of consumption communities as current
13 typologies seem inadequate. This paper responds with a critical examination through the
14 lens of the self-help support group, while also taking steps toward resolving the gender
15 imbalance in the consumption community literature. The paper explores loneliness, a
16 previously underexamined motivator for consumption community membership.
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22 1.6 Keywords 23

24 Consumer Identity, Consumption Communities, Self-Help, Social Support, Loneliness
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30 2. Introduction 31

32
33 Loneliness is a pervasive problem in post-industrial nations. The past few years have seen a
34 plethora of global studies which stress the growing issue of unhappiness, and in particular,
35 loneliness in society. Examples can be seen in the US (Polack 2018), Canada (Angus Reid
36 Institute 2019), Japan (DiJulio et al. 2018) and the UK (Hammond 2018). All of these large-
37 scale polls display similar findings – we have never been more lonely, younger demographics
38 are lonelier (Howe 2019) and young women are lonelier still (Office for National Statistics
39 2018), although gender differences in loneliness levels have been argued in the past (Borys
40 and Perlman 1985). Overall, it is suggested that one in twelve people is severely impacted
41 by loneliness (Cacioppo and Cacioppo 2018). In addition, loneliness has a cost; *“The lonely
42 are not just sadder; they are unhealthier and die younger”* (The Economist 2018). All of this
43 has led former U.S. Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy to suggest that loneliness is an
44 epidemic of the current era (McGregor 2017; Murthy 2017).
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49 The drive to belong and to form relationships is fundamental and pervasive in humans
50 (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Maslow 2013). This need for *“lasting, positive and significant
51 interpersonal relationships”* (Baumeister and Leary 1995, 497) is innate in humankind and is
52 frequently expressed as Community. As traditional geographically-bound communities are
53 in decline leading to increased social isolation (Bauman 2013; Field 2016; Putnam 1995,
54 2001), people now choose the communities they want to be aligned to, rather than being
55 defined and segmented more traditionally by demographic, race, class or religion (Cohen
56 2013). Despite the decline of the traditional community, we still seek what Cova and Cova
57 (2002) describe as *“quasi-archaic values: a local sense of identification, religiosity,
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3 *syncretism, group narcissism and so on*" (Cova and Cova 2002, 4). This lack, this loneliness,
4 has led to people searching for alternative means of achieving socialisation processes and of
5 forming bonds. Evidence suggests that some consumption communities (Cova and Pace
6 2006), also termed marketplace cultures (O Sullivan and Shankar 2019), may serve to
7 ameliorate loneliness (Agrawal and Ramachandran 2017), but there is limited literature
8 exploring how this might occur.
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14 Several theories of contemporary consumption communities have been suggested, most
15 notably, Tribes, Subcultures of Consumption, and Brand Communities. These terms, along
16 with Marketplace Culture and Consumption Communities as over-arching terms, have
17 become confused and muddled in the literature as they are used interchangeably and in
18 situations dissimilar to the original definitions. Even following the admirable attempts by
19 Thomas et al. (2013) and Goulding et al. (2013) to clarify the variety of and distinctions
20 between various types of community described in the literature, calls have been made for a
21 full critical re-examination of the concept and for the establishment of a new foundational
22 theoretical lens (O'Sullivan and Shankar 2019).
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26 One possible reason some marketplace cultures and consumption communities fail to be
27 well encapsulated by the existing typology is that the most esteemed papers in this area
28 have overwhelmingly focused on male consumers and further, most work on gender and
29 consumer behaviour focuses "masculinities rather than femininities" (Maclaran 2015; 1734).
30 The Harley Davidson Owner's Group (Schouten and McAlexander 1995), the Mountain Men
31 (Belk and Costa 1998), skydivers (Celsi et al. 1993) white water rafters (Arnould and Price
32 1993) and Tough Mudders (Scott, Cayla and Cova 2017), for example, all represent hyper-
33 masculine pursuits, tapping into ideals of hegemonic masculinity and symbolically
34 constructing consumer identities which are rugged, powerful and slightly dangerous. Even
35 seminal work on female identity in consumption communities has focused on women's
36 roles within these "hyper-masculine environments", 'rife with machismo' (Martin et al.
37 2006; 189) or on pursuits like roller-derby which have been variously theorised as parodying
38 or aping hegemonic masculinity (Thompson and Üstüner 2015 and Carlson 2010
39 respectively). Hence while the literature on masculinities comprehensively documents the
40 nature of male identity and its relationship to consumption, the absence of studies in
41 female-led and – dominated consumption communities has led to agreement that
42 femininity is still decidedly under-theorised (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Martin 1998;
43 Pyke and Johnson 2003; Schippers 2007). This is despite the growing recognition of the
44 importance of gender and feminism in the academic discourse in marketing and consumer
45 behaviour (Bettany et al. 2010) as we enter feminism's fourth wave (Maclaren 2015).
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51 One might question whether the findings from these 'hyper-masculine' contexts should be
52 applied to female consumers and those engaged in typically feminine pursuits. Rather than
53 consider women in 'a man's world' as in Martin et al. (2006), or those engaged in 'gender
54 tourism' (Thompson and Holt 2004), female and feminine consumption should be
55 considered in a 'feminised sphere' (Jantzen et al. 2006).
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59 We suggest that the issues in conceptualisation of consumption communities may arise
60 from a dual oversight, a lack of study in female and feminine spaces and a lack of attention

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3 to the fundamental human condition of loneliness. Further, loneliness itself appears to be
4 gendered as young women report the highest degree of loneliness. Thus, our research
5 examines the extent to which young female consumers utilise consumption activities,
6 experiences and practices to combat loneliness. Can consumption communities potentially
7 provide the antidote to loneliness, and by what mechanisms?
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10 The article is structured as follows. First, we review prior literature on loneliness, self-help
11 and social support. We then present a discussion of the context of our study, a female-led
12 and –dominated knitting community, and describe our methodology. Our findings are then
13 presented. We detail the ‘common predicament’ (Jacobs and Goodman 1989) of loneliness
14 which lead the members of an Irish Stitch ‘n’ Bitch to seek out companionship. We then
15 detail how the consumption community functions as a self-help support group, in the style
16 of Alcoholics Anonymous or Weight Watchers (Moisio and Beruchasvili 2010), to ameliorate
17 loneliness by using the consumption group as a means of accessing social support. We
18 illustrate how consumption practices facilitate this support. We conclude with a theoretical
19 discussion and implications.
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28 3. Literature Review

29 3.1 What is loneliness?

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35 Positive psychologists give subjective wellbeing, life satisfaction (Van Deurzan 2008) or even
36 the more ephemeral “*authentic happiness*” (Seligman 2004, 14) as their objective. Pascal
37 Bruckner argues we now perceive feeling happy as a duty, a duty which, in his view, breeds
38 much discontent (Edmonds and Warburton 2011). His belief is that happiness is by its very
39 nature fleeting, ‘a moment of grace’. Bruckner goes so far as to suggest that success ‘*leads*
40 *to boredom and apathy the moment it is realised*’ (Bruckner 2011, 4) and, thus, achieving
41 happiness will, in fact, lead to unhappiness. This duty to be perpetually euphoric places a
42 ‘*burden*’ (Bruckner 2011, 2) on us, and this pressure to be happy prompts us to seek a
43 ‘*therapeutic ideal*’ (Bruckner 2011, 54) which has become an obsession with perfection
44 (Bruckner 2011; Edmonds and Warburton 2011).
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49 Both Bruckner and Madsen (2015) suggest that postmodern, fragmented society, with its
50 lack of traditional support structures like kith and kin and religious community, leads to
51 loneliness and unhappiness. Golpaldas (2016) suggests that traditional support structures of
52 family and community are disintegrating into dispersed social networks with fewer strong
53 ties despite an increasing number of weak ties. Thus, despite our increased connectivity, we
54 feel less connected. Without the “*intensive ties which have genuine meaning*” (Moustakas
55 1961), the fleeting online connections with the idealised, Instagram-ready lives of others
56 only exacerbate prolonged, existential loneliness.
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3 Loneliness derives not merely from a lack of companionship but from a perceived deficiency
4 in the quantity or quality of relationships or interpersonal reality (Heinrich and Gullone
5 2006). It is one's perception of, or judgement of, our interpersonal relationships as lacking
6 which give rise to loneliness. Weiss, who produced a multi-dimensional typology of
7 loneliness (DiTommaso and Spinner 1997; Russell et al. 1984), similarly believed "*people
8 experience loneliness because of perceived deficits in relational provisions which refer to
9 companionship and emotional support provisions*" (Rosenbaum 2006, 65).
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13 Weiss (1973) differentiates between the social loneliness of lacking those weak ties and the
14 'emotional loneliness' of lacking intimate relationships. Moustakas (1961) focuses on
15 'existential loneliness'. Other authors differentiate between acute loneliness and prolonged
16 loneliness (Peplau 1985). All these distinctions amount to a consensus that we are, to use
17 Putnam's (1995; 2001) well-known phrase, bowling alone.
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20 21 3.2 Community as an antidote 22

23 As Peplau (1985, 269) says, "*social relationships are essential to personal health and
24 happiness... "friends are good medicine"*". Community, therefore, offers an antidote to
25 loneliness.
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28 Bell and Newby, as cited by Urry (1995), give three different senses of the concept of
29 community. The first is geographic in nature, referring to the boundaries of a physical
30 settlement, the second implies a social system, again local in nature but defined by personal
31 connections and links between members, and the third is "*communion, a particular kind of
32 human association implying personal ties, a sense of belonging and warmth*" (Urry 1995,
33 10). Turner (1969) and Cohen (2013) moved the conception of community beyond locality
34 and toward meaning and identity instead. Community is symptomatic of a search for
35 belongingness, useful to engage in identity projects, and "*an expression of communitas*"
36 (Delanty 2003, 32). Community is both cultural (the idea) and social (the practices), a
37 symbolically constructed reality (Delanty 2003).
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43 Without traditional community supports, particularly in trying times, one mechanism people
44 may turn to is the support group. Disability support groups (Finn 1999), Weight Watchers
45 (Moisio and Beruchashvili 2010) and Alcoholics Anonymous, for example, can provide
46 belongingness and serve as that 'good medicine'. These types of support groups have been
47 widely studied as they have been found to be beneficial and empowering for participants
48 (Høybye, Johansen and Tjørnhøj-Thomsen, 2005).
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54 55 3.3 Community as a source of social support 56 57 58 59 60

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3 Finn (1999), in exploring a self-help support group, identifies the existence of two types of
4 helping in a support group – ‘*socioemotional helping*’ (Finn 1999, 223) and ‘*task helping*’
5 (Finn 1999, 224). In the case of Finn’s field site, online disability support groups, task helping
6 referred to information provision around medical issues, rights, and assistance provision.
7 Task helping can be used to describe the ‘community of practice’ style information and skill
8 transfer (Wenger 2011), but the socioemotional helping is identified as the primary
9 motivation for attending (Finn 1999).
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14 Socioemotional helping is more commonly termed social support. The benefits of social
15 support are widely acknowledged in the literature (Nabi, Prestin and So 2013; Taylor 2011;
16 Thoits 1995). Social support offers many benefits; it “*reduces, or buffers, the adverse*
17 *psychological impacts of exposure to stressful life events and ongoing life strains*” (Thoits
18 1986, 416), can be beneficial to physical and mental health during periods of lower stress,
19 and even contributes to longevity (Taylor 2011). Research also suggests that women provide
20 more social support, draw more on socially supportive connections and networks during
21 periods of high stress, and may indeed derive greater benefit from social support (Taylor,
22 2011; Taylor et al. 2000; Thoits 1995). Thus, social support may be of more importance in a
23 female-led and - dominated consumption community than in those which celebrate the
24 hegemonic masculine.
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30 Hirsch (1980) and Pearson (1982) present similar schema to identify the mechanisms by
31 which social support is provided within a group setting. Utilising these schemas of social
32 support, in conjunction with Jacobs and Goodman (1989) and Shaffer and Galinsky (1989)’s
33 descriptors of a support group, a more complete model for the workings of a support group
34 is proposed. Moisio and Beruchashvili (2010) also emphasise the importance of story-
35 telling, celebration and encouragement in the Weight Watchers self-help support group
36 process, an element which is under-represented in previous support group literature. From
37 combining these studies, a diagram is provided to illustrate the mechanisms of social
38 support, and thus loneliness amelioration, expected in a self-help support group type of
39 community.
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Fig 1: Characteristics Expected in a Self-help Support Group Type of Community.

Dholakia et al. (2004) discuss the benefits of consumer participation in a consumption community, although they use as an example customers of Amazon.com where one might question the interconnectedness. Even so, they show some evidence of participants overcoming loneliness through receiving social support. We therefore apply the lens of the self-help support group to the female-led and –dominated Knitting community to examine its effectiveness in ameliorating loneliness.

4. Methodology:

4.1 Research context: Knitting and Stitch 'n' Bitch

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3 To fill the gap in the literature around a female-led and female-dominated consumption
4 community, and to investigate if findings from the hyper-masculine environments might be
5 generalisable to a “feminine” context, a consumption community which is overwhelmingly
6 female and associated with femininity was identified. The context chosen was the knitting
7 community.
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11 Craft presents an ideal location to study a female-dominated consumption culture. Pristash
12 (2014; 3) states, “*It may only be a slight overstatement to say that the history of craft is a*
13 *history of femininity.*” These crafts have moved in and out of fashion over time as the
14 stereotypically ‘feminine arts’ have waxed and waned in acceptability (Parker 2010; Stalp
15 2015; Stalp and Conti 2011; Turney 2009). Needlework, in particular, became an essential
16 part of gender performativity as well as a ‘suitable’ and viable means of financial support for
17 women (Parker, 1984; 2010). The membership of Ravelry.com, the lynchpin of the global
18 Knitting community, is estimated to be around 99.9% female and 0.1% male (Cherry, 2016).
19 These traditionally feminine activities could be seen as performative of emphasised
20 femininity (Schippers 2007).
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26 The acceptability of these feminine arts has changed with social movement. Quilting for
27 example, which has occupied a particularly central role in the American female experience,
28 moved from being considered the ‘*epitome of female patience, perseverance, good nature,*
29 *and industry*’ (Showalter, 1986; 232) to being considered ‘*obsolete, blinded,*
30 *claustrophobically and perhaps dangerously isolated from the mainstream*’ (ibid; 239). This
31 rejection of ‘women’s culture’ arose from a rejection of subjugation and enforced
32 domesticity by the second-wave feminists. Embracing a traditional feminine craft, thereby
33 rejecting the idea that “*women should view the masculine as normative, that is, as the goal*
34 *to be achieved*” (Hughes 2002, 34), is subsequently seen as a way to openly state that one
35 values “women’s work”.
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41 Groenfeld (2010, 259) explains that this new embrace of “women’s work” was particularly
42 due to third-wave feminist periodicals of the 90s and 00s promoting “*reclaiming and*
43 *repoliticising activities traditionally associated with the domestic sphere, particularly*
44 *knitting*”. Debbie Stoller, a prominent third wave feminist, PhD in Women’s Studies and
45 editor of BUST magazine, played a leading role and went on to publish the “Stitch ‘n’ Bitch”
46 books, “Stitch ‘n’ Bitch Handbook” (2003), “Stitch ‘n’ Bitch Nation” (2005), “Stitch ‘n’ Bitch
47 Crochet: The Happy Hooker” (2006), “Son of a Stitch ‘n’ Bitch” (2007) and “Stitch ‘n’ Bitch
48 Superstar” (2010), and popularised the idea of a Stitch ‘n’ Bitch group, collectively
49 understood to be predominantly female, ‘third place’ (not home or work), social spaces
50 (Minahan and Cox 2006).
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56 Knitting was thus repositioned as both “*cool, as well as quiet, comforting and communal*”
57 (Parkins 2004, 429) and, in addition, as a feminist, subversive pursuit. Indeed, the years just
58 before the start of this study saw an “*explosion in the popularity of knitting*” (Wills, 2007; 4)
59 resulting in a 51% increase in the U.S. in women who know how to knit (Minahan and Cox,
60

2006). The upward trend was not exclusive to knitting. Bratsich and Brush (2011) use the term '*fabriculture*' to describe the resurgence among younger women not just in knitting, but in crochet, sewing, dressmaking, embroidery, quilting, and scrapbooking. These 'low culture' genres which had been trivialised and denigrated (Stevens et al. 2007) were thus reclaimed.

The stereotypical image of a crafting circle is of a warm, nurturing environment for women who support each other through thick and thin. This expectation of a "caring community" is reflected in the literature (Green 1998; Minahan and Cox 2006; Piercy and Cheek 2004; Prigoda and McKenzie 2007; Schofield-Tomschin and Littrell 2001) but little attention has been paid to motivations for membership of these groups. MacDonald (2010) found that many older knitters stressed the utility of knitting, the '*satisfaction of accomplishment*' (vii), reflecting StevFens et al.'s (2007) findings among female magazine readers, some of whom felt the need to justify their 'me time' as useful or educational. On the other hand, Turney (2018) discusses the rise of 'ditsy ephemera''s popularity with this new wave of crafters. She compares the phenomenon of magazines dedicated to this kawaii esthetic to Victorian busy-work. When the output is something "ditsy, cute, useless" (Turney 2018; 32), it may be harder to identify the value to the women behind this expression of women's culture.

This surge in the popularity of fabriculture may have been a fad for some but for others knitting has become central to their sense of self. While Kozinets (2001; 68) entreats us to "avoid granting subcultural status to what are essentially American leisure activities", it is clear that for many knitters the hobby has become an integral part of their identities. The Knitting consumption community is thus ideal as a site within which to study consumption within a female-led and -dominated community.

Cova et al. (2007) discuss how a global consumption community is constituted of multiple "local sub-tribes". For this study, a local Irish sub-group is chosen as a representative sample of a wider global consumption community. The Local Stitch 'n' Bitch group is a sub-group both of the global Stitch 'n' Bitch movement and of the modern knitting consumption community. It is expected that the local sub-group will share some common meanings with the global consumption community but will also develop its own meanings and, consequently, have a specific local subculture (Cova et al., 2007). To determine which aspects of the consumption community were local and which were global Ravelry.com was studied for purposes of triangulation (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008; Mathison, 1988). Ravelry.com fulfils multiple roles for the Knitting community offering space for both a community of practice element, including a pattern database and immediate access to knitting advice, and a social networking environment, with forum spaces for discussions on both knitting and non-knitting topics. It also serves as an e-commerce and promotional platform for those involved in fabriculture as a business.

4.2 Data collection

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3 In Cova and Cova (2002), the authors suggest that researching tribes should involve:
4

- 5 • Desk research including monitoring the media and netnography
 - 6 • Semi-structured or unstructured interviews with group members singly or together
 - 7 • Participant and/or non-participant observation at group events
- 8
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10 In the case of this study, all three of these suggestions were followed. In an effort to identify
11 Knitters, a Local Stitch 'n' Bitch in Ireland was studied. This group was founded in January
12 2007. Initially, members connected through Yahoo groups, then text messages and later,
13 through Facebook.
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17 This group overlapped and interacted with multiple other knitting and fabriculture groups in
18 the city (including Knit Up mentioned in this paper) and these were also explored to give a
19 full and rounded picture of the culture. The group comprised 22 key informants, all female,
20 whose involvement with the group coincided with the period of study (membership of the
21 group was not static), anonymised with pseudonyms. Participant observation was
22 undertaken at weekly Stitch 'n' Bitch meetings beginning in 2010 and concluding in 2016.
23 Around 12 members might attend in a given week. The first author also attended events in
24 the Knitting community, both national and international, and worked as the Marketing
25 Manager for an independent yarn company (anonymised as Dyad Fibres).
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30 Semi-structured in-depth interviews of over one hour duration were conducted with nine
31 local Knitters, spinners and crocheters who identified with the Stitch 'n' Bitch movement.
32 The interviewees showed projects that held particular meaning or importance for them, and
33 in the case of at-home interviews, showed the first author their 'stash' (yarn) and supplies.
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37 Ravelry.com is a knitting database and social networking site with over seven million
38 members and since its establishment in 2007, has become and continues to be the central
39 online organisational, social, and often, ecommerce hub for Knitters. Those seven million
40 members contribute millions of forum posts, avatars and photographs of knitted items from
41 tens of thousands of patterns. The sheer volume of netnographic data on the site had the
42 potential to overwhelm. For this reason, Ravelry was used for triangulation purposes only.
43 Once initial themes in the data were identified, appropriate search terms were selected and
44 applied to the Ravelry forums to identify relevant posts. While this is slightly different to
45 Kozinets' guidelines for netnography (Kozinets 2010; 2014), the methodology is designed to
46 be "*flexible and adaptable*" (Kozinets 2010, 5) and a "*blended ethnography/netnography*
47 *could take many forms*" (Kozinets 2010, 65).
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Method	Location	Details	Dates
Participant observation	Local Stitch 'n' Bitch	Ranged from full ethnographic notes/ partial notes of interesting data / no notes, full immersion – techniques chosen in advance.	2010 - 2016
Participant observation	Knit Camp U.K.	Notes taken (not full), Reviewed others' blog accounts.	09-15/08/10
Participant observation	This Is Knit Yarn Tasting	Notes made after event.	08/09/11 14/09/12
Depth Interviewing	Stitch 'n' Bitch Members	Semi Structured following McCracken's Long Interview techniques	Rachel – Pilot Interview (19/09/11) Aryanna (16/05/13) Beth (31/05/13) Jennifer (04/06/13) Danielle (11/06/13) Sarah (13/06/13) Siobhan (11/07/13) Cosima (11/12/13) Charlotte (18/07/14)
Member checks	Stitch 'n' Bitch members	Online discussions of themes arising, via group chats and private messaging	Example: Discussion re: ACR Gender paper (9/2/12)
Netnography	Ravelry.com	Searching for emergent themes in forums for triangulation.	Ongoing for the duration of the study
Close reading of media	Online and Offline	Examination of popular media's perception of the community	Ongoing for the duration of the study

Table 1: Outline of the Methods used in Data Collection

4.3 Data Analysis

The data collection and analysis were guided by an emergent design approach (Belk et al., 1989), iterating between the data and the literature. Initial literature reviews focused on

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2
3 consumption community, but also craft, femininity, feminism and craftivism based on
4 previous literature (Minahan and Cox, 2006). However, initial findings indicated that many
5 within the community rejected these meanings. The authors found no compelling evidence
6 of feminist activism or craftivism. As themes emerged, further iterative literature reviews
7 were carried out around therapy, social support and self-help. The authors moved back and
8 forth between the field and the literature as laid out in Spiggle (1994) as well as Glaser and
9 Strauss (2009), Strauss and Corbin (1994) and Miles and Huberman (1984).

16 17 5. Findings

19 The Local Stitch 'n' Bitch group displays many of the characteristics of a self-help support group
20 as discussed by Jacobs and Goodman (1989), Levine and Sandeen (2013) and Moisio and
21 Beruchashvili (2010). Both task helping and socioemotional helping (Finn 1999) are observed in
22 Local Stitch 'n' Bitch. The group members provide and receive support using mechanisms
23 described in Barrera (1986), Hirsch (1980) and Pearson (1982).

26 The key finding of the study is that members of the Knitting community are forming a
27 consumption-based support/self-help group to ameliorate loneliness.

32 33 5.1 Loneliness as a motivator

36 The data from Local Stitch 'n' Bitch reveals that loneliness and social isolation emerge as the
37 major reason for membership of the group.

39 Danielle explains *"I was missing my peer group and wanted to find people that I had something
40 in common with"* and Rachel tells us she *"wanted to find people to connect with"*.

43 Jennifer says

45 *"I hoped that I would get some friends and some contacts. People that I could, you know,
46 start friendship with and kind of so I wouldn't be so lonely."*

49 The group serves as a surrogate support system for the members, many of whom are isolated by
50 circumstance – as young mothers and/or immigrants. Several members had come to Ireland on
51 spouse visas and were unable to work outside the home.

54 Kira suggests that as 'outsiders',

56 *"Ex-pats, by definition, know what it's like to be lonely."*

58 Other members found themselves socially isolated through changes in their lives prior to joining
59 the group. Prior to the study Ireland's economy had been seriously damaged by the Great
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3 Recession and many young people had emigrated. Others found themselves unemployed or
4 underemployed and with time to fill.
5

6
7 *"...basically just before I joined Stitch 'n' Bitch most of my friends had left....and I had also*
8 *just broken up with someone, so I had a lot more free time and then I joined the group."*

9 (Siobhan)
10

11 Pearson (1982; 1983) suggests that self-help groups may be needed more by populations
12 undergoing developmental changes such as leaving college, relocating, emigrating and
13 motherhood. The members of Stitch 'n' Bitch are using the group as an aid to overcoming 'life-
14 disrupting problems' (Moisio and Beruchashvili, 2010). In the therapeutic support group
15 literature this is termed the 'common predicament', problem or concern (Jacobs and Goodman
16 1989).
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20 In Stitch 'n' Bitch, we see the consumption community function as a surrogate support system,
21 often where kith and kin are absent. Pearson (1983) and Heller and Swindle (1983) discuss the
22 need for a "surrogate support system" where the "kith and kin" are absent or harmful. Many of
23 these women were 'starting over' in some way (Price et.al 2017).
24
25

26 The physical practice of knitting is widely agreed to have benefits (Riley et al., 2013), and
27 Minahan and Cox (2006) identify "knitting together" as a social capital building exercise in
28 contrast to Putnam's "bowling alone" (Putnam 2001). However, the group experiences an
29 amelioration of loneliness from the consumption community and consumption practices beyond
30 what could be explained by the relaxing nature of knitting. Sarah specifically describes the
31 group, rather than knitting itself, as her "therapy" saying that the group is important "for [her]
32 mental health". Danielle describes Local Stitch 'n' Bitch as "very therapeutic". This shared belief
33 in the power of the group is ubiquitous in Local Stitch 'n' Bitch, and creates a strong group bond
34 and sense of shared identity with an 'ingroup' and 'outgroup' mentality (Avery 2012).
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40 So, while there is no shared pathology underlying the group as in AA or Weight Watchers, the
41 shared problem (loneliness and isolation), and the socioemotional helping provided by the
42 group, result in a shared belief that the group is therapeutic and has great value in the
43 members' lives as a surrogate support system. The lack of underlying pathology in the
44 consumption community removes the potential stigma of a support group. However, the group
45 shares many practices of the self-help support group which may explain how the consumption
46 community serves to successfully ameliorate loneliness.
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50 5.2 Emotional Support 51

52 The presence of emotional support (Hirsch 1989) is strongly identifiable in the data.
53 Danielle, for example, is very clear that she used the group as an emotional support, to help
54 her cope with the loneliness and isolation of being a young mother in a foreign country:
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“Just loneliness, em yeah ‘cos that was what I got out of it, what I needed to get out of it when I first started going, [Danielle starts to cry] wow well, emotional response, because I suppose that was a particularly difficult period ...

So yeah, that social contact for feeling less alone was something that I definitely benefited from, from the group and yeah, I don’t know if I particularly contributed anything to it, but I felt .. talking to people and that’s what I got from it and that’s what I got from it and that’s what it gave as well. Good feelings yes I attribute to that” (Danielle).

For Danielle, having immigrated to Ireland and fallen pregnant at 19, the group represents access to a peer group and a support structure that she is missing. She begins to cry when discussing this difficult time in her life and her use of Stitch ‘n’ Bitch as a resource to navigate it. She goes on to say that though she is currently not attending the group due to family commitments, knowing that Stitch ‘n’ Bitch is ongoing gives her peace of mind, if she “needs it”, it is there.

As discussed previously, many of the group members are without ‘kith and kin’ and they turn to Stitch ‘n’ Bitch and the relationships they build there as an emotional support system.

Amelia, a new arrival in the city, had little interest in knitting but met members of the group through an American ex-pat group and tagged along to Local Stitch ‘n’ Bitch. By purchasing some pink chunky yarn and a set of knitting needles, she gained access to a peer group and an emotionally supportive community. She attended every week that she lived in the city, often carrying her unchanging ‘knitting project’ of a few rows of plain stitch. Despite her minimal engagement with the hobby, the emotional support the community provided was accessed through a small purchase.

The acknowledgement that loneliness was a clear motivation for the participants was an unexpected finding from the study. The depth of emotional connection between the members was in stark contrast to characterisations of consumption communities or marketplace cultures as playful, transient or without obligation (Goulding et al. 2011). The other mechanisms of social support provision identified in support group literature were also apparent in the group.

5.3 Further Characteristics of Social Support

5.3.1 Reciprocal Helping and Tangible Assistance

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3 The support system is at its most tangible in the many practices of reciprocal helping
4 (Shaffer and Galinsky, 1989) and assistance that exist in relation to all aspects of community
5 consumption. While at the outset Local Stitch 'n' Bitch was not officially help-intended,
6 reciprocal helping (Shaffer and Galinsky 1989) exists within the consumption community.
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10 Danielle, who has a low-income family, receives lots of tangible assistance to enable her to
11 pursue her craft; Danielle then uses the yarn to make practical items for her children. These
12 gifts may come from within Stitch 'n' Bitch or from friends and family who understand her
13 love of knitting:
14

15
16 *"Most of the yarn I have I got as gifts or maybe people clearing out some stuff and*
17 *they say do you want some and I say yes sure, great you know, I'll take some of that"*
18 *(Danielle).*
19

20
21 Yarn is often gifted between members, if it is more suitable to another member's planned
22 pattern or, often, if the colour is felt to be more suited to another member.
23

24
25 When Cosima wanted to learn to spin yarn, Katja, in addition to giving her the tangible
26 assistance required to learn a new skill by providing her with the spindles and fibre
27 necessary for the task, also provided cognitive guidance by teaching her how to use the
28 spindle.
29

30
31 Outside the knitting sphere, members of the group continued to assist each other, with Leda
32 providing vegan-cooking lessons to Sarah, for example. On one memorable occasion, the
33 first author provided tangible assistance to a member of the group who was being assaulted
34 by a drunk in the pub. This story has become part of the shared repertoire of the group
35 through storytelling and, of course, has been enhanced over time, but several interviewees
36 mentioned it as an example of the group being there for each other:
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40 *"[Jennifer] really appreciated you defending her honour at that time"* (Sarah).
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43 This ethos of caring and tangible support extends outwards into charitable acts for the wider
44 community. In the case of Local Stitch 'n' Bitch, this has involved knitting little hats for
45 Innocent Smoothies Age Action Ireland campaign, knitting blankets for premature babies for
46 the a nearby maternity hospital, and wraps for deceased babies for Féileacáin, the Stillbirth
47 and Neonatal Death Association of Ireland. The Knitters provide tangible assistance to each
48 other in multiple ways, engaging in gift giving, financially supporting member businesses
49 (yarn and otherwise), and assisting with childcare and other everyday tasks.
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53 The group members also try to support the wider Knitting community, particularly through
54 Ravelry. Aryanna states that when she has good fortune, she 'returns the favour',
55 supporting the community that has provided enjoyment and support to her:
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3 *“[I] was making good money and so I said I’m going to pay for a pattern and support*
4 *the .. the community [deliberate emphasis] cos I’d been taking free patterns for years*
5 *so I’ll pay for this one”* (Aryanna).
6
7

8 The group not only provides tangible assistance to other members of the local group, but to
9 other members of the wider Knitting world. They also work as a group to provide support
10 and assistance more widely in the community. Much of this tangible assistance is rooted in
11 the desire to be supportive of fellow members and to provide proof of emotional
12 involvement.
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15 16 17 18 5.3.2 Cognitive Guidance and Social Reinforcement 19

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22 Cognitive guidance is defined by Hirsch (1980) as providing information, advice or
23 explanation, while social reinforcement is offering praise or criticism for specific actions
24 (Hirsch 1980; Pearson 1983). Both elements are apparent in the Local Stitch ‘n’ Bitch group.
25 The group has a socially negotiated leadership structure based on social capital derived from
26 skill and commitment to the group. While in many cases the group engages in joint cognitive
27 guidance and social reinforcement, Sarah occupies a particular position of authority.
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31 Sarah is termed ‘*the Mammy*’ of the group due to the high level of cognitive guidance
32 (Hirsch 1980) she provides, particularly in terms of ‘task helping’ (Finn 1999). This type of
33 task helping is reflective of community of practice behaviour (Wenger 2011), where
34 knowledge is passed from ‘senior’ members of the group to newer or less skilled members.
35 This guidance has also led to Sarah being teasingly, but affectionately, called ‘*Knitler*’ by
36 Marian, one of her close friends in the group.
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39
40 Beth describes the process of learning to be a ‘Knitter’ from other members of the group:
41

42 *“People would be more excited about choosing projects to talking about yarn and*
43 *em, learning new skills really and I know Sarah and Kira were doing these little knit-*
44 *alongs where they’d be figuring out how to make a sweater kind of without a pattern*
45 *from scratch”* (Beth).
46
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49 Sarah is regarded as a font of knowledge and ‘converts’ others from what she believes to be
50 an inferior form of knitting (on straight needles) to using circular needles. Sarah is the first
51 to change to circular needles, then interchangeable needles. Almost all members of the
52 group now use interchangeable needles, most commonly KnitPicks/KnitPros. Sarah herself
53 has since moved on to Hiya Hiya, needles which she believes to be superior as they have a
54 swivelling join between needle and cable. She describes converting the other members to
55 her way of thinking through “*grim determination.*” Sarah uses social reinforcement (Hirsch
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3 1980; Pearson 1983) to spread her ideas through the group. The members copy Sarah to
4 affirm their group identity.
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7 When Jennifer was in the USA, she drove over 150 miles to find a complete set of Hiya
8 Hiya:
9

10 *"I saw [Sarah] and her Hiya Hiya and I don't know I just wanted them ... I drove all*
11 *over Phoenix looking for these god damn needles, sorry, and about two hundred*
12 *dollars later I had them ... I probably drove a hundred and fifty miles in my Mom's car*
13 *by myself with the radio and I was delighted to do it"* (Jennifer).
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17 This 'pilgrimage' (Belk et al. 1989) demonstrates Jennifer's commitment to the group as well
18 as reinforcing Sarah's role as maven and trendsetter. Using the right tools affirms one's
19 identity as part of the group and underpins the sense of the group as a well-structured
20 community offering relief from loneliness.
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23 The community, here, is treated as a therapeutic safe space as in a support group, in which
24 to seek advice and 'praise or criticism for specific actions' (Hirsch, 1980), however the
25 support is facilitated by consumption practices. The high level of emotional support
26 provided and the ability to seek this guidance result in an environment of intimacy.
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30 31 5.3.3 Intimacy 32 33

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35 Intimacy (Pearson 1982; 1983) is by its nature a difficult support group characteristic to
36 identify. Demonstrations of intimacy may be so subtle as to be missed by all but those who
37 exchange them (for example touches of the hands after hugging goodbye, quiet
38 conversations within the main group chatter, or even 'knowing' smiles). Technology was
39 used to facilitate this at times; the first author, for example, has received messages during
40 Local Stitch 'n' Bitch meetings via mobile phone from members who were seated at a
41 distance that did not allow for a private conversation.
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45 Small intimacies such as a pat on the knee or on the arm are common in the group. Knitting
46 lends itself to such intimacies as tiny stitches are studied side by side when, for example,
47 looking for the source of a mistake, or in the cramped pub environment where as many of
48 the group as possible will squeeze together into a comfortable booth seating. The tactile
49 nature of the activity promotes this physical intimacy. This adds to the sense of community
50 and closeness, alleviates feelings of isolation and loneliness, and provides a support system
51 for the women.
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55 56 5.3.4 Socialisation External to the Group 57 58 59 60

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3 Members of the Stitch 'n' Bitch group regularly socialise outside set meeting times. Hirsch
4 (1980) and Pearson (1982; 1983) suggest that this is vital to the provision of support in a
5 group context. Shaffer and Galinsky (1989) suggested that in self-help groups "informal
6 member to member contacts [were] sometimes viewed as more therapeutic than the
7 formal group meetings." In Local Stitch 'n' Bitch, smaller groups or pairs meet for shopping
8 trips, yarn related or otherwise, for coffee and meals, as well as for larger life events such as
9 weddings or christenings. For many years, an annual potluck Thanksgiving dinner was
10 organised by the American members of the group.
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15 Cosima states that socialising with friends is her primary motivation for joining the group;
16 she is "contented" with her knitting but wants the "social interaction" of the group:
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19 *"Well I was quite contented from the knitting side, you know, to kind of use Youtube*
20 *and the internet, Ravelry, and that, but I wanted to get to know people outside of the*
21 *research department so it was a kind of a way of getting to know people who weren't*
22 *in my workplace" (Cosima).*
23
24

25 Beth recalls earlier organised social events she enjoyed which were not specifically knitting
26 related:
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29 *"One of my favourite things that we did as a group was a while ago, were the*
30 *Thanksgiving dinners that we had at one of the group founder's apartments ... it*
31 *wasn't actually based around knitting, I can't even remember if people brought*
32 *knitting..." (Beth).*
33
34

35 Often, meet-ups for Knitters centre on consumption experiences or SAE (Stash Acquisition
36 Experiences) in the Knitting parlance. Group outings to national knitting events have taken
37 place. Far from being problematic, as in AA or Weight Watchers, consumption is celebrated
38 and shared.
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42 The socialising element of the therapy builds a deep loyalty to the brands that facilitate the
43 social interactions of the group. Stitch 'n' Bitch members are loyal to 'their' pub. Similarly,
44 members of KnitUp collaboratively created a jumper for the owner of the bar/restaurant at
45 which they meet, at his request. Sweaters are acknowledged to be something of a labour of
46 love in the Knitting community, due to the investment of yarn and time. This gift, therefore,
47 has meaning for the Knitters and shows the high value they place on the business owner's
48 facilitation of their group's socialisation.
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54 5.3.5 Storytelling, Celebration and Encouragement

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58 Storytelling is often an important part of the support group process. Narratives are how we
59 make sense of the world around us and of ourselves; it is quite natural then that they would
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3 therefore take a pivotal role in processing the experience of loneliness and in its
4 amelioration. Moisiu and Beruchashvili (2010) when discussing Weight Watchers mention
5 several types of confession (confession of pathology and confession of failure) and
6 storytelling (autotherapeutic testimonials). However, the confessional model is tied to the
7 spiritual and religious framing of overconsumption as sin in Weight Watchers, Alcoholics
8 Anonymous and similar programmes. Without this sin, there is no need for confession.
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12 Storytelling and testimonials in a different form, however, are observed within the Stitch 'n'
13 Bitch group. Cognitive guidance is sought on yarn, tools, and patterns. This guidance is often
14 provided in the form of consumer testimonials. A shared repertoire of tales from the
15 group's past are retold time and time again – how Sarah couldn't stand to be around wool
16 when she was pregnant, how Charlotte only ever made squares, how quickly Jennifer took
17 to knitting, producing expert level projects within weeks. These anecdotes are used to
18 entertain, to reassure, and to build a sense of community. Beyond the personal, knowledge
19 of the Knitting world is passed on. New knitters are warned of the Curse of the Boyfriend
20 Sweater, an urban legend that states that knitting a man a sweater will result in a breakup,
21 and they are introduced to the vital vocabulary and slang of Knitters through storytelling.
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27 As in the world of AA and Weight Watchers, achievements are celebrated and
28 encouragement is given for good Knitting behaviour. Knitters are asked to bring in finished
29 objects (FOs) to show off to the group. Their hard work is praised, their identity as a Knitter
30 is affirmed, and support is amplified by this.
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36 5.3.6. Open-endedness

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40 Although membership of AA or Weight Watchers may be open-ended and indeed lifelong,
41 there is a goal in mind: dealing with pathological consumption. In the case of Local Stitch 'n'
42 Bitch, membership is perhaps even more flexible and open-ended. Although members of
43 the group share a common predicament, once companionship has been achieved, loneliness
44 addressed, and emotional support attained, members can choose to leave, secure in the
45 knowledge that the group is there if they need it, as with Danielle, or continue to attend, as
46 with Sarah, who has been an active participant since the first meeting. When Cosima injured
47 her wrist and was unable to knit, she still attended the group. It is clear that in this group it
48 is *'not about the knitting'* (Sarah) but, rather, it is the support community that drives
49 continued attendance.
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54 Having established that this group essentially functions as a self-help support group through
55 consumption in a different way from those previously identified in the literature, and having
56 examined the mechanisms by which the group ameliorates loneliness in this female-led and
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3 -dominated consumption community, the use of brands to facilitate that experience are
4 now explored.
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6 7 5.4 Consumption to Facilitate Self-Help 8 9

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11 Stitch 'n' Bitch members use several brands to facilitate self-help and ameliorate loneliness.
12 A selection of examples is given in the table below. These, in keeping with the
13 entrepreneurial spirit suggested by Goulding et al. (2013) as characteristic of a neo-tribal
14 consumption community, include brands created by members of the community itself.
15 Support of these brands, Dyad Fibres and Prolethean Yarns, while providing tangible
16 assistance to the founders also affirms one's commitment to the group. In the case of Dyad,
17 a much sought-after and rare commodity in the Knitworld, association with the brand and
18 access to the product added significant social capital to group members.
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23 American brands such as Ravelry.com are used to demonstrate affiliation with the wider
24 Knitworld. Purchasing the 'right' tools such as Knit Pro needles, and now Hiya Hiyas,
25 demonstrate both financial commitment to the Knitting identity, and an acceptance of and
26 reinforcement of Sarah's superior skills and knowledge and informal leadership.
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Brand	Mechanism of the Support Group	Examples
Dyad Fibres	Tangible support, Social reinforcement	The group shops extensively from Dyad and promotes the brand through social reinforcement. In turn, some of the cachet of the brand is transferred to the group.
Prolethean Yarns	Tangible support	Alison and Cosima co-authored a pattern book with Aryanna to promote Proleathean Yarns, again in an exchange of tangible support. All parties receive additional social capital as published pattern authors as well as monetary compensation.
SnB Pub	Socialisation	The SnB pub provides a location for the Knitters to meet and becomes an integral part of the Local Stitch 'n' Bitch experience.

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		When Charlotte and Kira visit, it is not enough to merely knit together, the knitting must take place in the pub.
KU Bar/restaurant	Socialisation	Members of Knit Up display a similar loyalty to and affection for the KU Bar and Restaurant which hosts their meet-ups.
Knit Pro needles	Cognitive guidance, Social reinforcement, Story-telling	New members were gently guided to purchase these 'correct' tools to assume the Knitter identity. Their use was socially reinforced by re-tellings of Jennifer's pilgrimage across Arizona. Her determination to consume the correct brand is celebrated.
Hiya Hiya needles	Cognitive guidance, Social reinforcement	Sarah later guides members to see that, in fact, Hiya Hiyas are a superior tool and that to progress as a more serious Knitter, this brand must now be adopted. Again, this is socially reinforced consumption as more and more of the group switches over.
Knit Picks	Cognitive guidance, Social reinforcement, Celebration of consumption	Shopping from Knit Picks, a U.S. website which does not ship to Europe, was usually a joint online shopping experience relying on an intermediary located in the U.S. As shipping was free over \$100, members encouraged each other to 'spend up'. The parcel would then be brought to the meeting to be opened and its contents dispersed, with consumption being celebrated.

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<p>Events such as WonderWool, Knit Camp, Yarn Tasting</p>	<p>Task helping, Cognitive guidance, Social reinforcement, Socialisation</p>	<p>Events such as Wonderwool, Knit Camp, and The Yarn Tasting, are Stash Acquisition Experiences (and potentially skill and knowledge acquisition experiences too). However, they also allow socialisation between diverse groups of knitters and facilitate the spread of knowledge from one group to another in the form of task helping (teaching new techniques and ways of being a Knitter). Members return from these events with new knowledge to share and to reinforce the other members' connection to the Knitworld.</p>
<p>Ravelry.com</p>	<p>Task helping, Tangible support, Socialisation, Cognitive guidance, Social reinforcement</p>	<p>Ravelry.com is a social network and therefore offers opportunities for socialisation. More than this, it offers access to tangible support, cognitive guidance and social reinforcement from the whole Knitting world.</p>

Table 2: Examples of Brands Used to Facilitate Self-Help and the Amelioration of Loneliness

The use of these brands certainly facilitates the craft of knitting, but using the right tool also serves as a marker of the Knitters' 'in-group' status. Much in the same way that other communities might identify each other by a certain tattoo, jacket or ring, the Knitter can spot another by her insider knowledge of knitting needles. Within the Knitting community specifically, the brands serve an important role not just in affirming the Knitter identity but also in providing access to the therapeutic well-being on offer. The Hiya Hiya needles, for example, represent not just the highly skilled and discerning Knitter identity, but also the positive experience of social reinforcement. In this way, the brands come to symbolise and embody the amelioration of loneliness that the members associate with the community.

6. Discussion:

The key meaning to emerge from the data behind consumption activities in this female-led and –dominated consumption community is that members have essentially created a self-help support group through a consumption activity.

The members of this consumption community seek to ameliorate loneliness through consumer experience as in Woodruffe's (1997) work on retail therapy, but they cope with loneliness not just through purchasing but through the consumption community. This differs from consumption as previously explored in the literature in the forms of compensatory consumption (Grunert, 1994; Moisiso, 2007; Woodruffe, 1997; Woodruffe-Burton and Elliot, 2005) and spiritual-therapeutic consumption (Moisiso and Beruchashvili, 2010). There is no spiritual component, such as exists in spiritual-therapeutic consumption (Moisiso and Beruchashvili, 2010), possibly due to the lack of an underlying pathology. Membership of AA or Weight Watchers has a goal in dealing with pathological consumption, and draws on religious elements such as confession and penance to achieve this goal. The Local Stitch 'n' Bitch community is not originally help-intended, but, rather, has an explicitly pro-consumption orientation. However, it possesses many of the same characteristics as a self-help support group.

In examining the mechanisms by which a self-help support group functions from both the therapy literature (Barerra, 1986; Hirsch, 1980; Pearson, 1982; 1983) and the consumption literature (Moisiso and Beruchashvili, 2010), it is apparent that many of these mechanisms are also utilised by Local Stitch 'n' Bitch. While addressing their shared predicament of loneliness, group members engage in reciprocal helping, tangible assistance, emotional support, cognitive guidance, social reinforcement, intimacy, socialisation, and story-telling, celebration, and encouragement. Thus, the consumption community functions as a self-help support group to ameliorate a common predicament of loneliness.

7. Conclusion:

Consumption communities potentially offer additional resources for people suffering from loneliness. As consumption communities are not tied to a particular affliction or addiction, they are less stigmatised than self-help support groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous and Weight Watchers. Loneliness itself carries a stigma (Ho and O'Donohoe 2014) but joining a consumption community offers a way to repair the negative emotional state without tarring oneself with the brush of 'a loner'. The consumption community is thus potentially more accessible and approachable than the officially help-intended group.

This finding also further illustrates issues with the existing consumption community literature. Though Goulding et al. (2011) makes an admirable effort to untangle terms which

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3 have been used interchangeably and without firm definitional boundaries in the literature,
4 the Knitting community fails to be encapsulated by the typology established. It is neither
5 based around a single brand (as illustrated in table 2), oppositional (as illustrated by its
6 open-ended membership and member's willingness to attend and interact with other
7 groups) or transient and playful, as illustrated by the members deep emotional commitment
8 to each other and the existence of a self-help support group. As such, it seems that
9 O'Sullivan and Shankar's (2019) call for a critical re-examination of the foundational
10 theoretical framework of these consumption communities is clearly supported by our
11 findings. However, the self-help support group type of consumption community is clearly
12 distinct from the 'play-community' type of marketplace culture. Perhaps this is because this
13 paper too uses as its context the familiar "hyper-masculine" (Martin et al., 2006)
14 environments.

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21 This study considers the meanings that reside in a female-led and dominated consumption
22 community without the 'outgroup' minority status (Avery, 2012) of a male-led and –
23 dominated consumption community. Rather, the nature and meaning of consumption
24 within a female-led and –dominated consumption community has been explored,
25 contributing in a novel manner to the work in this field by scholars such as Harju and
26 Huovinen (2015), Minihan and Cox (2006), Scaraboto and Fischer (2013), Schau and
27 Thompson (2010), Shankar (2006), and Thompson and Üstüner (2015).

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31 Shankar's (2006) chapter on book groups as a female-led and - dominated culture offers an
32 insight into the importance of these groups to the members. Shankar (2006) mentions not
33 only shared sentiments and a collective bond, but also the common witticism 'a drinking
34 group with a book problem'. Schau and Thompson (2010) identify a need to actively
35 negotiate liminality as a key meaning behind the Twilight brand community which is also
36 exceptionally female. This points to the idea that these groups may also function as self-help
37 support groups, perhaps to ameliorate the modern malaise of loneliness.

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42 It is therefore proposed that the encouragement and support that women consumers give
43 one another in all female-led, market-mediated communities or sub- communities, including
44 roller derby (Thompson and Üstüner, 2015), motorcycle-riding (Martin et al., 2006), or the
45 fatshionista blogosphere (Harju and Huovinen, 2015; Scaraboto and Fischer, 2013), could be
46 re-examined using the lens of the self-help support group. However, further research is
47 required to explore this possibility, particularly given the contrast this presents to findings in
48 other studies of female-dominated communities, where community priorities seem to be
49 centred on the activity, rather than the provision of mutual support.

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56 There is a further intriguing possibility presented by some of the work on loneliness (Borys
57 and Perlman 1985; Wiseman et al 1995; Zasloff and Kidd 1994) who suggest that women,
58 potentially due to gendered socialisation, may be better able to express loneliness. This
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3 would imply that although hyper-masculine consumption communities profess to chase the
4 hegemonic ideals of physicality, competitiveness and even rugged independence, as in the
5 Mountain Men (Belk and Costa 1998), underlying all of this 'play' is a drive to ameliorate
6 loneliness.
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12 These consumption communities may provide a unique antidote to what is becoming a
13 global problem, loneliness. Marketers have an opportunity to build supportive consumption
14 communities that are not focused on a short-term profit goal but provide a safe space for
15 support where commerce and brand-building can also occur (as in the style of Ravelry.com).
16 The growing loneliness problem of the western world could be addressed through
17 consumption communities but this, of course, can lead to problematic consumption (Elliott
18 1994; Woodruff-Burton et al. 2002). However, the consumption community clearly served a
19 purpose in these women's life, relieving isolation and ameliorating loneliness.
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24 This potentially points not just to a marketing implication, but also to a policy implication.
25 'Men's Sheds', for example, are considered "*an exemplar for the promotion of men's health*
26 *and well-being by health and social policy-makers*" (Wilson and Cordier 2013, 451). The use
27 of the consumption community as a self-help support group by the almost entirely female
28 membership suggests a similar model may be required to counter isolation and loneliness in
29 young women. Groups engaged in suicide prevention programs for example, or those
30 charged with integration of refugees/displaced persons, may wish to consider integration of
31 the consumption community model into their curriculum or training. Further, those brands
32 aiming to build a consumption community, particularly if their target market are
33 postmodern consumers, the transitory, the globalised, the nomadic (Holt and Thompson
34 1996), loneliness amelioration is a useful model marketers can use to strengthen their
35 consumption community strategies. The provision of a treatment for the loneliness epidemic
36 offers an insight into why the bonds within consumption communities can have such deep
37 meaning to their members.
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Suggestion	Original	Amended
<p>R1: I'm not thrilled with the title but I'm not great with titles either. I recommend something like "Knit Together: Using Consumption Communities to Overcome Loneliness" or something like that. This isn't a deal breaker; I'm just recommending something a little more specific.</p>		<p>We suggest a compromise of "Close Knit: Using Consumption Communities to Overcome Loneliness"</p>
<p>R1: need a segue between two sections on pages 2 and 3. The "community as antidote" idea would work here.</p>	<p>Evidence suggests that some consumption communities (Cova and Pace 2006), also termed marketplace cultures (O Sullivan and Shankar 2019), may serve to ameliorate loneliness (Agrawal and Ramachandran 2017), but there is limited literature exploring how this might occur.</p> <p>Several theories of contemporary consumption communities have been suggested, most notably, Tribes, Subcultures of Consumption, and Brand Communities.</p>	<p>As suggested below, some material is moved from section 3.2 to strengthen the transition.</p> <p>The drive to belong and to form relationships is fundamental and pervasive in humans (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Maslow 2013). This need for "<i>lasting, positive and significant interpersonal relationships</i>" (Baumeister and Leary 1995, 497) is innate in humankind and is frequently expressed as Community. As traditional geographically-bound communities are in decline leading to increased social isolation (Bauman 2013; Field 2016; Putnam 1995, 2001), people now choose the communities they want to be aligned to, rather than being defined and segmented more traditionally by demographic, race, class or</p>

		<p>religion (Cohen 2013). Despite the decline of the traditional community, we still seek what Cova and Cova (2002) describe as <i>"quasi-archaic values: a local sense of identification, religiosity, syncretism, group narcissism and so on"</i> (Cova and Cova 2002, 4). This lack, this loneliness, has led to people searching for alternative means of achieving socialisation processes and of forming bonds. Evidence suggests that some consumption communities (Cova and Pace 2006), also termed marketplace cultures (O Sullivan and Shankar 2019), may serve to ameliorate loneliness (Agrawal and Ramachandran 2017), but there is limited literature exploring how this might occur.</p> <p>Several theories of contemporary consumption communities have been suggested, most notably, Tribes, Subcultures of Consumption, and Brand Communities</p>
<p>R1: also on page 3, 3rd paragraph, I think the word "can" should be changed to "should" in the first sentence after 'hyper-masculine' contexts.</p>	<p>One might question whether the findings from these 'hyper-masculine' contexts can be applied to female consumers and those engaged in typically feminine pursuits.</p>	<p>One might question whether the findings from these 'hyper-masculine' contexts should be applied to female consumers and those engaged in typically feminine pursuits.</p>

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<p>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11</p> <p>R1: on page 4, last paragraph, the word "our" is used. Is this "our" referring to the authors or people in general. Clarify or change.</p>	<p>It is our perception of, or judgement of, our interpersonal relationships as lacking which give rise to loneliness.</p>	<p>It is one's perception of, or judgement of, our interpersonal relationships as lacking which give rise to loneliness.</p>
<p>12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55 56 57 58 59 60</p> <p>R1: on page 5, in the large paragraph, the point about "As traditional geographically...." is a really great point and I think should be moved earlier in the introduction perhaps to link the two main points being made there.</p>		<p>Removed to section 2 as mentioned above. This necessitated some slight edits to section 3.3 Community as a support group, which resulted in two very short sections, these were combined under subheading 3.2 Community as antidote. Now reads:</p> <p>Community is symptomatic of a search for belongingness, useful to engage in identity projects, and "an expression of <i>communitas</i>" (Delanty 2003, 32). Community is both cultural (the idea) and social (the practices), a symbolically constructed reality (Delanty 2003). Without traditional community supports, particularly in trying times, one mechanism people may turn to is the support group. Disability support groups (Finn 1999), Weight Watchers (Moisio and Beruchashvili 2010) and Alcoholics Anonymous, for example, can provide belongingness and serve as that 'good medicine'. These types of support groups have been widely studied as they have been found to be beneficial and empowering for participants (Høybye,</p>

		Johansen and Tjørnhøj-Thomsen, 2005).
R1: on page 6, first paragraph, I'm not sure what this paragraph is trying to accomplish. It appears to be introducing a distinction that is then dismissed. Unless the other reviewer asked for this distinction to be made, I say delete.	Groups like Weight Watchers and AA/NA differ significantly from the consumption community) as a mechanism by which help is delivered.	Paragraph removed.
R1: on page 7, it says "combing these scholars". What does this mean? Combining findings from studies sounds better.	From combining these scholars, a diagram is provided	From combining these studies, a diagram is provided
R1: I personally would anonymize the public places that were mentioned. It's not technically required but I think it's better especially given how small the groups are and the lengths gone to anonymize participants.	Stitch 'n' Bitch members are loyal to 'their' pub, the Abbot's Ale House. Similarly, members of KnitUp collaboratively created a jumper for the owner of Electric, the bar/restaurant at which they meet, at his request.	Stitch 'n' Bitch members are loyal to 'their' pub. Similarly, members of KnitUp collaboratively created a jumper for the owner of the bar/restaurant at which they meet, at his request. In table 2, these are now anonymised as SnB Pub and KU Bar/Restaurant
R1: I'm not a big fan of adding new data in the conclusion section. In the marketing implications paragraph (which I think should be strengthened), there's new data presented about intervention of excessive spending. I don't think this is the appropriate place to bring this up. If it is a significant enough theme, then it should be fleshed out in the findings. If not, it shouldn't be brought up here. I would strengthen the	The growing loneliness problem of the western world could be addressed though consumption communities but this, of course, can lead to problematic consumption. Indeed, during the study, one member of the group was advised by two others in an 'intervention' style approach that she needed to slow her spending on knitting yarns and accessories. This was treated in a joking way but	These consumption communities may provide a unique antidote to what is becoming a global problem, loneliness. Marketers have an opportunity to build supportive consumption communities that are not focused on a short-term profit goal but provide a safe space for support where commerce and brand-building can also occur (as in the style of Ravelry.com). The growing loneliness problem of the

<p>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55 56 57 58 59 60</p> <p>marketing implications by explaining how marketers can strengthen their consumption community strategies to help with consumer loneliness.</p>	<p>points to the darker side of support through consumption. However, the consumption community clearly served a purpose in these women's life, relieving isolation and ameliorating loneliness.</p>	<p>western world could be addressed through consumption communities but this, of course, can lead to problematic consumption (Elliott 1994; Woodruff-Burton et al. 2002). However, the consumption community clearly served a purpose in these women's life, relieving isolation and ameliorating loneliness.</p> <p>.....</p> <p>Further, those brands aiming to build a consumption community, particularly if their target market are postmodern consumers, the transitory, the globalised, the nomadic (Holt and Thompson 1996), loneliness amelioration is a useful model marketers can use to strengthen their consumption community strategies. The provision of a treatment for the loneliness epidemic offers an insight into why the bonds within consumption communities can have such deep meaning to their members.</p>
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<p>R2: This revision has produced a much stronger study. Focusing on loneliness gave the study a much stronger rationale and focus, which was lacking in the previous version. There is also much more effort made to position the study in relation to related literatures, although I think there are still some gaps and areas of weakness in relation to the literature and the findings, as I note below.</p> <p>I still don't think you've given enough consideration of the value of women's groups and women's culture more generally - women getting together to support one another is not a new phenomenon, after all. It goes back a long, long way. Some reference to historical precedents would have given the paper more depth.</p> <p>Showalter's work might have helped give the paper greater historical richness, and incorporating the work of Day 2000, Prigoda & McKenzie and Green 1998 would help too.</p>	<p>Further development on the topic of women's culture including references to Showalter, Stevens and Prigoda and McKenzie among others.</p> <p>While we agree that a further discussion of women's culture and feminism would be optimal, we have almost reached the word count limit for the journal and feel that we lack the space to add any further depth without removing from other areas which are perhaps more directly relevant to the themes in this particular paper.</p>	<p>To fill the gap in the literature around a female-led and female-dominated consumption community, and to investigate if findings from the hyper-masculine environments might be generalisable to a "feminine" context, a consumption community which is overwhelmingly female and associated with femininity was identified. The context chosen was the knitting community. Craft presents an ideal location to study a female-dominated consumption culture. Pristash (2014; 3) states, "<i>It may only be a slight overstatement to say that the history of craft is a history of femininity.</i>" These crafts have moved in and out of fashion over time as the stereotypically 'feminine arts' have waxed and waned in acceptability (Parker 2010; Stalp 2015; Stalp and Conti 2011; Turney 2009). Needlework, in particular, became an essential part of gender performativity as well as a 'suitable' and viable means of financial support for women (Parker, 1984; 2010). The membership of Ravelry.com, the lynchpin of the global Knitting</p>
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There is a passing reference to feminism which could have been explored further. Women gaining strength from one another is an important aspect of women's empowerment, as I'm sure you know! Women's culture also gets short shrift. Yet aside from the support aspects, women's culture has historically been trivialised - it would have been useful (and I think relevant) to at least make some reference to that.

The benefit of knitting groups, for example, is that something tangible is produced through the activity, so it is positioned as more than just a leisure pursuit. Women's lack of free time and particularly their guilt about taking time for themselves (which is well-documented in the literature, as noted in my last review) is often decreased if there is a practical outcome. Reading women's mags, for example, provides women with lots of practical information which makes them feel less guilty i.e. it is not simply wasting time!

I'm surprised this aspect didn't come up in your data more, or if it did, that it didn't make it through in your findings. You refer to 'tangible assistance', which is probably the closest you

community, is estimated to be around 99.9% female and 0.1% male (Cherry, 2016). These traditionally feminine activities could be seen as performative of emphasised femininity (Schippers 2007).

The acceptability of these feminine arts have changed with social movement.

Quilting for example, which has occupied a particularly central role in the American female experience, moved from being considered the '*epitome of female patience, perseverance, good nature, and industry*' (Showalter, 1986; 232) to being considered '*obsolete, blinded, claustrophobically and perhaps dangerously isolated from the mainstream*' (ibid;). This rejection of 'women's culture' arose from a rejection of subjugation and enforced domesticity by the second-wave feminists. rejection of the idea that "*women should view the masculine as normative, that is, as the goal to be achieved*" (Hughes 2002, 34), embracing a traditional feminine craft is seen as a way to openly state that one values "women's work".

As Groenfeld (2010, 259) explains this was particularly due to third-wave feminist periodicals of the 90s and 00s promoting "*reclaiming and repoliticising activities*

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get to touching on these tangible aspects, but in the study that is not in relation to the act of knitting itself. Surely there was a sense of achievement and of reward and pride, in the physical work of knitting itself, in that it produced something tangible? Showalter's quilting study might have helped you here.

I suspect that the absence of these aspects in your findings is because your focus is now very much on loneliness, which meant that you were more interested in the therapeutic aspects of knitting communities, but there are also material and indeed embodied aspects (wool, needles, physical environment (in the offline world), bodies, intercorporeality, spatial dimensions, etc) that could have been given much more consideration in the paper.

The therapeutic benefits of physical activity - especially collectively - are well-documented in the literature but not referred to here.

traditionally associated with the domestic sphere, particularly knitting”.

Debbie Stoller, a prominent third wave feminist, PhD in Women's Studies and editor of BUST magazine, played a leading role and went on to publish the “Stitch 'n' Bitch” books, “Stitch 'n' Bitch Handbook” (2003), “Stitch 'n' Bitch Nation” (2005), “Stitch 'n' Bitch Crochet: The Happy Hooker” (2006), “Son of a Stitch 'n' Bitch” (2007) and “Stitch 'n' Bitch Superstar” (2010), and popularised the idea of a Stitch 'n' Bitch group, collectively understood to be predominantly female, ‘third place’ (not home or work), social spaces (Minahan and Cox 2006). Knitting was thus repositioned as both “cool, as well as quiet, comforting and communal” (Parkins 2004, 429) and, in addition, as a feminist, subversive pursuit. Indeed, the years just before the start of this study saw an “*explosion in the popularity of knitting*” (Wills, 2007; 4) resulting in a 51% increase in the U.S. in women who know how to knit (Minahan and Cox, 2006). The upward trend was not exclusive to knitting. Bratisch and Brush (2011) use the term ‘*fabriculture*’ to describe the resurgence among younger women not just in knitting, but in crochet, sewing, dressmaking, embroidery,

		<p>quilting, and scrapbooking. These 'low culture' genres which had been trivialised and denigrated (Stevens et al. 2007) were reclaimed. The stereotypical image of a crafting circle is of a warm, nurturing environment for women who support each other through thick and thin. This expectation of a "caring community" is reflected in the literature (Green 1998; Minahan and Cox 2006; Piercy and Cheek 2004; Prigoda and McKenzie 2007; Schofield-Tomschin and Littrell 2001) but little attention has been paid to motivations for membership of these groups. MacDonald (2010) found that many older knitters stressed the utility of knitting, the 'satisfaction of accomplishment' (vii), reflecting Stephens et al.'s (2007) findings among female magazine readers, some of whom felt the need to justify their 'me time' as useful or educational. On the other hand, Turney (2018) discusses the rise of 'ditsy ephemera's' popularity with this new wave of crafters. She compares the phenomenon of magazines dedicated to this kawaii esthetic to Victorian busy-work. When the output is something "ditsy, cute, useless" (Turney 2018; 32), it may be harder to identify the value to the women behind this expression of women's</p>
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		<p>culture.</p> <p>This surge in the popularity of fabriculture may have been a fad for some but for others knitting has become central to their sense of self. While Kozinets (2001; 68) entreats us to “avoid granting subcultural status to what are essentially American leisure activities”, it is clear that for many knitters the hobby has become an integral part of their identities. The Knitting consumption community is thus ideal as a site within which to study consumption within a female-led and -dominated community. Cova et al. (2007) discuss how a global consumption community is constituted of multiple “local sub-tribes”. For this study, a local Irish sub-group is chosen as a representative sample of a wider global consumption community. The Local Stitch ‘n’ Bitch group is a sub-group both of the global Stitch ‘n’ Bitch movement and of the modern knitting consumption community. It is expected that the local sub-group will share some common meanings with the global consumption community but will also develop its own meanings and, consequently, have a specific local subculture (Cova et al., 2007). To determine which aspects of the consumption community were local and which were global</p>
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		<p>Ravelry.com was studied for purposes of triangulation (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008; Mathison, 1988). Ravelry.com fulfils multiple roles for the Knitting community offering space for both a community of practice element, including a pattern database and immediate access to knitting advice, and a social networking environment, with forum spaces for discussions on both knitting and non-knitting topics. It also serves as an e-commerce and promotional platform for those involved in fabriculture as a business.</p>
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