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Stream: Communities and Social Media

Paper:

The ceramic community and Instagram: How traditional makers have embraced a digital platform for industry growth, engagement and support.

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Abstract:

This paper explores how ceramicists have engaged with Instagram, with discussion of the supportive networks and community engagement found on the social media platform. The paper gives context to challenges facing the contemporary Australian Craft sector, while acknowledging the resurgence of interest in the handmade amidst an era of digital innovation. Focus is given to the Australian ceramics community, and discussion on how use of the mobile app has enabled industry growth, engagement and support.

Key words:

Instagram, ceramics, Australian craft, industry, community, third place

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Ceramics has seen a resurgence of interest that parallels the popularity of social media, with this most notably seen on Instagram. The social media platform has become a key component to a maker's toolkit, both as an important marketing tool, and as a third place for the ceramics community to engage with each other and a larger audience of public supporters. This paper will give some context to circumstances surrounding the contemporary Australian ceramics community, and explore how the industry has adapted and grown in the face of challenges. The embrace of social media, particularly Instagram, has enabled key support networks for ceramicists, with high levels of engagement and connection.

While other social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and more recently, TikTok play a part in some ceramicist's social media presence, they will not be discussed in this paper. Many creatives still use Facebook as promotional tool, though Instagram has become the preferred application for ceramicists and other makers to share their work (Luckman & Andrew, 2020b). Posting regularly with a wide reach is perceived to be more accessible within Instagram's format than other social media and online communication methods. While the topics discussed in this paper can be connected to the wider international ceramic community, and arts and crafts practitioners in general, focus will be given to Australian ceramicists, defining them as a sole *community*, interacting with wider *communities* on Instagram. The overarching Australian ceramics community can be subcategorised by its members in many ways – professional, hobbyist, student, full time, part time, casual, geographical location, urban, regional, rural and remote.

The Australian ceramics community is relatively small in a global context. An Australian Bureau of Statistics report in 2012 noted 294,000 people engaged in "Glass, crafts, pottery, ceramics or mosaics" (Heath & Pascoe, 2014, p. 12, citing the 2012 Australian Bureau of Statistics report, '*Participation in selected cultural activities, Australia, 2010-11*'). The National Craft Initiative's report *Mapping the Australian Craft Sector* further referred to a

study by Throsby and Zednik (2010), which found only 3,800 'craft practitioners' (such as ceramicists, glass artists or metal workers) met the criteria of a professional practitioner. While a small community, often fragmented through the rural and regional locations of its members, Australian ceramicists remain connected through their shared interest. Prior to the rise of social media, the community developed connections and relationships through events (trade fairs, markets, workshops), education (apprenticeships, traineeships, university and TAFE courses), industry bodies (a long list including The Australian Ceramics Association, and members of the Australian Craft and Design Centres network), retailers and galleries.

In Australia over the preceding sixty years, the visual arts and crafts sector has enjoyed a relatively stable and vibrant cultural terrain, underpinning the growth of ceramics courses, practitioners, galleries and museum collections. More recently, the viability of ceramics education has been the 'elephant in the room', its future exposed and threatened by university course closures and recent cuts to the TAFE sector. (Bamford, 2013, p. 26)

Within Australia, crafts education, studio training, and funding gained major success during the 1960s-1980s (Heath & Pascoe, 2014). However, policy changes and defunding of industry bodies by conservative federal governments have had a severe impact on the industry (Luckman & Andrew, 2020b). Closure and defunding of tertiary study pathways have put pressure on Australian arts industries, particularly the studios still teaching traditional crafts such as ceramics, tapestry, glass and jewellery and metalworking (Bartholomew, 2019; Grishin, 2020; Heath & Pascoe, 2014; Tracey, 2016). It should be noted this industry pressure is not exclusive to Australia. Bailey (2018) discusses the closure of traditional centres for making ceramics throughout the United Kingdom, while Luckman and Andrew (2020a) draw further parallels to obstacles to handmade crafts in earlier periods of rapid technological revolution in their book *Craftspeople and Designer Makers in the Contemporary Creative Economy*.

Given the context of challenges facing the industry, training and development in traditional mediums are now “increasingly being provided by industry organisations and bodies” (Heath & Pascoe, 2014, p. 4). Bridging the gap left by public-sector education providers is the rise of independent, privately funded clay schools and teachers. In a discussion at the *Clay Push Education Forum* on the challenges facing ceramics education, master potter Greg Daly acknowledged that this new model is similar to that successfully practiced 60 years ago, while emphasising the need for self-advocacy by the ceramics community (Bamford, 2013). The gap in the education market has led to high demand, with independent ceramics education encountering booked out class terms and long waiting lists of potential students (Bamford, 2013).

It is an intriguing dichotomy that a time of industry pressure in education and funding is corresponded with a strong surge of interest in traditional crafts. Luckman (2013) notes that “in the digital age, [...] the analogue becomes Othered, different, desirable” (p. 251). Appreciation and demand for handmade and locally made work has grown substantially, with a resurgence of interest in craft-based mediums, activities and markets (Gauntlett, 2018; Heath & Pascoe, 2014; Luckman & Andrew, 2020c). The internet, World Wide Web, social media and mobile apps have made sharing creativity easier than ever before. These virtual spaces allow for collaboration, support, information and entertainment for users, and have been successfully embraced by many makers (Gauntlett, 2018).

Creatives sharing their work online, particularly through social media, has enabled an immediate, engaging and dynamic form of visual communication. As Luckman and Andrew (2020b) state, “maintaining an online professional identity is now a core part of the work involved in being a contemporary maker” (p. 208). Importantly for isolated makers, access to the internet - and the development of social media and mobile apps - has created a ‘third place’ for creatives to connect over their preferred medium with a supportive network of peers.

Oldenburg and Brissett (1982) proposed the notion that a third place (a social space separate from the ‘first’ and ‘second’ places of ‘home’ and ‘work’) is important for

socialisation, fostering community and emotional expression. The third place emphasised localised community, was accessible, and a social leveller (Soukup, 2006). Oldenburg (1999) further states in the second edition of *The Great Good Place*, “the First and most important function of third places is that of uniting the neighborhood” (p. xvii). As Soukup (2006) observes, “[Oldenburg] is not using the term ‘neighborhood’ metaphorically or abstractly (e.g., a ‘virtual’ or ‘wired’ neighborhood) – he literally means the homes and businesses along intersecting city streets” (p. 427). However, in a contemporary application of this theory, it must be acknowledged that accessibility of the internet and ubiquity of social media unites people of common interests from across the globe into a *digital* third place. Much as McCarthur and White (2016) presented the notion of Twitter as third place, with ‘regulars’ present in conversation, Instagram itself fosters a community of regulars, connected by common interests, hashtags, and analogue relationships.

Instagram has provided creatives the space to present their work to the virtual community, often intertwined with their own identity. It is now expected that makers have not only a professional website, but a social media presence, with image important to success. As a primarily visual social media, Instagram has become the preferred platform for many creatives to share their work (Luckman & Andrew, 2020b). The immediacy of Instagram, and its focus on image - with less onus on descriptive text - has seen it become a popular social media platform amongst makers, often time-poor and preferring to focus their energies on their studio practice (Luckman & Andrew, 2020b).

From a marketing perspective, “the identity of the maker as an identifiable individual with a story is key to the way the handmade is positioned in the market” (Luckman & Andrew, 2020b, p.208). Hashtags and the simplicity of sharing accounts and posts on Instagram make it easy to discover new creatives, with comments such as “I found you on Instagram” often heard at designer markets (Luckman & Andrew, 2020b). Successful ceramicists have used Instagram to build large fanbases, followers and returning customers, performing to a large audience.

A widely used platform like Instagram – with “more than 1 Billion monthly active users” (Abidin, 2021, pg. 6) – holds incredible power to the vast majority of professional craft practitioners who work freelance or are self-employed, operating a small or micro-business centred on their craft (Heath & Pascoe, 2014). Beyond the marketing of work, Instagram allows makers to share their process. This cultivates interest and friendliness from followers and customers, giving insight to different processes and engendering appreciation for skills and growth.

The rise of social media and e-commerce has also encouraged a significant change within creative industries, with independent artists now able to market and sell their own work direct to consumers without a third-party (Luckman & Andrew, 2020b). Community-instigated shopping events, such as pop-up shops and boutique markets, utilise the fanbase of the Instagram accounts of organisers and participants to generate interest and excitement. In 2017, Instagram recognized the increased demand for shopping online and integrated with e-commerce capabilities. Users were now able to create shoppable posts within their feed, linking directly to their own e-commerce (Caliandro & Graham, 2020). Instagram became even more important for income amidst Covid-19 lockdowns, where mass-gatherings such as trade-fairs and markets, and even galleries, shops, and studios were forced to close. Designer maker markets such as Handmade Australia (@handmadeaust, 36.9k followers) pivoted to a digital market model, and heavily rely on Instagram for promotion and engagement in a now virtual-only event.

Ceramicist Vipoo Srivilasa acknowledges the power of Instagram in developing his career. In 2013 he set up his account (@vipooart) to showcase his work and a glimpse of his making process behind-the-scenes (Srivilasa, 2019). Vipoo notes how mutual following, liking, and commenting of posts fostered ‘insta-relationships’, allowing connection directly “without going through a middle person” (Srivilasa, 2019, p. 58). Other enterprising ceramicists have engaged with the platform to create accounts for the ceramic community, such as the tongue-in-cheek @ceramic_casualties. With 20.1k followers (and the byline: “The Daily Ceramic Grind That Can Make You Cry, Laugh or Sigh. It Happens To The Best Of Us!”), @ceramic_casualties becomes a place to commiserate with a community who understand

the trials and tribulations of clay. Northcote Pottery Supplies, a major ceramic supplier in Melbourne, use Instagram not only for marketing and communication at @northcotepottersupplies (14.6k followers) but have set up an additional account (@npskilns) to exclusively share updates from their popular kiln firing services, directly communicating to the localised ceramic community.

When discussing the Australian ceramic community on Instagram, it is imperative to acknowledge the work of The Australian Ceramic Association, a “national, not-for-profit organization representing the interests of practicing potters and ceramicists, students of ceramics and all those interested in Australian Ceramics” (Heath & Pascoe, 2014, p. 22). As a peak body, TACA are industry advocates and producers of the Journal of Australian Ceramics (Grima, 2020). Joining Instagram in August 2013 as @australianceramics, their presence on the platform has grown substantially, with 63.6k followers as of April 2021.

In 2014 Shannon Garson, then President of TACA, noted that Instagram “is particularly effective in keeping regional artists in touch with their peers” (Garson, 2014, p.13), and suggested use of the hashtag #australianceramics on their posts would enable artists from across Australia to be included in an international community while showcasing their work. The @australianceramics account regularly shares work that has been tagged as #australianceramics, showcasing both the work of Association members and that created by the wider Australian ceramic community. While initial use of #australianceramics often referred to the Journal of Australian Ceramics and TACA, the hashtag now has frequent and widespread use on posts by Australian ceramicists sharing ceramic work. As of April 2021, over 270k images have been tagged #australianceramics on Instagram.



Figure 1: Vipoo Srivilasa’s initial call out to ceramicists wishing to participate in #clayforaustralia fundraising project.
Note. From @vipooart Instagram account, published January 9 2020.



Figure 2: The Australian Ceramics Association acknowledging and offering support to community members impacted during the 2019-2020 bushfires.
Note. From @australianceramics Instagram account, published January 6 2020.

Caliandro and Graham (2020) observe that “communities of users [connect] via hashtags” (p. 3). A strong example of the power of this network is the creation of large successful fundraisers, instigated by ceramics community members and banking on the popularity of ceramics on Instagram. Amidst the 2019-2020 Australian bushfires, Vipoo Srivilasa leveraged his community connections, network and social capital to create #clayforaustralia (Figure 1). Regrammed by many other large ceramic accounts, including @australianceramics, #clayforaustralia had an incredible response from the ceramics community, with assistance in the organisation and running of the event by community members, and donation of “482 works from 477 artists from 30 countries within a span of three weeks in January” (Somsuphangsri, 2020, p. 101). The fundraiser was a large success, with over \$49,000 raised

– 73% of which was donated towards wildlife charities. During this time, the @australianceramics account became a focal point for updates on community members who were severely impacted by the bushfires (Figure 2), as well as sharing ways for followers to give aid. Like other social media in times of crisis, Instagram became a way for ceramicists and their followers to directly communicate and discuss ways to support where needed.

While the Australian ceramics community has a solid analogue foundation, the integration of digital means and virtual community has strengthened supportive networks. Hampton and Wellman (2018) acknowledge this change in how community operates, that while “technological changes are again reshaping the structure of community” (p. 649), they are not limiting it. It is now common to network with other makers on Instagram for information and guidance, feedback and comments. Social media, and Instagram in particular have encouraged community-building and community participation (Luckman & Andrew, 2020b).

As has been discussed, Instagram has empowered the ceramics community, acting as an important third place for engagement and support. For the purposes of this paper, I primarily focused on the Australian ceramic community and their use of Instagram. The broader context of ceramicists and digital engagement could be further discussed in larger global aspects, alongside the wider arts and crafts communities. Many issues facing the greater Australian Craft sector have been covered in the National Craft Initiative report (Heath & Pascoe, 2014). It should be noted that the impacts of Covid-19 are still being felt within the Arts, as many creatives pivot to new technologies or industries. While there are many challenges facing the industry, it is encouraging that ceramics is currently within a renaissance period, and that online networking and social media have played a vital role in this rapid growth and interest.

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