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#NaturalDye

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Abstract

Natural dyes from plants, insects, and fungi can be used to color yarns and textiles by craftspeople. Craft communities interested in natural dyes are using social media platforms such as Instagram to connect and share knowledge and to generate commerce for their products. *#Naturaldye* is a documentary film that explores the use of Instagram as a pedagogical, social, commercial, and creative space where dyers foster community and support businesses. Participants in the film discuss what types of information they find essential to articulate while also describing themselves as part of a community of other makers and artists. Theoretically, *#Naturaldye* is situated at the intersection of the circuit of style-fashion-dress (Kaiser, 2012) and imagined communities (Anderson, 1983). Social media platforms like Instagram enable articulation between fashion, textiles, commerce, and craftspeople where knowledge of natural dyes, dyers, and their work is conveyed to a wider array of individuals that become part of an imagined community through craft.

NATURAL DYES

Natural dyeing refers to the process of using plants, insects, and fungi to dye fiber and is the oldest form of textile coloration (Cardon, 2007; Davies, 2018; Kramell et al., 2014). Over the last 160 years synthetic petroleum-based dyes have mostly replaced natural dyes in fashion and textile crafts because they are a reliable source of cheap, consistent, and high-performing color (Gregory, 2007). However, environmentalists and scientists point out that synthetic dyes pollute water and soil (Brigden et al., 2012; Gregory, 2007). Environmental concerns have led to a growing demand for ecologically friendly textile processes and have increased interest in natural dyes because they are a biodegradable source of color (Bechtold & Mussak, 2009; Doty et al., 2016; Laughlin, 2017; Schneider-Levy, 2018). Those interested in natural dyes can learn from others on social media platforms such as Instagram, where individuals and communities provide a space to connect and share knowledge (Gauntlett, 2018).

Social media offers a place for commerce, where individuals can sell products and connect with customers that might otherwise be unable to access their product due to their location and availability.

INSTAGRAM

Instagram is a social media platform where users interact by following one another and posting photos, videos, and stories (“Our Story,” 2016). An important feature of Instagram and other social media sites is the ability to tag a post with metadata through hashtags, symbolized by the “#” sign followed by a description. Hashtags allow other users to search and quickly find pertinent information. Instagram can enable individuals to share the making process and finished objects, be it a knitted sweater or musical composition, involving makers in the broader community. See Figure 1 for an example of an individual posting to Instagram from the documentary film *#Naturaldye*.



FIGURE 1 Tamara White from Wing and a Prayer Farm Posting to Instagram.

METHODS

***#Naturaldye* is a documentary film that explores the use of Instagram as a pedagogical, social, commercial, and creative space where natural dyers foster community and support businesses.**

In 2017, the lead researcher conducted fieldwork with four natural dyers from the Northeast and Midwest United States. Each participant used Instagram for promotion and connection, which enabled them to sell products and teach others how to use natural dyes. In the film, the artists discuss their motivations for using natural dyes and how they use Instagram to connect to individuals outside of their geographical locations. Interviews were filmed in the participants' studios, gardens, and homes, allowing viewers to see the complexities involved with the production of naturally dyed goods and their promotion through social media (Figure 2). The use of documentary filmmaking as a research method provides a visual connection between the dyers, the natural dyes, and the resulting textiles. For example, in the film, viewers can see color from plants applied to yarns, which then produce knitted garments, woven textiles, and conceptual art.



FIGURE 2
Indigo Dyed
Yarn by
Blue Sheep
Yarn Co.

SITUATING #NATURALDYE IN FASHION THEORY

#Naturaldye is situated theoretically at the intersection of Susan Kaiser's (2012) fashion theory of the circuit of style-fashion-dress (CSFD) and Benedict Anderson's (1983) imagined communities. The theory of the CSFD captures the fluid and intersectional aspects of how identities, materials, economies, and cultures are produced and how change is promulgated through fashion (Kaiser, 2012). Production, distribution, regulation, consumption, and subject formation make up the delineations within the CSFD circuit (Kaiser, 2012). To better explain how the CSFD model fits within the context of *#Naturaldye*, this work will turn next to the delineations of this framework, and how participants in the film interacted with each concept.

First, production refers to the ideas of “making and doing” and is meant to conceptualize the creation of apparel, textiles, ideas, or cultural practices (Kaiser, 2012, p. 14). Participants in the film demonstrate how they create naturally-dyed textiles and yarns and post that information to Instagram. Instagram provides a window into the production process for potential customers and others interested in natural dyeing. Second, distribution is the movement and marketing of goods from one individual or company to another (Kaiser, 2012, p. 19). In the film, individuals are distributing information on Instagram to generate both community and commerce. They are also selling and distributing naturally dyed products through the connections they have made on social media. For an example of naturally-dyed yarn, see Figure 3.



FIGURE 3 Naturally Dyed Yarn by Blue Sheep Yarn Co.

Third, regulation refers to the formal and informal regulation of subject formation; regulation also represents policies and restrictions placed on companies producing and distributing goods (Kaiser, 2012, p. 23). Participants in *#Naturaldyes* continuously regulate how much and which types of information to communicate with their followers. They strive to provide enough information to grow connections within communities and increase the potential for commerce while holding back some aspects to protect their intellectual property. Fourth, consumption is the utilization of a product or service, including the consumer's consumption of services such as Instagram. Finally, subject

formation is the act of “being or becoming” and is an iterative process that is shaped by our identity intersections (i.e., class, age, gender, ethnicity/race, sexuality, place, and nation) (Kaiser, 2012, pp. 20-21). For example, individuals may use natural dyes as part of an environmentally sustainable identity, while others use natural dyes to feel more connected to their surroundings and nature. For each individual, their class, age, gender, race, etc. contribute to their emergent identities and why/how they use natural dyes. When viewed through the lens of the CSFD, we can see that natural dyers are using Instagram to participate in the flow of culture, textiles, and fashion.

Natural dyers using Instagram are also producing what Benedict Anderson (1983) has called “imagined communities,” a time symmetry where two or more people are experiencing a similar event at the same time (p. 7). Technology can connect people who do not know one another and builds a time symmetry, the technology, in this case, being Instagram (Anderson, 1983). These imagined communities, in turn, discuss ideas related to transparency, labour, process, education, and commerce to benefit those individuals they would otherwise never interact with in person (Anderson, 1983).

Connecting people, practice, and commerce, the interviewees described articulating information with individuals they would consider strangers were they to meet in person.

This performance of sharing and viewing is a type of “mass ceremony,” where various knowledge is connected by a specific date and time (Anderson, 1983, p. 35). Through the lens of the CSFD and imagined communities, we see that using Instagram to share information is a dynamic place to build communities and commerce.

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