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Blogging as Economic Empowerment: A Five-Step Model

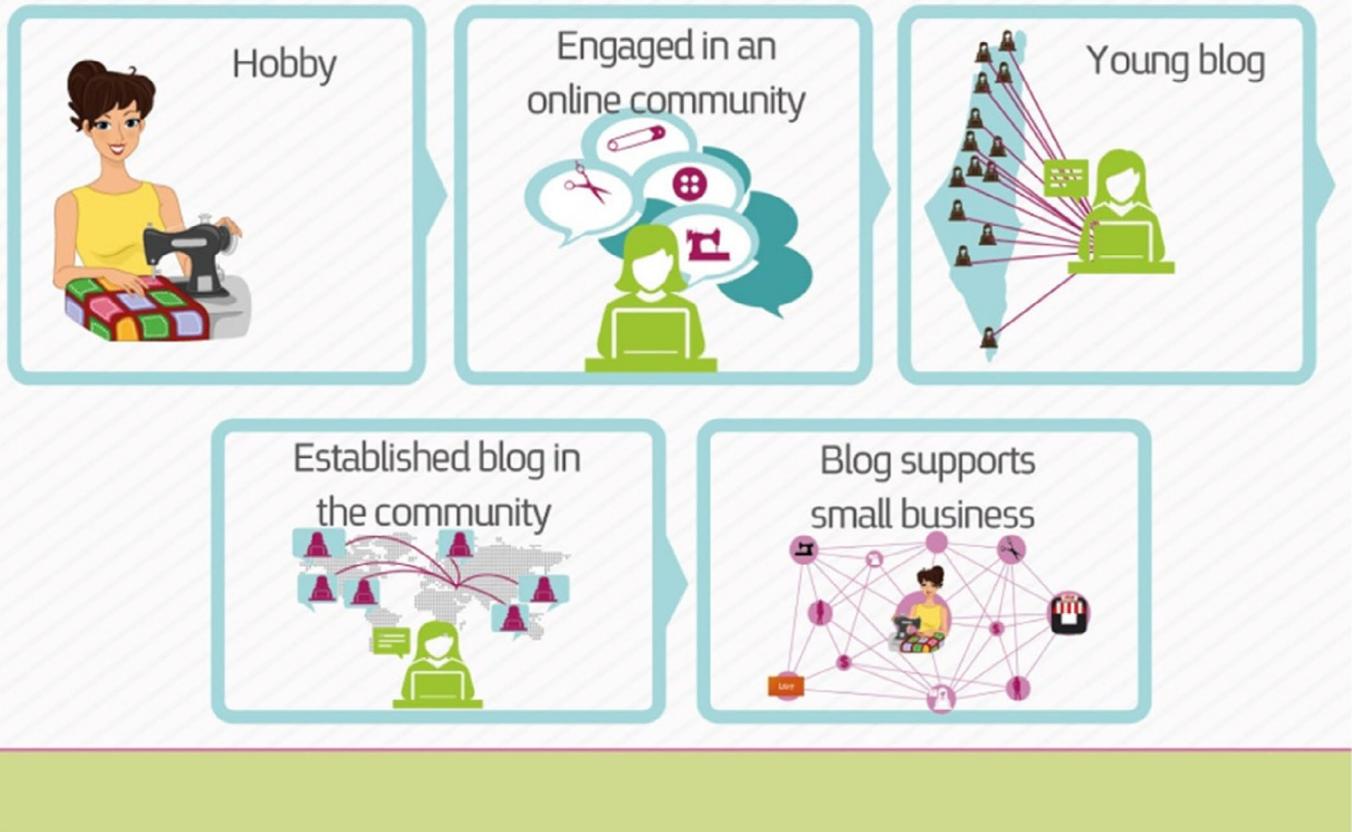


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MEDIA & COMMUNICATION STUDIES | RESEARCH ARTICLE

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MEDIA & COMMUNICATION STUDIES | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Blogging, craft culture, and women empowerment

Idit Manosevitch^{1*} and Yonit Tzuk¹

Abstract: The study presents an analysis of the development process that women crafters underwent who began blogging as a hobby and gradually turned their crafts into blog-supported small businesses. The analysis demonstrates the role of sharing via blogging as a driving mechanism for community building and empowerment for economic and personal development. Taking a grounded theory approach, our analysis is based on data collected from semi-structured interviews with top craft bloggers in the local blogosphere. We discuss the findings in light of work on the impact of network technologies on individuals' and markets.

Subjects: Gender Studies - Soc Sci; Gender Studies; Economics; Business, Management and Accounting

Keywords: blogs; business; community building; crafts; empowerment; reciprocity; sharing; women

1. Introduction

Women have been seizing social media opportunities as a means of social and economic empowerment. Information technologies have a capacity to empower users in multiple ways (Amichai-Hamburger, McKenna, & Tal, 2008; Mehra, Merkel, & Bishop, 2004). Women's economic empowerment via digital media has been of particular scholarly interest, specifically the examination of how women may seize upon the affordances of social media for economic growth (Ajjan, Beninger, Mostafa, & Crittenden, 2014; Huyer & Sikoska, 2003).

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Yonit Tzuk (MA Netanya Academic College <http://www.blogeristit.com>), is a leader in the blogger community in Israel and an expert in digital marketing. She has created the first blogger school in Israel The Bloggers Parliament <http://www.blogeristit.com/course/טנמלרפה>, and uses her applied research about marketing via digital content as a basis for teaching. Most recently, Tzuk has established the Hubblogging the greenhouse for professional blogging. <https://www.hubblogging.com/>

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Blogging has opened up a world of opportunities for women to connect and grow personally and economically. But how does blogging work to transform women's lives? This research analyzes the development process of top craft bloggers in the Israeli blogosphere. Interview data is used to present a 5-step process of the transformation for women crafters underwent: from private, small-scale crafting, to a public, economically-driven crafting supported by popular blogs. We discuss the concepts of sharing and reciprocity as a driving mechanism for community building and empowerment in craft blogger communities, and offer directions for further research.

The resurgence of crafting in the past two decades (Minahan & Cox, 2007; Walker, 2007) has led to a surge of online platforms devoted to crafts, thus creating a vibrant online craft culture (Bratich & Brush, 2011). Given the empowering capabilities attributed to ICTs (Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2008), coupled with the dominance of women in the vibrant global craft culture (Luckman, 2013, 2015), scholars have been investigating notions of empowerment as they manifest themselves in these virtual craft communities (Gajjala, Zhang, & Dako-Gyeke, 2010). Yet the meaning of women's empowerment varies from online craft communities that focus on affirming women's craft experience by offering a sense of community and companionship, to activist craft groups who use information technology and crafting to promote political and social ends (Bratich & Brush, 2011).

Blogs seem particularly suitable for economically empowering women crafters, as they enable the creation of a sense of community (Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, & Swartz, 2004) that is an integral component of craft culture (Bratich & Brush, 2011). Stavrositu and Sundar (2012) revealed that blogging in the form of personal journaling, psychologically empowers women by promoting their sense of efficacy and inducing a strong sense of community. The combination of psychological empowerment and enhanced social capital may have further effects and ultimately lead to economic empowerment (Ajjan et al., 2014). While scholars have identified factors associated with empowerment via blogging (Ajjan et al., 2014; Stavrositu & Sundar, 2012), further research is needed to understand the nature of this process. The goal of this research is to unravel the path by which empowerment processes via blogging occur, and how they enable women to translate their blogging into tangible economic gains.

The research is based on semi-structured interviews with 12 top Israeli craft bloggers. Taking a grounded theory approach, we use the interview data to propose a five-stage model of the evolution of bloggers in this field. The model describes a process wherein individual women experience a transformation via the role of crafting in their lives, and alongside that, a transformation in their personal, social, and economic dimensions. They begin as anonymous women engaging in craft as a hobby in the private realms of their lives. Gradually, via online interactions, they encounter a community of bloggers in the field and learn of the potential of online sharing for economic growth and personal development. All this drives these hobbyists to begin blogging and ultimately parlay their hobbies into successful small businesses.

The theoretical background lays the groundwork by examining the relationship between blogging, empowerment, crafts, and business. We also discuss the concept of online sharing as it relates to economics and provide background on issues associated with women's economic empowerment and career building. All this serves as a foundation for an analysis of the development of craft bloggers. We conclude with the study implications, and directions for research.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Blogs, empowerment, and crafting

Blogs, the earliest application of social media, are a combination of content posted by the blogger and followers' comments. Together with her followers, the blogger creates a virtual community that focuses on an idea, a product, a hobby or any other topic (Droge, Stanko, & Pollitte, 2010). One effect of the use of the social media, specifically blogs, is the empowerment that users experience (Ajjan et al., 2014; Mehra et al., 2004; Stavrositu & Sundar, 2012). Empowerment is a process wherein an "individual acquires or strengthens the necessary psychological resources that will enable goal achievement" (Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2008, p. 1777). For example, using blogs serves as a means of empowerment for cancer patients when dealing with their illness (Chung & Kim, 2008).

Amichai-Hamburger et al. (2008) identified two key qualities of the internet that are significant for empowerment: the capacity to eliminate barriers, and the opportunities available for experience. The elimination of barriers combined with opportunities for experience serve to empower, as they help strengthen skills and overcome personal limitations associated with a given task.

These two qualities are important for crafting, defined as the skill of manipulating physical materials for creating new objects (Rosner & Ryokai, 2009) such as knitting, sculpting with polymer clay, scrapbooking, and more. In all these crafts, skills are developed in a learning process which is primarily social (Torrey, Churchill, & McDonald, 2009). Traditionally, the learning of these skills took place in live workshops that integrated a demonstration by the teacher-expert with hands-on experience of the learners. Demonstration and experience are crucial to learning, as it is difficult to verbally transmit the nuances of technique.

Against the backdrop of the growing craft movement (Bratich & Brush, 2011), the nature of blogs as a multimedia, interactive platform, render them particularly suitable for empowering crafters, since the interface enables a social learning process that involves student-teacher interaction supplemented by verbal, visual, and audio content. Further, blogs' demonstrated community building capabilities (Jackson, Yates, & Orlikowski, 2007; Nardi et al., 2004) make them particularly suitable for facilitating the creation of a crafting community that may fulfill the social dimension that is regarded an integral component of crafting (Bratich & Brush, 2011; Minahan & Cox, 2007). Arguably such communities make crafting an especially appealing form of labor, since it connects people to each other and to physical materials and thereby improves the quality of life in society (Crawford, 2009; Luckman, 2013; Sennett, 2008; Stavrositu & Sundar, 2012).

With the spread of craft culture, implications for women's empowerment via crafting have gained much scholarly attention. Bratich and Brush (2011) provided an overview of various online knitting communities, noting differences in the meanings they embody. While some appear to affirm women's online experience by reinforcing traditional notions of knitting communities as associated with domesticity and womanhood; others position themselves as resisting those conventional associations of female knitting groups. On the radical end, the concept of craftivism denotes activist craft groups that focus on political and social dimensions of craft culture, and create public crafting events for promoting such values.

In this research, we focus on craft blogs that serve as platforms for small businesses, and examine the process that these bloggers underwent in order to parlay their craft into a money-making endeavor.

2.2. Blogging, business, and women's economic empowerment

Using blogs for business has become common practice in a variety of fields and industries. Blogs are used for marketing, image building, crises management, customer service, and more (Kim, Lee, & Lee, 2013; Scoble & Israel, 2006; Wright, 2006). Most commonly, companies learn the economic value of blogging, and decide to invest the necessary resources in maintaining a business blog. Thus blogging is an outcome of a business plan. Though some may argue that blogs are now overshadowed by other social networks, data shows the continued popularity of blogs in businesses (Barnes & Lescault, 2014; Singer, 2014).

Yet blogging for business may not always result from a deliberate, pre-planned business strategy: The process may occur in reverse, particularly for women. Blogging may serve as a means of psychological empowerment, and consequently enhance economic opportunities and growth. Recent research has examined the role of social media in women's economic empowerment. Scholars argue that social media can empower women entrepreneurs by enhancing their social capital and their self-efficacy, two key elements of entrepreneurs' success. Social capital helps increase access and exposure to economic opportunities, while self-efficacy—one's belief in one's capacity to employ the skills and resources needed to attain a desired goal—constitutes a necessary cognitive orientation for empowerment (Ajjan et al., 2014; Stavrositu & Sundar, 2012).

While online social media has enabled crafters around the world to parlay their crafts into economically sustainable businesses (e.g. Luckman, 2013, 2015; Walker, 2007), the notion of ICTs as economically empowering women is contested (Mitter, 2004). Gajjala et al. (2010) argued that

ideological framing of women weavers' economic empowerment is oftentimes counterproductive, as well-intentioned discourse ends up being oppressive. Yet the case appears otherwise for women entrepreneurs who have been exploiting digital technologies to develop their small businesses (Ajjan et al., 2014). In this study we focus on women entrepreneurs in affluent sectors of Israeli society. Although these women's use of social media for personal and social purposes comes as no surprise, the process by which they exploit their virtual experience for economic growth is intriguing. We seek to unravel the nature of the process by which ordinary use of social networks transforms into business-oriented behavior.

2.3. Boundaryless careers

Research in organizational management and sociology differentiates between varying career development processes (e.g. Ensher, Murphy, & Sullivan, 2002; Hughes, 1997). Traditionally, career development was regarded as a fairly linear and stable process that oftentimes challenges women's ability to balance work and family life (Kanter, 1989). The economic, social, and technological developments of recent decades have opened up other career development paths that have been labeled *boundaryless careers* (Ensher et al., 2002; Sullivan, 1999). Such careers develop outside the framework of a single organization, in a dynamic path that is not necessarily continuous or known in advance (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1996). As such, they have allowed women to build personally fulfilling careers while maintaining work-life balance. Yet the flexible nature of boundaryless careers may act as a double-edged sword: While working from home with flexible hours may help cope with life demands, it may make it difficult to separate work from private life (Neff, 2012). Also, such careers require particular personality traits that not all women possess, such as creativity, communication skills, people skills, high motivation, and more (Ensher et al., 2002). Nonetheless, it appears that using social media for business may empower women by enabling them to develop boundaryless careers despite objective external constraints (Ajjan et al., 2014).

2.4. Sharing and economics

The concept of sharing is regarded as the constitutive activity of web 2.0 applications, specifically social network sites, and comprises an array of behaviors, purposes, meanings, and effects on all realms of life (Chan & Li, 2010; Chiu, Hsu, & Wang, 2006; John, 2013, 2016). As such, sharing is a key mechanism underlying online crafting communities, since crafters use these virtual spaces to share tips, ideas, knowledge, creations, and more.

In his seminal work on the power of networks, Benkler (2006) discussed the economics of online sharing and its broad impact on society. He argues that network information technologies have created a new economic model that challenges the industrial information economy by providing individuals and societies significantly greater freedom to develop and progress with commensurately less dependence on corporate businesses or commercial media. Benkler (2006) uses the concept *enhanced autonomy* to argue that network information technologies offer individuals greater capacity than ever to exchange information, knowledge, and culture, and thereby transform themselves and their societies.

Regarding the craft blogosphere, sharing has clearly impacted the economics of many small crafters worldwide. The popularity of social media has given rise to a vibrant sphere of virtual crafting communities (Bratich & Brush, 2011), coupled with the exploitation of digitally enabled networks and interfaces for engaging in craft-based entrepreneurship (Levine & Heimerl, 2008; Luckman, 2013, 2015). Online networks have enabled small crafters to enhance their reach within a global market, thus exemplifying Anderson's (2007) *long tail* wherein virtual interconnectedness enables niche goods to reach significant sales levels that cannot be achieved through physical connections. While Luckman (2013) discusses global economic networks as a means of enhancing crafters' reach to geographically distant markets, many women use social media to support their locally based business (Ajjan et al., 2014).

The above review explicates the linkages between empowerment, blogging, crafts and business, along with the role of sharing in online behavior. In this study, we seek to unravel how can the concept of sharing help us understand the process by which women exploit the affordances of blogs to enhance their economic autonomy and develop a blog-supported craft business. Accordingly, the research question is twofold: What is the nature of the process by which blogging empowers women to develop a blog-supported craft business; and how does the interplay between sharing, blogging, and crafting play out to economically empower women crafters?

3. Methodology

In order to uncover the process by which craft bloggers develop their blog-supported businesses, we conducted semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of prominent women bloggers who publish established blogs that meet three criteria: (1) the blog was two years old or more at the time of the study; (2) it has a minimum of 6,000 monthly followers¹; and (3) it supports a small local craft business. Due to the lack of a reliable list of craft bloggers in our country, we used snowball sampling to recruit interviewees.

The sample included 12 women bloggers with similar socio-demographic backgrounds. By and large, our interviewees were in their thirties ($M = 33$), married with young children², with academic degrees and working full time when they began blogging. With the exception of one outlier that quit her former job in order to begin her blog-supported business, all of the interviewees were working full time when they began blogging, thus initially perceiving their blog as a hobby. (See Appendix I for the list of the bloggers' blogs names, urls, and starting date).

Importantly, purposive sampling is appropriate for the study, as it enables us to trace the path that women crafters tread as they use social media to develop a small business. However, the small and non-random nature of the sample limits our ability to generalize the findings to all craft bloggers, and does not enable us to identify variables that may explain differing outcomes.

Interviews were conducted between August and October 2012, and lasted about two hours each. Most interviews were conducted in the blogger's studio, but some chose to meet at cafes. The same questions were used for all interviews with a few adaptations as necessary due to the differences in blogs' topics. Bloggers were first asked about their motivations to begin blogging, their internet usage patterns before and after starting to blog, the development of their blog and their craft, and how they affected each other. We also asked the interviewees about online craft communities that they belong to: what they are, who comprises them, how they came to join, and how they would describe their engagement therein and their relationships with other members. In regard to their blogs, we asked interviewees about the types of content that they post, how this has changed over time, and what their relationships are with their blog followers. Finally, we asked them to describe their businesses, how their blogs support them, and what challenges they encounter.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed³, then analyzed according to the grounded theory methodology in which generalizations are derived from the data collected (Glaser & Strauss, 2009). Each interview was first read through to identify the key stages and milestones in the craft bloggers' experiences. As we read through the interview data, we sorted all the statements into categories based on themes that emerged. This emergent process helped us identify a five-stage model that is closely tied to the data as well as comprehensive, as it accounts for most of the data collected (note aforementioned exception).

In the next stage of the analysis, we delved deeper into the data, studying each of the five stages separately. We looked for statements expressing similar experiences, feelings, or behaviors, and sorted them into subcategories. Emerging themes led us back to scholarship in the various fields discussed in the analysis, which helped us explain our findings and further develop our theoretical argument. Finally, we examined the data across the five stages in search of a common structure or

features underlying them. This resulted in important observations concerning the role of sharing and empowerment in the evolution of craft bloggers from hobbyists to small business women.

4. Blogging for economic empowerment: A five-stage model

The craft bloggers interviewed experienced a five-stage development process wherein each stage follows a similar pattern (Figure 1). The pattern begins with an *incentive* that drives the crafter to *take an online action* associated with her craft. Her action produces results that *empower* her in ways that move her to the next stage in the model (Figure 2). While sharing serves as the catalyst that drives the model forward, the incentive for sharing and its meanings change as the bloggers develop. All of our interviewees underwent the complete five-stage process, with one outlier who was familiar with the online craft culture and its economic potential, and thus began blogging intentionally for the purpose of creating a business. Thus her experience reveals a three-stage process that began at Stage 3 of our model. Following is a detailed description of each stage of the model and the roles of sharing and empowerment in each stage.

4.1. Stage 1: From craft work to craft culture

Bratich and Brush (2011) differentiate between *craft work*—the laboring involved in crafting—and *fabriculture*, or craft culture, which is the broader phenomenon, defined as “a new way of connecting that is based on material production using traditional craft skills and yarns as well as the optical fiber and twisted pair cable used for telecommunications” (Bratich & Brush, 2011, p. 234; Minahan & Cox, 2007, p. 6). Accordingly, the future blogger begins as an anonymous amateur creator who engages in craft work at home, with no online expression or community affiliation. Most of the interviewees said that they were unaware of online craft communities, or craft communities at large until they encountered a problem in their hobby and searched online for a solution. Iris: “It started about seven years ago. I didn’t know what the internet was.... I searched online, looking for an answer to something about Fimo.” Dana: “Four years ago I got back into sewing. I needed filler for a baby blanket, so I went online to see where I could buy some. I bought some and got sucked into the online world of crafts.” And Efrát says: “I’ve been drawing and sculpting for years, randomly taking photos ... but it wasn’t organized ... suddenly I had an urge to record my work, so I looked online to learn how to take photos.”

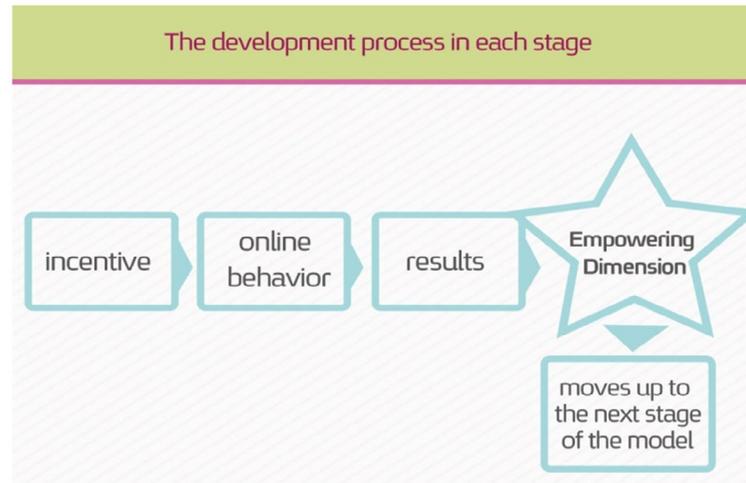
Figure 1. Blogging as economic empowerment: A five-stage model.

Illustration: Tali Ihie



Figure 2. The development process within each stage of the model.

Illustration: Tali Ihie



In this stage, sharing plays two roles in the crafter's empowerment process: The availability of information shared by other crafters enables the amateur crafter enhanced autonomy in her capacity to independently seek out information that she needs (Benkler, 2006). This exemplifies Minahan and Cox (2007) observation that the internet serves as an enabler and resource exchange for craft communities. This process goes hand in hand with the nature of the connection between the internet and applied arts. Alongside the surge of public craft gatherings in public spaces (Bratich & Brush, 2011), many crafters engage in their hobbies in their spare time at home, and thus the internet becomes a natural resource for information and solutions (Torrey et al., 2009).

Yet the online search has a deeper impact, which notes the beginning of the crafter's transformation process. The discovery of the rich and vibrant community in which others share and celebrate a (previously) marginalized aspect of one's life, has been shown to decrease one's feelings of cultural estrangement and isolation, consequently increasing self-efficacy (Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2008). Indeed, our interviewees noted that the discovery of the vibrant online craft communities helped strengthen their sense of legitimacy to engage in the field, and their belief in themselves and their hobbies. They no longer felt like "weirdos engaging in nonsense", but rather part of a community of women who enjoy creating. Yaël: "I needed to consult with someone about napkin glue, so I found a forum online ... I discovered other fanatic devotees. There was a sense that it's okay to do this knitting 'nonsense' ... there are others out there doing this ..." Altogether, these feelings deepen the crafter's interest in her craft and thus empower her to continue her personal development thereby. Discovery of the online craft culture intrigues the crafter to return.

Notably, the case is different for the blogger who was familiar with the online craft culture and the economic opportunities it holds, and thus begun blogging with an intentional business goal. Dana explained: "We weren't crafters. We wanted to start a physical store, but it was too expensive. So we started a blog and then an online store. Once the online store was ready, we shifted the blog's traffic to the store." This blogger came from the online to the craft business rather than the reverse.

4.2. Stage 2: Developing a sense of community

The amateur crafter becomes a regular participant in the online craft community. Her interest in crafting is now intertwined with her attraction to the spirit of the craft community. Initially, she participates as a lurker in blogs and forums, motivated by her genuine interest in crafting, without any economic aspirations associated therewith. Gradually, as many interviewees recalled, the exposure to craft ideas and photos that others shared online provided them perspective, leading them to appreciate their own work, and giving them an incentive to begin sharing it.

Differently put, her initial sharing with others enhanced the crafter's self-efficacy, empowering her to move from consuming information and ideas shared by others, to sharing her own creations. Indeed, increase in self-efficacy—an individual's belief in her capacity to implement the necessary skills for pursuing a desired goal (Bandura, 1988), may arise as a result of the opportunity to observe others' behavior online (Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2008).

Further, as the crafter engages in the online craft community, she begins to develop a *sense of community*, defined as the feeling of belonging that community members have, and a feeling that members matter to one another (Stavrositu & Sundar, 2012). Consequently, the crafter usually joins a closed online group of crafters.

Iris:

When I joined the forum, I was completely new to Fimo ... I thought, "Wow! I need to show this [her polymer clay creations] to the world!" I loved sharing my stuff, and got fired up. I don't know how I got there ... I guess I found the place to show things.

Some interviewees reported that a group invited them to join. Efrát recalls: "... I was in open forums. I didn't perceive myself as qualified to join a closed group ... I didn't ask to join Frida and Noma [a highly-regarded forum] because I was afraid of being rejected. Then they approached me ..."

Yael's story demonstrates how the community helped strengthen her sense of efficacy:

One day the forum organized an offline get-together ... I posted a comment: "Good for you guys. Have fun! I don't know why I wrote that. Then the forum manager wrote back, 'Hey. Wait a minute. Who are you? Why don't you join us ...?'" and she convinced me to come. That's where I got off my keyboard, and when I looked around me and saw that everyone there was normal, neither better nor worse than me ... I was OK.

The centrality of the content for sustaining a vibrant online community has led scholars to explore the motivations for content provision, specifically the exchange of information, ideas, and advice on the common interest (Bateman, Gray, & Butler, 2011; Chan & Li, 2010; Chiu et al., 2006). Analysis of the bloggers' development process reveals that their motivation for sharing content changes as the process unfolds.

The crafters' initial incentive to share their work or ideas is a personal need for recognition and support. Accordingly, sharing takes the meaning of telling others about her craft (John, 2013). In turn, the resulting reciprocal exchanges strengthen her sense of belonging to the community and empower her to continue crafting and sharing. Luba recalls: "I participated in some closed groups where I did crafting exchanges. People were excited about my stuff. It was fun ... I discovered an incredible realm of wonderful women that embraced me with support."

Gradually, the forum members' ongoing support further enhances the crafter's sense of efficacy. At this point she begins to develop her community commitment. In turn, her motivation for sharing transitions to what Bateman et al. (2011) called *affective commitment* to the community, or one's "emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in" (986) the community. Taken together, these orientations lead her to start her own blog as a way of contributing to the online community. Most interviewees reported that the incentive to start a blog came from the community that had been exposed to their work and believed in their potential to contribute to the field. As Dana said: "I posted some replies in the interior decorating forum, and people said to me, 'Hey you have to write. You must share, write a book, start a blog.'" Hadár recalls: "Tál discovered wedding blogs abroad, and said it makes no sense that we don't have a blog like that here in Israel. She approached me because she fell in love with my forum posts. She told me I couldn't refuse."

Further, her enhanced sense of efficacy coupled with her community commitment yields recognition of the crafter's capacity for contributing to the community. Thus, consistent with Chiu et al. (2006) findings, her primary motivation to share content now is her *community-related outcome expectation*, defined as "a knowledge contributor's judgment of likely consequences that her knowledge-sharing behavior will produce to a virtual community" (1876). Indeed, some bloggers began blogging when they saw a need that they could fill.

Luba:

I felt that I could really help parents who are stuck ... the same questions kept arising in the parents' forum ... They'd ask what I would do, if I have any ideas, and I always had so many ideas. So I said to myself, "Come on, start sharing!"

4.3. Stage 3: The young blog: Community, commitment, and reciprocity

The crafter starts a blog and begins blogging regularly, sharing her craft ideas, tips, photos, and expertise with a community of followers. Running a blog entails the management of relationships with two communities: the community of fellow bloggers, and the community of her blog's followers. She now develops affective commitment to both communities, which serves as incentive for continued sharing along with ongoing development. Efrát recalls: "The blog forces me to create and innovate. I love the fact that it keeps me on the edge, [compelling me] to offer something new and exciting; my followers wait for this."

Further, the blogger realizes that her blog, and more importantly, her status in the community, is contingent upon ongoing content sharing. She thus internalizes *the norm of reciprocity* that governs online communities (Chan & Li, 2010), defined as "actions that are contingent on rewarding reactions from others" (Blau, 1964, p. 15, in Chiu et al., 2006, p. 1877). Now reciprocity becomes the key motivation for her enhanced sharing in both communities. As Efrát further explained: "Besides, I now have friends who are bloggers, so I have a reputation as a blogger in the field, and as such I must keep on producing ... keep writing and contributing to the field."

The norm of reciprocity does not stop at her blog. Her commitment to other bloggers impels her to regularly follow their blogs and interact within them. Thus the blogger is engaged in the field, deepening her knowledge, and strengthening her ties in the blogger community. For example, Sigál said: "Ever since I have a blog, I read more blogs. Whether you want to or not, you're exposed, because whoever comments on your blog links it to her own. I got intrigued; I developed a second career in reading blogs."

Thus, engagement in the blogging community becomes an integral part of the craft blogger's development process. The nature of the connections within the blogger community is both social and personal, and the discourse accompanying it is supportive. The norm of reciprocity governs the community as members deepen their commitment to write, respond, and encourage. As Iris said: "... bloggers comment because they appreciate the importance of it." Revital elaborates: "I try to write many supportive comments to other bloggers because they deserve it ... I don't see any reason for competition. On the contrary, we empower each other, and it's likely that users who follow the blogs read more."

Usually, the blogger community develops beyond the blogosphere, thereby reflecting what Minahan and Cox (2007) called the new materiality that merges old notions of craft communities with new technology-enabled opportunities (Bratich & Brush, 2011). Most of the interviewees reported live gatherings, and noted that since they began blogging, their circle of friends has broadened, and now consists mostly of other bloggers. The interpersonal connections strengthen the reciprocal norms of supporting and encouraging each other's work, and serve as additional empowerment to the blogger.

4.4. Stage 4: The established blog

As her number of blog followers increases and the craft blogger continues to develop her blog along with her craft expertise, she becomes a recognized expert publishing an established blog, all of which take on several common characteristics.

The blogger begins to *take a marketing approach* in order to broaden her community of followers, increase her blog's activity, and further establish her status in the community. To illustrate, some interviewees create Facebook pages to accompany their blogs, and use them to share their blogs' milestones, post teasers about upcoming blog posts, and more. She now understands that the blogosphere has its own rules of conduct, and that she must adopt the language and norms that govern its dynamics. For example: bloggers recalled using the *candy [blog] strategy* (using raffles or competitions to increase traffic), as Sigal explained:

There are lots of trends in blogs, and it's important to be familiar with these and adjust. For example, I never knew what a candy blog was, and once I used it, it boosted my exposure. If I didn't make a habit of scrutinizing other blogs, I would not have realized that it exists.

Iris:

I did a candy blog when I began blogging about bento [Japanese food boxes]; I wanted to generate buzz, get the 'wow' effect, and she [the supplier] agreed to give me freebies in exchange for advertising on my blog ... I learned from bloggers abroad how to give followers freebies.

During this stage, the blogger begins receiving *requests for services or products* in her field of expertise. For example, some bloggers recalled getting requests to give workshops. The act of sharing her creations online enables her followers to appreciate her talent, and they ask her to host a workshop where they can learn particular craft skills. Efrat recalls: "Yaël made [a pillow] as a gift for someone, she put it on her blog, and all of us in the forum loved it and asked for a workshop. She then sewed a rabbit, and we all said, 'Cool! Do a workshop!'" The requests for a workshop strengthen the blogger's self-confidence and status as a resource and an expert (Stavrositu & Sundar, 2012).

A third characteristic of the established blog is *collaboration* with other bloggers, whose strategic value the craft blogger begins to appreciate. A group of bloggers may collaborate to write posts on a shared topic with varying foci as relevant to each blog. Or, bloggers link to each others' posts, manage a collaborative Facebook page, or announce joint competitions. For example, Revital says: "People love to develop relationships with people who can help them develop ... If someone writes about me and another one writes about me, if five leading blogs exchange links, it empowers your blog. Good relationships are beneficial."

Enoch and Grossman (2010) explained that the blogger is considered an information resource. This reputation develops from the reciprocal process wherein the blogger develops through experience alongside sharing her learning process with her followers. The blogger's followers empower her. In turn, her confidence as an expert grows.

Revital:

"I wrote some posts, and people started responding and sending me private messages with queries. Kids' crafts teachers write to me, 'Maybe you have an idea for a craft in such-and-such area?' I realized that this has an audience. The more familiar people became with me, the greater my motivation to continue blogging."

Social media can empower women by encouraging self expression in a variety of ways. The repeated act of sharing thoughts, experiences, and emotions associated with a craft results in an improved sense of self-empowerment (Ajjan et al., 2014). Further, expanding her follower reach,

collaborations, and workshops, all strengthen the blogger's standing in the community and her reputation as an expert. Taken together, these activities strengthen her sense of efficacy, as well as her feeling of having a distinct voice (Stavrositu & Sundar, 2012). Thus she learns to appreciate her capabilities, and ultimately recognize the economic value that she generates.

Yael recalls:

My life went on, disconnected from the blog, a metamorphosis. But the blog helped me sharpen things: A belief in myself, in what I do ... in my capacities ... it helped me realize that I've got something, not just the craft ..., [but] my proficiency, ... my sense of confidence ... At Natanela's fair, someone approached me: "Hey, I'm Dalia B." I thought, "Wow!... I know her; she's been responding to my blog posts for three years now" ... all of a sudden this beautiful woman approaches me to say hello.

4.5. Stage 5: Blog supports craft business

The craft blogger's transition from perceiving her blog and craft as hobbies, to envisioning her blog as a platform for supporting her self-made craft business, occurs when she realizes the economic value of her services or products, and feels sufficiently efficacious to charge a fee for them. Again, her community commitment coupled with the norm of reciprocity that governs the craft community's culture, motivates her ongoing sharing as the mechanism that drives her economic transformation. Her followers consume the content she shares, and implicitly relate to her as an expert by approaching her for information and advice. In turn, these acts empower her to realize that she is an asset to the field, and gives her the confidence to start her business.

The business develops gradually; some craft blogger businesses begin with workshops, the initial request for which usually comes from the online community, helping her to comprehend the economic potential of her hobby.

Luba recalls:

It began when my forum friends saw my products and asked me to do a workshop. From then on, it snowballed. It began with something personal that I wanted to create and simply gathered steam. I got to a point where they convinced me [to progress], and what used to be a kids' craft studio transformed its image and became something entirely different.

A key means to empowerment is experience (Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2008). Accordingly, most bloggers begin with a free trial workshop for their blogger friends, which provides them experience, generating enthused feedback. Equipped with these, she is empowered to open the workshop to the broader community, using her blog for publicity and registration. Yael B-K: "I practice on my forum friends to make sure it works, the time frames and everything, and after trying it on them, I can do an open workshop for pay."

Yael Y.:

I did a few workshops for my forum friends. I didn't come from a place of self-confidence ... the idea of having a workshop never crossed my mind. My friends kept nagging me: "Come on. Give us a workshop." So one Friday morning, I took a day off work. I was worried, but it turned out great; it was even fun. When it ended, as they were leaving, they asked me when the next workshop was. I'd rather gain my experience with my forum friends, to make sure it works ... then I can offer a workshop and charge people.

In a similar vein, other craft bloggers began with a virtual store. The blogger's initial incentive is a desire to share her creations with her online community. In turn, the norm of reciprocity within the community leads her followers to share their enthusiastic reactions (Chan & Li, 2010), and some ask to buy her creations. These reactions empower her to realize the economic value of her craft and start selling it via her blog.

Luba recalls:

I told my friends on one of the closed forums that I'm dying to do carpentry ... One said that she'd love to have this piece of furniture, and asked me to use her for my internship. I said, 'You know what? I'll go for it. I'll draft a design, and if you like it, I'll make it for you'. It was a hive that was split into compartments for dolls. I made a sketch, she liked it, and I made it for her. It turned out better than I imagined, and two other forum friends wanted one too.

Revital recalls how she began selling washi tape⁴ and eventually offered workshops:

My post transformed the washi tape landscape in Israel. People didn't know what it was, and once I wrote about it, craft stores haven't stopped selling it. I started selling it and it went like crazy. I found myself busy writing about washi tape and selling it ... I thought about having a washi tape workshop, it made sense ... and got rolling. People fell in love with it and I did too. I still do workshops ... they're constantly full.

The blog's development continues alongside the blogger's personal development. DeFillippi and Arthur (1996) explained that women who succeed in boundaryless careers are those who are capable of ongoing development and learning. Indeed, interviewees stressed the importance of ongoing development in the field. For example, Efrát recalls: "... I saw an old sewing machine at Navit's house. I'd never sewed, and I thought that I must learn so I attended sewing workshops ..."

Revital recalls:

I took a home decorating course ... as an experiment for my blog. I thought ... I could create a new line for my home decor products. I learned a lot ...; I didn't intend to become a home decorator, but today it represents most of my work. It inspired me; now I'm taking a photography course on Matkonation⁵ [a recipe blog], and I don't even like to cook! I told Matkonation that I'm not interested in taking photos of food, but if they do food styling, that would be perfect for my blog. I took lots of photos of food being served. If I take photos, I'll better understand what's popular, and I'll do better photography. It's great ... it provides me with many tools that I can apply ...

At this juncture, sharing also takes on the meaning of sharing the journey (John, 2013): The blogger shares the story of her path, writing posts about workshops or courses she attends and what she learned. This keeps her followers interested, and further enhances her reputation as an expert. As Yael said: "The blog forces me to keep innovating ... I love the fact that blogs keep me on the edge, innovating, inspiring, exciting. My followers anticipate this ... once you're a reputable blogger, you must create and write, share something in your field."

But progress may have a price: Some followers may not be interested in new directions that the blogger has taken, and may leave the blog, as Ilil said: "I know that people left me in the process, because at some point I stopped providing them with links and guidance for art. I see them leaving, and I think it's legitimate."

Craft bloggers also employ business collaborations and mutual promotion. For example, Sigal recalls a collaborative food project: "I hate cooking ... it's a burden. I hate dealing with food. Then, one of the first women that responded to my blog was Matkonation. I decided to collaborate with her on a dinner project." Iris explains: "My collaboration with BlingBling was based on barter: I didn't pay them, but I got exposure. At that time my goal was to get myself into the field of food photography."

The norm of reciprocity continues to serve as the primary incentive for sharing, with an added economic dimension of meaning. John (2013) contends that entrepreneurs view the web 2.0 sharing economy as creating a community, since it is associated with positive social ties. While John refers primarily to sharing online consumption, it appears that craft bloggers perceive reciprocal promotion as an integral component of exploiting the community ties for fulfilling business goals. Yael B-K:

...we're a very supportive environment. I know Liát from BlingBling personally through a mutual friend. She wrote about the store I used to have in my house, then I met her on HaByta [a home décor blog], and decided to write about it. She did an amazing job. There were many entries to her story. It was very impressive.

Revital recalled how she asked her blogger friends to help her promote her new workshop: "... I was contemplating how to spread the word about my new carpentry workshops. I knew I had to generate buzz. Then I read about the candy blog, and asked my blogger friends on the forum to write a post."

5. Craft bloggers' boundaryless careers: Strengths and weaknesses⁶

The craft blogger's business fits the broad category of boundaryless careers (Ensher et al., 2002), since it develops independently on a dynamic path that is unknown in advance and oftentimes unexpected, rather than in the context of a particular organization. As such, these bloggers were able to build successful, fulfilling careers on a flexible schedule that allows for the objective constraints of family life (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1996). Indeed, the nature of the blog-supported craft business enables the flexibility needed when parenting young children.

Sigal recalls:

... My daughter was about to start preschool. I needed a job, and my mother-in-law said, "Why don't you teach photography?" That moment ... I dropped everything, opened my notebooks, and started preparing lesson outlines ... As I did so, I already had three spots [for classes] filled. As demand increased, I offered more workshops.

Yet the nature of blog-supported businesses also poses life challenges (Neff, 2012). One of the keys to a successful blog is constant updating: The blogger must constantly post new and varied content to maintain a broad readership, which is time-consuming and demanding.

As bloggers become leaders in their field, their continued success also entails maintaining close ties with their followers. Amichai-Hamburger et al. (2008) explained that the internet enables these e-leaders to be in direct contact with their group members and provide tips, advice, and professional information. As Yael explained: "It is so important for me to know my followers, and it's important that every follower knows that she can write me and I'll respond and try to help." Hadar elaborated [wedding blog]:

We give our brides the feeling that they have a welcoming home on our blog. They keep asking questions, and we give each one personal attention. It's very time-consuming. For us, the most important thing is that once we've helped someone resolve a crisis, it becomes the most important thing in the world to her; she'll tell people about it, and recommend us. They really express their appreciation; it's fascinating.

Thus, while the blog-supported business offers the flexibility needed for working mothers, it is time consuming. As such, blog-supported businesses may ultimately compromise women's maintaining work-life balance.

Other drawbacks of the craft blogger's business stem from the inherent tension between art and business. Some of our interviewees expressed a loss of the joy of crafting due to business pressures. As one interviewee admitted:

When your hobby turns into your work ... new considerations come in. You feel pressed to generate income, and you find yourself working under time constraints, and spending much time on crafts that sell great, but you don't necessarily enjoy them.

Thus it appears that craft bloggers' economic empowerment may come at the expense of positive dimensions associated with crafting (Crawford, 2009; Luckman, 2013; Sennett, 2008), or as one

blogger said: “I had a hard time with everyone turning their personal blogs into business blogs. How much can you read about their workshops? But I guess that’s my problem. I just moved on.”

Finally, bloggers addressed the challenges of posting commercial content: The blog can serve as an advertising platform, but the audience is very sensitive and doesn’t like to be used for making profit. At [one of the popular blogs], the followers didn’t like what happened there; they posted comments about their discontent, and eventually they left, and it hurt the blog. [Blogger x]. Another blogger discussed vulnerability to exploitation, explaining that she is continually pressured by craft-related companies to write about them in her blog: “This magazine [a premier women’s magazine] convinced me to write about them, saying, ‘You’ll get great exposure’. I always get such requests, and it never lives up to what they promise.”

The blog becomes an invaluable multi-dimensional platform. It serves as the virtual arena for publicizing craft-related services, displaying and selling products, and providing professional information. At the same time, it continues to serve as a means of strengthening the blogger’s credibility as an expert, and maintaining her network and ties in the craft community.

6. Discussion

This study provides an analysis of the transformation women crafters underwent who began blogging as a hobby, and gradually turned their crafts into blog-supported small businesses. The analysis demonstrates the role of sharing via blogging as a driving mechanism for community building and empowerment for economic and personal development.

The relationship between applied arts and blogging is consistent with the nature of both, as both are social activities driven by the sharing mechanism. Crafters develop their expertise through group learning and social interaction (Craig & Dubois, 2010; Torrey et al., 2009), and blogs are social network platforms that feature the sharing of information, knowledge, and experience. As such, the social dimension is part and parcel of craft bloggers’ activity: Writing for and interacting with a community of crafters empowers crafters in many ways: It enhances their social ties in the realm of crafts, which helps them attain information and skills and opens opportunities, increasing their sense of agency (Ajjan et al., 2014; Bratich & Brush, 2011; Stavrositu & Sundar, 2012); and creates a sense of commitment to continually interest their followers, thereby serving as a catalyst for personal and economic development.

Notably, most of this study’s interviewees abandoned their initial blogs after several years moving on to other endeavors. For example, Liat Vardi-Bar creator of the mothers’ blog *BlingBling* blog, joined a marketing agency as the director of division focused on women and mothers (Mizbala, 2015), and Tal Maor, sold her blog and started an online magazine as a platform for a new business (Tzuk, 2016). But these transitions do not seem to deter from the transformational role that the initial blogs served in these women’s lives. Blogging is a dynamic endeavor which reflects the processes that bloggers undergo. A blog’s success isn’t measured by its life-span or bottom line monetary figure, but rather by the role it served in the blogger’s personal and economic growth. Longitudinal analysis may provide more context and perspective on the role of initial blogging in the broader context of women’s economic and personal development.

The study is also consistent with John’s (2013, 2016) conception of sharing as a broad concept that applies to consumption and production of a broad array of goods, regarded as an act of creating positive social ties associated with the notion of community. Craft bloggers continually share craft-related experiences and knowledge, and via sharing they contribute to their community that empowers them to grow personally and professionally.

Yet motivations for sharing and its meanings constitute a transition alongside craft bloggers’ development: Crafters begin by consuming and producing craft-related content, thus adhering to John’s (2013) definition of *sharing economics* as “those in which money, or more specifically, the

ability to make it, is not a relevant factor in motivating participation (118).” Crafters’ initial sharing of their own work takes on the meaning of an act of communication, or “telling” (John, 2013, p. 123), motivated by psychological need for exposure within a community that is capable of appreciating the work. Gradually, as the crafters deepen their engagement in the online craft community, their sense of community strengthens along with their sense of efficacy vis-a-vis their craft. Combined, these two orientations drive their continued sharing of content, which now takes on the meaning of contributing to the community (Chiu et al., 2006), yet still detached from material motivations.

As craft bloggers develop and their blogs transform into business platforms, the meaning of sharing again changes. At this stage, their acts of sharing serve as an intentional and strategic mechanism for business development. The blogger maintains her strong commitment to the community, along with her commitment to the norm of reciprocity governing online communities (Chan & Li, 2010). However, the primary meaning associated with these commitments is their material implications. As such, mutual promotion and community collaborations are foreseen as a means to growing their businesses.

Our model also fits Benkler’s concept of enhanced economy, as it illustrates a realm of individual women who undergo economic and personal transformation via online sharing of content (2006). However, while Benkler argues that digitally enabled sharing challenges market-based economic models, our model suggests something else: Interviewed bloggers began their transformation process by consuming free, shareable goods, primarily craft-related information. Thus, while the early stages of our model are consistent with Benkler’s argument, as the craft blogger progresses through the model, she eventually harnesses digital technologies to affect radical changes on the personal and economic levels. Thus, rather than challenging the market-based economy, sharing equips these bloggers with skills and knowledge to successfully participate in the capitalistic market, thereby reinforcing traditional business models.

Further, the capitalistic market driven motivation does not come in contrast with the continued engagement in the sharing culture of bloggers’ community. These two blend together into what Gafni and Gluck (2014) describe as the new entrepreneur mindset that underlies sharing economy. The nature of the bloggers’ community relationships reflects the new mentality which perceives collaboration and mutual promotion as a part and parcel of successful entrepreneurship in current times (Gafni & Gluck, 2014).

Importantly, notions of women’s economic empowerment as manifested in this research must be qualified. The global craft culture comprises a wide array of craft communities representing varying notions of empowerment: from the creation of a counterculture that challenges traditional notions of domesticity, to activist groups employing community crafting as a vehicle for expressing social ideals (Bratich & Brush, 2011), to NGOs seeking to economically empower underprivileged women by global marketing of artisanal products (Gajjala et al., 2010).

Craft bloggers interviewed herein were personally and economically empowered via their discovery of and immersion in an online craft community. In this sense, our model aligns with research on the use of ICTs for empowerment of women entrepreneurs (Ajjan et al., 2014). However, while interviewees stressed the role of the online craft community in their personal growth and economic development, none mentioned any notion of activism, counterculture, or any desire to empower disadvantaged women. On the contrary, they embraced the welcoming and supportive community spirit for their personal needs. Further, while breaking out into the realm of entrepreneurship and learning to exploit the affordances of craft blogging for economic development, their small businesses remained confined to the gendered craft community. Rather than challenging current divides, or employing online networks for challenging gender divides or capitalistic economies, these networks reinforced existing capitalistic and gendered norms, values, and practices. Thus it appears that the nature of their empowerment adheres to what Bratich and Brush (2011) referred to as “captured in the confining, gated enclosure model of the cult of womanhood” (241).

Turning to limitations, the analysis demonstrates that although interviewed bloggers engaged in different types of crafts, the nature of the craft did not seem to influence the five-step pattern of their development process. Yet the small sample limits our ability to gauge more nuanced differences between bloggers' transformational processes. Future research is needed to inquire more deeply into each step of the model and how variables such as craft type, age, and marital status may affect its nature and duration. The increased use of vlogs (Biel & Gatica-Perez, 2013) raises another important direction for further inquiry, looking into differences in the nature and usage of blogs compared with vlogs for women empowerment. Also, the purposive sample limits the findings' generalizability. Certainly, not all women crafters become involved in online craft communities, nor do all craft bloggers become small businesswomen. Further research is necessary to investigate the variables that may explain differences in bloggers' development processes, and any factors impeding the empowering potential of online craft communities among affluent women.

Finally, while much of the research on the employment of social networks and ICTs for women's economic empowerment focuses on underprivileged women (e.g. Ajjan et al., 2014; Gajjala et al., 2010), this study focuses on the process by which affluent women crafters in prosperous societies develop a small business via blogging. The sample of women bloggers that had no a priori intentions of becoming part of the blogosphere or a craft entrepreneur is revealing: Basic internet knowledge was sufficient to enable their exposure to fellow crafters, and basic exposure was sufficient to trigger a transformational process for economic enhancement. The discovery of the vibrant local craft culture empowered these affluent women to pursue their creative passion, to personally develop, and ultimately to discover and pursue their entrepreneurial skills. Thus, the study provides further support to scholars and practitioners seeking to enhance women's access to network technology as a means of strengthening women's role in the global economy.

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Notes

1. Due to Israel's country's small population, 6,000 followers is considered a high number in the local blogosphere.
2. One interviewee reported that she was single when she began blogging.
3. Interviews were conducted in Hebrew and translated into English. Interviewees agreed that quotes from their interviews could be used for this research.
4. Washi tape comes in a wide array of patterns and designs used for decorative purposes. It is typically made of natural fibers such as bamboo or tree bark.
5. Hebrew-English play on words: *matkón* = Hebrew for "recipe" + and the English "nation" = "Recipe Nation".
6. Some quotes cited in this chapter are not attributed to a specific interviewee due to the content sensitivity.
7. Although some of the blogs no longer operate, this does not affect the research argument.

Cover image

Illustration: Tali Ihie

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Appendix I

Table 1. Interviewed bloggers' blogs⁷

Blog's name	URL	Blog start date
Colourful way	http://colourfulway.blogspot.com/	October 2010
My lovely mess	http://www.mylovelymess.com/	December 2011
Habayta	http://www.habaytashop.co.il	2011
My creative spot	http://nushi1.blogspot.com/	March 2009
Urban Brides	http://urbanbridesmag.co.il/	September 2010
Fashion tails	http://www.fashion-tails.com	May 2009
Mostly Carpenters	http://www.mishpaha-pnay.com/	May 2010
Like air to breathe	http://like-air-to-breathe.blogspot.co.il/	October 2010
Kipodim	http://ykipodim.blogspot.com/	July 2009
Miss Petel	http://www.misspetel.com	January 2011
Bling Bling	http://blingbling.co.il/	November 2009
Ilil Ziv	http://ililiziv.blogspot.com/	February 2008



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