From Organizational to Community Creativity: Paragon Leadership & Creativity Stories at Etsy

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ABSTRACT

With the rise of massive scale, globally distributed creative communities, such as Deviant Art, Etsy, and Minecraft, the role of creative leadership in sociotechnical systems is worth investigating. This paper presents a case study of one strategy Etsy, one such online creative community, uses to articulate the creative dispositions of the community's exemplar members: Featured Seller interviews. For this study, we report on a combined content analysis and close reading of Featured Seller interviews on Etsy.com, followed up with member check interviews. Our analysis highlights the demographics of featured sellers, the ways in they express their identities and creative processes, and how they position themselves within the broader Etsy community. Our findings demonstrate that Etsy's administrators provide both a platform and scaffolding for community leaders to co-articulate with them the creative ideals they believe will strengthen the bonds of the Etsy community.

Author Keywords

Craft; art; creativity; community; paragon; leadership; Etsy; content analysis

ACM Classification Keywords

H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

INTRODUCTION

Creativity is a prized human trait, and not surprisingly it has been broadly theorized and studied in nearly every modern academic discipline. Creativity research is a particularly mature area in psychology, where empirical studies since the Second World War have incrementally contributed to an increasingly powerful theoretical account of human creativity in diverse situations and contexts, including developmental creativity in children, creativity in the fine arts, creativity in everyday life, and professional creativity in the sciences, law, and other professions.

Given the emergence of socio-technical systems as an important research area in HCI and CSCW [3], it is not surprising that organizational theories of creativity would be explored as an important topic of interest within that area [11, 12, 13]. Derived primarily from empirical studies of organizations—corporate, government, non-profits, etc.—such theories are optimized to contribute to interaction design for those types of organizations. A key component of these organizational theories is the role of leaders in shaping, promoting, and embodying creativity for the organization at large. In psychology, *creativity* is understood as "the ability to produce work that is both novel (i.e., original, unexpected) and appropriate (i.e., adaptive concerning task constraints)" [30], and extends beyond artistic creativity also to include diverse forms of innovation and problem-solving throughout everyday life.

With the rise of massive scale, globally distributed and decentralized creative communities, such as Deviant Art, Etsy, Pinterest, and Minecraft, which are managed by organizations and have features and structures that are analogues of traditional organizational structures, the role of the creative leader is worth revisiting. Yet it is difficult to evaluate the efficacy of creative leaders in massive decentralized communities, in part because not enough empirical research is available about such communities.

In this paper, we describe our research on Etsy, an online community devoted to buying and selling crafts. With over 15 million members and $63 million in sales each month, the Etsy community is massive and successful in terms of craft items listed, viewed, and sold [8, 9]. While there are many factors that contribute to Etsy's economic success, this paper focuses on the growing number of publicly acknowledged and promoted sellers that help influence and shape the creative skills and dispositions of Etsy crafters throughout the community. A key strategy employed by Etsy administrators is to identify and promote its exemplar members is their use of the ongoing "Featured Seller" interviews. In brief, each Featured Seller interview highlights a successful member of Etsy community using a structured interview format. These interviews are then made available to the broader Etsy community via a high profile position on the official Etsy.com website. For clarity throughout this paper, we will use *Etsy community* (or *Etsy-comm*) to refer to the collectivity of all the site's buyers, sellers, users, lurkers, etc. We use *Etsy corporate* (or *Etsy-corp*) to refer

to the business that owns the brand and platform; and we use *Etsy.com* to refer to the technology platform itself.

This paper reports on a content analysis [14] of the corpus of these interviews. This analysis sheds light on Etsy-corp's emergent efforts to highlight exemplar members as a type of paragon leadership [27] in the community as one means of supporting creativity in a massive community. We focus our analysis on three dimensions of creative leadership found in the interviews: establishing identities as creators, articulating sources of inspiration, and reinforcing the broader community. These interviews, we argue, help Etsy-corp develop a coherent community vision and ethos, strategically (yet with restraint) strengthening the bonds of the loosely coupled millions that make up its community. Our research contributes to the study of massive scale creative communities by offering preliminary evidence as to how exemplar community members, in collaboration with site owners, may co-articulate desirable skills and dispositions that work to influence the broader membership of an online community of creators.

From Organizational Creativity to Online Communities of Creators

Organizational theories of creativity seek to identify and explain optimal team composition, leadership strategies, work environments, failure tolerance, organizational culture, etc. [23, 24, 25, 33]. Work in HCI and CSCW has carried these themes forward into interaction design. Fischer and colleagues [11, 12, 13] have investigated the relationships between social structures (e.g., communities of practice and communities of interest) and technological resources (e.g., boundary objects and collaboratories) as supports for organizational creativity. Farooq et al. [10] continue this work on organizational creativity noting the desirability of studying and designing for everyday long-term creative efforts and collaborations as opposed to anticipating the mythical "lightning bolt" moments of inspiration. Further, Davenport and Mazalek [6] explore the artful role of the designer (and researcher) in shaping new creative domains and communities through the development of innovative technologies.

One aspect of organizational creativity that is frequently emphasized in the literature is creative leadership. A recent article on organizational creativity [21] describes work on creative leadership as "a burgeoning body of research," and the authors' synthesis indicates that leaders that promote organizational creativity have the following attributes: "tolerance for ambiguity, ability to assess and be comfortable with risk; ability to quickly and effectively assess an individual; ability to balance passion and objectivity; and ability to change" [21]. Another key aspect of leadership in creative organizations is to define roles for the organization as a whole as well as teams and individuals within it [23]; roles help define relationships among members and facilitate decentralized collaborations. Leadership also creates (dis-)incentive structures that can affect organizational creativity [31], e.g., by stifling creativity through transactional reward structures that reward well defined goal achievement, rather than innovation and change. Finally, leaders in their roles as domain experts also take on the role of the creativity gatekeeper insofar as they often decide what gets to count as "creative" and what is preserved as an exemplar creative achievement for the future [4, 5].

In addition to the aforementioned organizational capacities of leaders (i.e., role definition [23], incentive structures [31], & gatekeeping [4, 5]), creative leaders may also serve as "role models" who lead-by-example through their day-to-day actions and dispositions [27]. Role models come in the form of impersonal "paragons" who are admired and emulated from a distance as well as personal "mentors" who influence emerging creativity in a more direct fashion [27]. One of the central means by which paragons influence the creativity of their followers is through the embodiment and reproduction of *creativity stories* that work to convey a message about the skills and dispositions that are best suited for encouraging creativity and success within their respective organizations [26, 27]. For these stories to be successful, they must (1) address individual and group identity, (2) appeal to the experiences of the audience, (3) operate in an organizational structure, and (4) be embodied by the actions of the leader [26, 27].

However, the empirical work on which these theories of creative leadership are based was grounded predominantly in twentieth-century professional organizations. These organizations tended to situate their members within strong organizational relationships that might not exist in massive creative communities. Many members of the organizations favored in traditional creativity research share a similar past, in the sense that they have similar backgrounds (e.g., collegiate degrees and professional knowledge). They share a similar present, in their physical, technical, and social environments. And they share a disposition toward the future, e.g., through organizational visions, mission statements, career trajectories, etc.

In the past decade, the rise of network-based creative communities, from e-science platforms to YouTube, provide an increasingly viable alternative to the traditional hierarchical organization. One emerging theoretical formulation of this type of community is Sylvan's [31] online community of creators (OCOC). According to her definition, an OCOC is a social network site that involves (1) individuals sharing their own creations, (2) discussion of one another's work, and (3) an association of creators with their creations. In [32], Sylvan identifies Flickr, Vimeo, and deviantART as paradigmatic examples. Membership in these communities is looser, in the sense that shared backgrounds, environments, and visions are more diluted. The Etsy community, too, fulfills the formulation of an online community of creators with its emphasis on creators and their creations, support of a loosely networked membership, and minimal organizational oversight. This paper works to provide early evidence of how strategies for creative leadership that were applied in traditional organizations, in particular the role of

paragon leaders and creativity stories, may be renewed, rejected, or otherwise reinterpreted in OCOCs.

Etsy as a Site for Massively Networked Creativity

Etsy is an online marketplace where people buy and sell vintage and handmade goods, as well as art and craft supplies. Etsy-corp's mission statement characterizes Etsy as a "community that actively supports one another in the shared goal of offering alternatives to mass-produced objects," with a focus on connecting buyers and sellers in a meaningful way [8]. In addition to Etsy-corp's goal of supporting a consumer-conscious community, it also facilitates the sharing of craft related skills among members, assists sellers in improving business practices, and fosters the growth of an online community for "all things handmade."

Most importantly, as alluded to in our naming conventions, Etsy can be distinguished from the types of organizations typically researched under the auspices of organizational creativity due to a hybrid organizational structure that separates, in part, Etsy's corporate entity and Etsy's broader community of crafter-sellers, what we refer to as Etsy-corp and Etsy-comm, respectively. Etsy-corp is managed by a CEO and a team of administrators, but these corporate leaders do not work in the same industry or domain as Etsy's crafter-sellers. Running a massive-scale e-commerce and community platform requires a different set of skills and dispositions than running a small handwork business. For Etsy's crafter-sellers, creative leadership is unlikely to be found in Etsy-corp's CEO, community managers, or engineers, (creative as they may be), which make up the bulk of the company, but is instead located within the community of crafter-sellers itself.

As a result, Etsy.com offers important empirical opportunities for studying massive-scale organizational creativity because of its hybrid organizational structure and its successes as an online community of creators. Further, Etsy.com has made available a dataset that, among other things, sheds light on Etsy-corp's emerging efforts to support its community by enabling that community to disseminate its own creativity stories that are embodied in and reproduced through the crafter-seller community's exemplar members. That dataset is the corpus of its Featured Seller interviews.

According to a research collaborator at Etsy-corp, up to three sellers a week are selected as "featured sellers" (note that as of summer 2012, Etsy-corp renamed them "featured stores") through a curated committee process among Etsy-corp staff, during which storefronts, merchandise, and photography are evaluated according to ideals that Etsy-corp wishes to promote. These include community participation, policy and guideline compliance, individual creative voice, and commercial success. Once selected, the featured sellers are invited to answer a variety of text-based, committee-selected questions about their hobbies, goals, Etsy-comm experiences, and creative work.

As noted, the 600+ expert interviews constitute a promising corpus for understanding the sort of leadership Etsy-corp and the featured sellers co-articulated for this massive-scale creativity community. However, there is a complication. Over the course of six years of interviews, Etsy-corp changed the questions. For the most part, the changes in the questions were slow and incremental. It is also clear from the changes that Etsy-corp refined the question sets in an ongoing effort to refine and clarify the ideals that they wish Etsy-comm to embody. In our analysis, we characterize both the question changes and more importantly their implications for how we understand these leaders.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The central empirical contribution of this work derives from a content analysis [14] of the Featured Seller interviews posted to Etsy.com from 2005 to 2010. There are 612 total interviews in the archive with a random sample of 237 interviews analyzed to establish a confidence interval of 95%

Code Theme	Code Category	Brief Description	# Codes	% Correct	Kripp. Alpha*
Demographics	Gender	Male, Female, or Transgender.	303	98.54	.79
	Craft Partnership	Store operated by more than one seller.	50	96.52	.71
	Training	Type of training received in craft or other skills.	586	92.51	.70
	Family	Live-in family members or pets.	436	98.52	.60
	Job Status	Current profession and employment status.	392	92.45	.63
Identity	--	Self-identified status as a creator.	307	74.66	.62
Process	Tools	Non-consumable items used in the creative process.	173	94.81	.57
	Product	Products produced and sold by the featured seller.	413	92.35	.55
	Materials	Consumable items used in the creative process.	393	96.74	.65
	Inspiration	Sources of inspiration in the creative process.	223	89.34	.61
Community	Advice	Advice given to other creators.	689	89.95	.67
	Technology	Discussion of technologies that support membership in an online creative community.	799	91.37	.61

Table 1: Breakdown of relevant coding categories. Only codes/categories discussed in this paper are listed.
*Calculated via the Coding Analysis Toolkit [CAT]. α > .55 used for this study.

+/- 5%. The number of interviews included in the final sample reflects the distribution of the total number of interviews per year. Table 2 offers a breakdown of the total number, sample number, and percent distribution of interviews by year.

Year	Total # Interviews	Sample # Interviews	% of Total Distribution
2005*	8	3	1.31
2006	41	16	6.70
2007	95	37	15.52
2008	155	60	25.33
2009	156	60	25.49
2010	157	61	25.65
Total	*612*	*237*	*100.0*

Table 2: Breakdown of featured seller interviews by year. *Partial year. Interviews began on Oct. 6, 2005.

The coding system employed in this study was developed through three iterative test codings of small random samples of interviews. For the initial coding system, the coding team (composed of three of the authors) independently evaluated a random sample of 20 interviews from years 2005-2010 and developed separate coding systems. These initial coding systems were collaboratively merged to produce a single shared coding system and were further developed through two additional iterations in which the coding team applied the shared coding system to a new random sample of 10 interviews each. In sum, the final coding system was developed through three iterations and across 40 random interviews. Interviews used during the development stage were removed from the interview data set before selection of the final sample. Additionally, a coding manual was developed in tandem with each iteration of the coding system to serve as a unifying reference for the coding team.

The final coding system includes 42 unique codes organized into 13 categories and 5 themes. Table 2 offers a breakdown of code themes, categories, and code descriptions. For this study, codes, categories, and themes relate to each other as follows:

- A *code* represents the smallest unit of analysis and is employed directly by the coder when coding the interview text.
- A *category* is a group of tightly related codes. For example, Gender is a category containing the codes of Male, Female, and Transgender.
- A *theme* is a critical grouping of code categories developed by the research team for the purposes of data analysis. Themes will be discussed in more detail in the findings and discussion sections.

The final coding process was conducted independently by each member of the coding team for all interviews in the final sample. In order to facilitate valid and reliable codes at the completion of the project, interviews were coded randomly, not chronologically, to prevent the privileging of a particular date range in the dataset. Also, to combat coder fatigue, each coder started in a different, evenly separated position in the dataset and a coding schedule was utilized. In total, the coding team applied 7,522 codes to 2,537 quotations across the 237 interviews in the final sample. Atlas.Ti, a Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software package, was used by the coding team to code the interviews and manage the code data.

Codes were validated using the Coding Analysis Toolkit (CAT) [2]. Codes were uploaded to the CAT system online and validated by an adjudication team comprised of the original coding team. To control for validation by a coding team, the code details and history were not made available to the coding team during the validation process. The adjudicators could not see which coder(s) applied the codes under validation. Further, the final codes were validated in a random order. Table 3 presents a summary of coder and code correctness post-validation.

	Avg. % Correct	(%) SD
Coders	91.1	1.57
Codes	90.45	9.8

Table 3: Coder and code correctness post-validation.

Additionally, Table 1 offers a breakdown of the number of codes, percent valid, and a Krippendorff's Alpha measurement of intercoder agreement. Agreement levels of $\alpha > .55$ were considered satisfactory for further analysis given the following study conditions.

- The interview data is volatile. The nature of the questions and responses changes over time.
- Interviews were coded as they appear on the Etsy.com website and interview text was not pre-selected for coders. The coding team was responsible for both identifying key text and then applying codes to the text.

After validation, the invalid codes were removed and the valid code data was exported for analysis in SPSS.

Interview Question Phases
To aid in analysis of the interview corpus, the research team analyzed all interviews' questions posed in the dataset to document the amount of variance in the questions over time. Our analysis of the questions and their changes was conducted through the method known as *explication de texte* or, more commonly, a close reading. An analytic method originating in the humanities [20], close reading refers to the careful and critical examination of rhetorical devices, style, and other thematic and formal elements of a text. We critically analyzed Featured Seller interview questions to identify significant rhetorical changes across the history of the interviews to help situate the interview data. These rhetorical changes are considered evidence of emergent strategy by Etsy-corp to refine its creativity stories to better highlight desirable skills and dispositions within the crafter-seller community.

Phase	Start Date	End Date	# Interviews
Phase 1	Oct. 6, 2005	June 24, 2007	91
Phase 2	June 25, 2007	Jan. 10, 2008	56
Phase 3	Jan. 11, 2008	Dec. 31, 2010	465

Table 4: Significant question changes cluster into three phases in Etsy Featured Seller interviews from 2005-2010.

In total, the team identified 23 questions changes wherein two sets of interview questions occurring at different times were considered to contain substantial rhetorical differences (e.g., changes in question content or structure). To account for the question changes in our analysis, we divided the interviews into a timeline segmented into three major question phases, shown in Table 4. In the findings section, we will discuss how specific question changes work together over time to shape the nature of the interview responses and the efforts of Etsy-comm's creative leaders.

Member Check Interviews
Following the content analysis, we conducted member check interviews [17] with featured sellers selected at random from our final sample of Featured Seller interviews. In total, we invited 73 featured sellers to participate in member check interviews and received 8 initial responses resulting in 5 completed interviews. The member check interviews were conducted remotely through email and chat clients. Interview questions were based on the claims and findings derived from our content analysis project. These interviews are not meant to compose a significant sample with respect to the total number of featured sellers, but rather the goal of the member check interviews was to validate our understanding of the Featured Seller interviews with community members that were most central to the process, i.e., featured sellers themselves.

FINDINGS
In the following, we present and interpret Featured Seller interview coding data by code theme (refer back to Table 2 for a breakdown of code themes): *Featured Sellers*, which collectively identifies key demographic attributes and characteristics of the sellers that Etsy-corp chose to feature; *Identity*, which explores the two most common forms of identity (i.e., artist and crafter) expressed by the featured sellers; *Process*, which explores trends into how the featured sellers articulate their work practices, and finally *Community*, which explores advice giving and support in a community that blurs the professional-amateur distinction. We also present the results of our member check interviews, which validate and also add nuance to the findings of our content analysis. The implications of these findings and their relation to creative leadership will be presented in the Discussion section.

Featured Sellers
Understanding the types of people selected as featured sellers provides insight into the demographics most salient in the community members who are identified and promoted by Etsy-corp as exemplar members. Table 5 presents key demographic data on the featured sellers.

Demographic Category	Code	% of Interviews
Gender*	Female	90.7
	Male	23.6
Craft Partnership	--	18.1
Training	General Aptitude	79.3
	Art/Craft Degree	57.0
	Family Legacy	38.0
	Other Degree	22.4
	Self-Taught	15.6
Job Status	Full Time Crafter/Artist	36.3
	Stay at Home Parent	13.5

**Table 5: Demographics of Etsy's featured sellers
*Gender is not exclusive due to Craft Partnerships.**

The demographic data offers a number of insights into the backgrounds and experiences of the featured sellers. First, featured sellers are overwhelmingly female (90.7%) suggesting that Etsy-corp carries forward the traditional gendered association (at least in the contemporary West) of craft work with females. Further, member check interview participants offered similar claims regarding the female-centric perspective of Etsy and the broader North American craft community.

"the crafting world in general is quite female dominated" [Female 1; Member Check]

"a pretty feminine community overall" [Female 2; Member Check]

"Although it's always interesting to see what the men are up to on Etsy, I'm most excited about supporting the female makers..." [Female 3; Member Check]

Second, in *contrast* to the mainstream Western notion of craft as amateur work [1], the featured sellers are predominantly professional, with the simple majority (57%) holding a formal degree in craft or art disciplines and a significant minority (22.4%) claiming professional training in other fields. Member check interviews revealed that training provides desirable social capital that featured sellers can leverage for economic and social gains.

"Etsy is all about selling & one upping each other... and having a trained background is just one more competitive edge" [Female 2; Member Check]

Finally, the demographics note that only 36.3% of featured sellers are employed full-time through their craft or art work despite both the overall economic success of Etsy.com and their special status within the community as featured members. Combining professional degrees with nights/weekends work, the featured sellers are a pro-amateur group. However, member check interview participants noted that full-time employment as an artist or crafter is more fluid than the Featured Seller interviews suggest.

"For a while I was making my boxes full time, and was being rather successful at it with projected gross annual sales in excess of $75,000, but then the economy took a turn" [Male 1; Member Check]

In addition to establishing certain demographic characteristics, featured sellers construct the content of their interviews around a number of key discursive categories. These categories are present across the majority of interviews regardless of the changing nature of the questions. Table 6 lists eight discursive categories identified in this study. Almost uniformly, featured sellers establish their expertise and, in part, validate their status as a featured seller through their unprompted discussion of training (94.9%). Participants in our member check interviews suggested a number of motivations for discussing their training in the Featured Seller interviews.

"Featured sellers talk about their training because it helps to define who they are at that moment..." [Male 1; Member Check]

"When you've paid thousands upon thousands of dollars for a very specific education, you're usually quite proud of it..." [Female 2; Member Check]

"If you're a working artist, trying to explain your job to other people makes you sound a little bit like a flake ... a lot of people need to make it clear that they are doing more than 'stringing beads'" [Female 1; Member Check]

Collectively, the member check interviews reveal a desire to professionalize art and craft through associations with formal education, career trajectories, and work—and they do so with full awareness of common prejudices against craft creativity, as the "stringing beads" example shows. Further, this professionalism and the seller's "successful" status are leveraged to provide advice (96.6%) to readers wishing to one day become featured sellers.

Beyond expertise, featured sellers frequently touch on their personal lives and aspirations via a discussion of their family (87.3%) and goals (87.3%). Furthermore, demographic statements concerning *Family* and *Training Legacy* (i.e., training received from a family member in an art or craft) increase by 11% and 10.4% across the question phases.

Code Category	% of Interviews
Advice	96.6
Training	94.9
Family	87.3
Goals	87.3
Materials	83.5
Job Status	83.1
Inspiration	78.5
Creative Identity	77.6

Table 6: Dominant discursive categories in the interviews.

In addition to personal life, professional life and experience are brought to the interviews through regular discussions of job status (83.1%), craft materials (83.5%), and design inspiration (78.5%). Finally, featured sellers frequently position their work and identity with respect to art (77.6%). However, and in contrast to the prior discursive categories, Etsy-corp prompted the frequent reflection on art through specific alterations of the interview questions. These changes are discussed in the next section.

For Etsy-corp and its featured sellers, the foregrounding of commercial success and professional pedigrees may work to professionalize craft, deemphasizing craft as a hobby and situating it instead within commerce and idealizations of consumerism. This may help explain a number of empirical results, e.g., that while craft is culturally constructed in the West as a hobby, a "culture of prosperous excess," predominantly female, and an amateur activity [1], 68.4% of featured sellers talk about their college education, and only 15.6% of them claim to be self-taught; that whereas only 4% of Etsy users are male [7], 23.6% of Etsy featured sellers are male; and that 77.6% of them use the language of "art," rather than or in addition to "craft" [9]. Together, these findings point to negotiations about forms of membership and identity in the Etsy community, with a particular emphasis on the relations and tensions between art and craft, and artist and crafter, as key roles available to members of Etsy's creative community.

Identity

As noted in the previous section and in Table 6, featured sellers frequently discuss themselves as creators in terms of both their creations and their own identities as crafters and/or artists (77.6%). This regular reflection on the values of craft, art, and one's identity as (or not as) an *artist* represents a central yet divergent property of the identity of the featured sellers. Over time, the Featured Seller interview questions have focused on this question and foregrounded a discussion among the featured sellers concerning the merits of *artist* and *crafter* as types of identities assumed by members of the Etsy community.

Phases 1 and 2 of the Featured Seller interviews asked: "What is the first thing you remember making by hand? How and why did you make it?" In phase 3, sellers were asked: "What first made you want to become an artist?" Phase 3's version is leading in two ways: it asserts that featured sellers have already become artists, and it asserts that this is a good outcome (i.e., that they *wanted* to be artists).

The overall estimated increase in the *Identity* theme is approximately 14.7% with the most active period of reflection occurring in Phase 3, the final question phase (85.4%). For reference, Table 7 offers a breakdown of coding themes and categories with the percent of interviews in each question phase containing the associated codes. Additionally, Table 7 includes the Gamma measure of association as well as a total estimated percent change in the codes from the first to last question phase.

At the code level, there are several significant relations between question phases and *Identity* codes. The *Identity*

theme includes the following significant code and question phase relations:

- *Art Embrace*: Featured sellers who identify as artists increased by 11.2% across the phases.
- *Art Growth*: Featured sellers who "grew," "developed," as/into or otherwise "became" an artist increased by 7.3% across the phases.
- *Art Refusal*: Featured sellers who refuse the title of artist increased by 6.8% across the phases.

The Art Refusal code is of special significance as it only appears in phase 3, when Etsy-corp implemented the leading question to ask about becoming an artist. Prior to this question, featured sellers were able to volunteer their statuses as artists, and many did, but in phase 3, they were all practically required to position themselves and their work with respect to art. As a result, a new discursive strategy emerged wherein some featured sellers denounced any formal ties to art. The following interview quote is representative regarding the way featured sellers reject the label of artist as a means to embrace the skill of craft:

"I feel a bit silly and embarrassed calling myself an artist. I would be proud, though, to be considered a craftsperson… It seems the word craft has taken a beating somewhere along the line, but to me, it conjures up the honorable and noble idea of taking the time and care to craft a beautiful decorative or useful item." [Female; Feb. 5, 2010]

At other times, the art-refusing featured sellers appear to be humbly reacting to the (lingering) cultural status of art:

"It's strange to think of myself as an 'artist'" [Female; Jan. 22, 2010]

"I've never been too comfortable with the title of artist as I've always thought of myself as a designer." [Female; March 13, 2009]

"I still don't feel like an artist, but I was always creating things, sewing and painting." [Female, April 28, 2010]

"I've always been uncomfortable calling myself an artist but that has more to do with insecurities than anything." [Male & Female; June 4, 2010]

"I truly don't consider myself an artist, but I am creative." [Female; Aug. 25, 2010]

"I'd feel misleading to call myself an artist. I prefer to consider myself a crafty lady with fun ideas that I bring to life." [Female; Oct. 20, 2010]

As demonstrated by these quotes and the interview codes, the relationship between art and craft remains one rife with tensions and implications for understanding the identity struggle exemplified by the featured sellers. The identity struggle espoused in the interviews embodies, in part, a recent and growing shift in the relation between art and craft, wherein art seems to continue to enjoy more esteem than craft, but craft is beginning to make a comeback [19, 26]. The connotations of art-as-intellect and craft as-embodiment in many ways remain, but the cultural and economic capital associated with those connotations is shifting, as embodied knowledge practices are increasingly appreciated [15, 26].

Member check interview participants validated our findings that art versus craft identities and connotations are actively negotiated within the broader Etsy community.

"There's a gray line between being an artist and being simply a crafter" [Male 1; Member Check]

"I like the … challenge of making something & sending it on to a new home almost immediately. Selling prints & fine art is a tough life … In the end, I do need to make a living from it." [Female 2; Member Check]

"I really love craft and folk art, and am inspired by people who make something because they need to make that thing even though they haven't been trained to do so" [Female 1; Member Check]

"I don't really care for the term 'crafters' because it denotes an amateur status to the work and insults what you're trying to do…" [Female 4; Member Check]

In their position as exemplars within Etsy's creative community, the featured sellers embody different positions within a broader debate about the acceptable types of creative identity in the Etsy community. Together, culturally unresolved tensions between art(ist) and craft(er) may help to inspire, attract, and define the paths to membership in the Etsy community.

Process
Discussion of the process of creative work—and in particular the inspirations and materials involved in such work (as noted in Table 6)—is a major topic within the interviews. The dominance of such concerns notwithstanding, the *Process* theme actually declined by 7.3% across the phases. This decrease is more than compensated for by a corresponding increase in the *Community* theme. Table 8 offers a breakdown of the *Process* and *Community* themes.

Code Theme	Code Categories	% Phase 1	% Phase 2	% Phase 3	% Est. Change	Gamma	df, X^2 [N = 237]
Identity	Artist: Accept	43.9	44.4	68	12.1	.431	2, 10.757
	Artist: Refusal	0.0	0.0	13.5	6.8	1.00	2, 8.85
Process	Materials	100.0	100.0	78.1	-11.0	-.398	6, 16.08
	Inspiration	100.0	100.0	71.3	-14.4	-.731	12, 69.83
Community	Technology	65.9	83.3	100.0	17.1	.874	4, 108.37
	Advice	97.6	61.1	100.0	1.2	.726	4, 110.70

Table 7: Breakdown of significant associations (p < .01) between code categories and % of interviews with the codes per phase.

Questions regarding the featured seller's process begin with the first interview where Etsy posed the related questions of "What inspires you? Where do your ideas come from?" and "What are your favorite materials?" However, beginning with the phase 3, the specific questions about inspiration and materials are replaced with, "Please describe your creative process." Whereas the questions in phases 1 and 2 decomposed the creative process into widely recognized constituents—inspiration and materials—in phase 2 Etsy reformulated a more abstract and less operational prompt. Featured sellers correspondingly spoke with less reference to these specific dimensions of their creative process, materials, and inspirations.

The following *Process* related codes exhibit significant changes across the question phases.

- *Tools*: Descriptions of non-consumable items used in the craft process increased by 11.3% across the phases.
- *Product*: Mentions of the craft or art products sold by the seller increased by 10.3% across the phases.
- *Inspiration Etsy*: Mentions of Etsy.com or other Etsy sellers as sources of inspiration decreased by 2.6% across the phases.
- *Inspiration Nature*: Mentions of nature and the environment as sources of inspiration decreased by of 11.4% across the phases.
- *Inspiration People*: Mentions of non-family and non-Etsy sellers as sources of inspiration decreased by 19.4% across the phases.
- *Inspiration Other*: Miscellaneous citations of inspiration that did not fit into other Inspiration categories decreased by 21.6% across the phases.
- *Material Other*: Citations of miscellaneous consumable items that did not fit into other Material categories decreased by 12.9% across the phases.

As stated earlier, our analysis of the *Process* theme reveals an overall decline in the extent to which featured sellers discuss their creative process. However, even though the frequency of *Process* related codes may be in an overall decline, many featured sellers note the transformative and supportive role of the Etsy community itself in facilitating their growth and performance as a crafter, as seen in the following interview excerpts:

"The way people on Etsy work together on projects inspires me." [Female; April 25, 2007]

"Etsy … has made me feel part of a bigger world as well as providing a source of inspiration, suggestions, and hints for every aspect of … creating my art." [Female; July 16, 2007]

"I am … constantly amazed and inspired by the creativity of other … Etsy sellers." [Female; Sept. 30, 2009]

"I get really excited when I … see new stores open … and I treasure the folks who gave me support and direction along the way." [Male; Sept. 13, 2007]

"Featured seller interviews...we read these religiously and find them very inspirational." [Female & Female; January 9, 2009]

Member check participants also highlighted the role of the Etsy community in influencing their professional development. In particular, the member check interviews revealed the underlying social and economic pressures that are delivered through the Etsy community and how these pressures push sellers to improve and expand their skills and operations.

"I actively push myself to improve my techniques because of etsy. There are a lot of sellers on etsy, and eventually original work gets copied, or emulated, and I really want to stay ahead of that curve." [Female 1; Member Check]

"I believe my art and craft skills have improved greatly alongside my business skills, as Etsy has allowed me to create and sell my work on a regular basis. Painting full time is continuing to improve my craft, and feedback from the Etsy community helps me hone my skills. [Female 5; Member Check]

As shown in the interviews, there is a trend away from the featured sellers discussing the personal, intimate, and intangible dimensions of craft-centric creative process (e.g., inspirations, insights from nature or from an embodied engagement with craft materials) and an increasing emphasis on the role of Etsy.com as a socio-technical platform for defining and supporting a community and the creative work of its members. This focus on Etsy as a *Community* is addressed in the following section.

Community

Pursuant to Etsy-corp's mission of elevating the social and economic status of creative handwork, the Featured Seller interviews contain discussions of how to improve the seller's competence in operating an Etsy.com store specifically and a handwork business more broadly, but also increasingly provide insight into how to operate as a successful member of an online creative community. As a theme, mentions of *Community* increase by 17.1% across the 3 interview question phases. As noted earlier, while the frequency of statements about *Process* declines over time, discussions of *Community* increase. The overall growth of the *Community* theme across the question phases is influenced in part by a

Code Theme	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Gamma	(%) Est. Change	df, X^2 [N = 237]
Identity	56.1	50.0	85.4	.608	14.7	2, 25.043
Process	6.1	6.4	4.6	-.505	-7.3	14, 41.66
Community	6.0	5.0	9.5	.868	17.1	8, 135.29

Table 8: Breakdown of significant associations (p < .05) between code themes and question phases.

number of interview question changes. Changes to the interview questions will be discussed below in relation to the code categories most impacted by the questions changes.

Advice: Phase 1 interviews included this question to prompt featured sellers to offer business advice: "Any tips for selling handmade stuff?" Phase 2 interviews added a second question, "What have been the most valuable lessons learned from other artists on Etsy?" By phase 3, the advice-oriented questions underwent a substantive revision, replacing earlier questions with: "How do you promote your work?" and "What advice would you give to artists who are new to Etsy?" Phase 3 introduced two places for featured sellers to offer advice, even while they were simultaneously framing their interviews around questions of "artists" and "work," instead of the more folksy "handmade stuff" of the earlier question phases.

Technology: Phase 1 interviews included the question "Any Etsy feature requests?" and in phase 3 that question was replaced with "What are your favorite features on Etsy? What new features would like to see?" Again, the combination of a leading question and an operationalization of an abstract idea has obvious pragmatic benefits for Etsy-corp as an organization seeking to support and improve the output of its members.

At the code level, a number of relations developed between *Community* related codes and the question phases. The following codes demonstrate significant relations.

- *Technology General*: Citations of technology not specific to Etsy.com increased by 28.3% across the phases.
- *Technology Etsy*: Citations of technology specific to Etsy.com increased by 20.2% across the phases.
- *Advice Practical*: Specific and actionable advice given to the reader and other sellers increased by 14.7% across the phases.
- *Advice Orientation*: Attitudinal or dispositional advice given to readers increased by 5.3% across the phases.

Furthermore, *Technology* and *Advice* increase across the interview question phases; both categories peak in Phase 3, with 100% of interviews containing technology and advice related statements. However, the estimated change across the question phases is different for the categories with *Technology* increasing by 17.1% and *Advice* by 1.2%.

It is important to note that the featured sellers frequently framed their discussions of technology, especially of Etsy.com, as fundamental to their success. Typical passages from interviews discussing Etsy as a technical resource highlight how various technical features of Etsy.com (and other sites like Twitter and Facebook) can be leveraged to both increase professional skill as a business owner and creative skill as a craftsperson. Below are examples:

"The critique forums have given me some crucial information about my listings and my shop --- you just give some reviews, and then you get some reviews in return." [Male; February 20, 2009]

"Read as much as possible about being successful at Etsy by … reading blogs by other successful shop owners, and observing how other successful shops handle their business." [Female & Male; April 26, 2010]

"Spend a whole lot of time on the site and use everything you can to your advantage. 'Favorite' other artists, read everything you can, use the tools--like showcase--to your advantage. It really comes down to really using the site, literally, not just seeing it as an e-commerce tool." [Female; January 12, 2009]

Common to these quotes, and the interviews as a whole, is a view of Etsy.com and its users as a thriving, supportive online creative community and not "just … an e-commerce tool." Accordingly, as exemplar members of this community, many featured sellers provide encouraging and supportive advice about investing in Etsy as a community of like-minded creators. As exemplified in the following quotes, the featured sellers embody participation that helps to maintain and develop Etsy's community of creators [27, 28].

"Become involved in the Etsy community straight away. Don't be afraid to share info, make friends, reach out for help." [Female; January 4, 2010]

"Etsy is its own supportive community with thousands of creative people networking with each other, sharing the same passion, TO CREATE!" [Female; January 18, 2008]

"I love that Etsy is a real community. We as users care so much about our Etsy 'clubhouse' and prove it by speaking up loudly to voice our concerns and successes. I meet Etsians in real-life and feel a real connection. This ain't no eBay." [Female; May 30, 2008]

Member check interview participants further highlighted the importance of Etsy's community to the growth and success of their stores. In particular, the member check participants validated the sense of safety and confidence that the Etsy community offers to new crafter-sellers.

"just building up a marketplace … has helped immensely … also getting together with other artists has been essential… it's strange to have a huge connection of virtual friends, but many are very important to me" [Female 1; Member Check]

"the most touching aspect … were the hundreds of convos [messages] *I received from people … to receive the endorsement of so many people really validated what I was doing and gave me the confidence to continue to grow the business."* [Female 3; Member Check]

The increasing focus on Etsy.com as a tool for inspiration and a platform for organizing a community is a distinct trend in our data. This multi-faceted perspective on Etsy (both the site and its community) is shared across Etsy's featured sellers. Further, developing and sharing this worldview of Etsy is framed as a key requirement and benefit of membership in Etsy's community of crafter-sellers.

DISCUSSION

Summarizing our findings from an analysis of the Etsy Featured Seller interviews at a high level, we have seen the following:

- They are semi- or fully professional crafter-artists, with degrees and professional skills, in contrast to traditional stereotypes of craft as amateurish and hobbyist.
- They are engaged in an activity of identity and role definition which navigates and defines the relations and tensions between art(ist) and craft(er) as key roles in the Etsy community.
- They embody a view of Etsy as e-commerce tool, virtual community, and inspirational resource.

Together, these findings constitute, in part, a creativity story [28, 29] told through the words of the Etsy community's exemplar members. Further, in as much as the featured sellers are used to promote this creativity story, they may also be leveraged as paragon leaders [27] who provide valuable identity and behavior modeling from a distance.

As a generative template for creativity stories, the Featured Seller interview seemingly meet the aforementioned requirements of (1) addressing individual and group identity, (2) appealing to the experiences of the audience, (3) operating in an organizational structure, and (4) being embodied by the actions of the leader [28, 29]. Discussions of individual and group identity, especially with respect to the roles of crafter and artist, are a central theme in the interviews. Further, these discussions of identity are rooted in the experiences of crafter-sellers as they work to integrate and extend their handwork, small-business skills, and community network to improve the social and economic visibility of Etsy and their stores. To meet the organizational structure and embodied leadership requirements for a successful creativity story, Etsy-corp has modified the traditional creativity story format (one leader to many followers) [28, 29] by leveraging a strategy for paragon leadership in a decentralized organization.

Instead of members of Etsy corporate attempting to embody the desirable skills and dispositions to operate a handwork e-store, they instead identify and promote exemplar members as paragon leaders. These paragons need not be leaders in the sense that they themselves implement appropriate organizational policies and incentive structures, but rather in that they offer leadership-by-example through the creativity stories they tell about themselves, their handwork, and the crafter-seller community. Further, by providing many paragons, Etsy-corp is able to present a generalizable model of the skills and dispositions that are constitutive of success (as defined by Etsy corporate) to the crafter-seller community, while leaving room for individual crafter-sellers to interpret and act on the creativity stories in ways that best suit their individual contexts (a strategy echoed by Simonton [27] for the optimal use of paragons).

At the heart of Etsy-corp's recognition and promotion of its exemplar members via the Featured Seller interviews sits an organizational strategy for defining and communicating desirable skills and dispositions in hopes of positively influencing the community at large. Such strategies are not uncommon in HCI, with Ling et al. [16] and Preece and Shneiderman [22] recently demonstrating the utility of using social and organizational psychology-informed design strategies, including behavior modeling, as effective means for motivating and increasing involvement within online communities. Further, Luther and Bruckman [18] highlight the importance of supporting alternative styles of leadership in online communities, especially in "open-ended" domains like Etsy's crafter-seller community.

Managing and supporting creativity in massive online communities of creators will likely require new and modified strategies informed by existing literatures on social and organizational creativity and their design oriented counterparts in HCI and CSCW. Etsy-corp provides an example of one such strategy in its Featured Seller interviews. The creative leadership strategy of modeling desirable skills and dispositions through creativity stories as told by the Etsy community's paragon members may help to develop an increasingly coherent community vision and ethos, while strategically (but with restraint) strengthening the bonds of the loosely coupled millions that make up the crafter-seller community, contributing usefully to a organizational structure and culture of creativity.

CONCLUSION

The goal of this paper is to contribute to organizational creativity in massive-scale socio-technical systems research in HCI by offering an empirical look at an apparently successful example of decentralizing leadership in an online creative community. We report on a combined content analysis and close reading of Featured Seller interviews on Etsy.com. Our analysis sheds light on the demographic characteristics of Etsy's creative leaders while also revealing the ways in which these leaders discuss their creative identities, creative processes, and their relation to the broader creative community. Further, we demonstrate how Etsy-corp uses these interviews to provide a stage to paragon leaders, and to shape their performances while on it, so that these leaders can embody and co-articulate Etsy-corp's emerging vision of an ideal online craft commerce community. Specifically, we found that this interview-mediated and emergent co-articulation of creative ideals was used to strengthen the bonds of a decentralized community of creators and, eventually, support both craft and commercial creativity within that community.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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