



## The Modern Bee: Motivations and Social Engagement of Quilters

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*“Quilts were a large part of every woman’s life. They were made because they had to be, but they also served the purposes of beauty, relaxation, artistic expression, and an acceptable excuse for social gatherings.” Miles (1979, Preface)*

**Scope of the Quilting Industry.** The rich history of quilt-making has evolved into a multi-billion dollar industry (Thomas, 2022), yet it is largely ignored by academic retail research. The modern quilting industry is more attuned to artistic expression than the tradition of using all available fabric scraps to provide bed covers. This industry is comprised of many brands and companies that sell tools and materials which the end user then must use to make the final product. Thus, quilting is both an artistic endeavor and a project-management activity.

### The Quilting Bee

*“At a quilting bee, one might have learned...how to bring up babies by hand; how to mend a cracked teapot; how to take out grease from a brocade; how to reconcile absolute decrees with free will; how to make five yards of cloth answer the purpose of six; and how to put down the Democrat party” quote by Harriet Beecher Stowe in Miles (1979, np).*

The traditional bee still exists, and often manifests in quilt guilds, quilting retreats, and family groups (Finley & Brockbank, personal communication, Sept. 22, 2022). Quilt guild membership is generally open to all in a geographic area, or in the case of online guilds, available to any who want to join. Guild membership involves monthly meetings, often with a guest speaker, working together on charity projects, fellowship with other quilters in the community, and retreat opportunities. Quilting retreats may consist of multi-day events and/or overnight stays that cover a weekend or a week. Facilities designed for this purpose are scattered throughout the U.S., and loosely networked via social media and websites (i.e. <https://www.retreatsandco.com/quilt-retreats>).

In addition to in-person activities, quilting consumers participate in online communities communicate with others of similar interest, connect with friends, learn about new trends, share knowledge, and make inquiries about products, thereby potentially having a significant impact on consumer buying decisions (Strubel, Pookulangara, and Murray, 2013). Specifically, in the context of quilting, one might go to Pinterest or Instagram for inspiration, participate in closed groups working on the same project (Quiltalongs or Block of the Month Facebook groups), and post completed projects

with hashtags to tag the fabric or pattern designer (“Quilting in a...,” 2021). Quilters might also visit Youtube for instruction on a technique or project, and follow blogs of their favorite designers or fellow quilters.

The primary purpose of this study was to understand the motivations and practices of hobby group. The secondary purpose was to employ a Uses and Gratifications approach to social media consumption and participation of this group. Uses and gratification theory “asserts that people use media to gratify specific wants and needs” (Vinney, 2019). The theory relies on two principles: (1) media users actively select the media they consume, and (2) they are conscious of their reasons for selecting specific media. It is theorized that media consumption is an important modern aspect of quilting, as it is historically fueled by community. Social media can be used a pedagogy for teaching new techniques developed by experts and designers, a way to interact with other enthusiasts, and perhaps more importantly, make all who engage part of a community that has a focus on creativity, dedication to the craft, altruism, and companionship. According to Glassenberg (2020), quilters’ top sources for quilt related information are websites and blogs (19%), magazines and newspapers (14.1%), and YouTube (13%).

**Methodology.** Data were collected for this study via in-depth interviews with ten quilters who ranged in age from 45 to 68. One lives in Florida, two in Utah, and the other seven were in Texas. One is a partner in a quilt design company, one owns a quilt store and retreat center, and the other eight are hobby quilters. Only two of the interviewees earn an income from quilting.

When asked why they quilt, responses included themes such as, “*I just have to be busy all the time,*” “*I just love it,*” “*For my legacy,*” “*Your day is pretty stressful, and sewing quarter-inch seams just helps.*” All of the interviewees talked about quilting as a creative expression. One interviewee added the philanthropy aspect as being a strong motivator: “*Sewing with purpose other than just creating makes sense to me.*” When asked what their favorite part of the process was, all indicated two similar responses: “*Seeing the final quilt – bound and finished*” and “*Beginning the process; selecting the pattern and the fabric.*”

Conversation to get at the fellowship aspect of this hobby led to half indicating they sew with others regularly. Two indicated they sew in a family bee, one owns a fabric store and she and her employees spend two hours a day sewing samples for the store. All indicated they participate in social media groups, primarily Facebook (n=5) and Instagram (n=3). Eight also indicated they look at quilt related videos on Youtube with the purpose of learning either how to solve a problem, or to explore new products and ideas. Only two interviewees indicated that they actively interact with others on the platforms, and then it was in Facebook groups. Interestingly, only one mentioned specifically using Pinterest for new quilt ideas.

When asked where they like to shop, half indicated they like to purchase fabric when they travel, and all indicated a commitment to their local fabric shops rather than the chain stores, even though their local shops generally sell at higher price points. One specifically mentioned favoring some online mom-and-pop stores.

### Conclusions.

The community aspect of quilting is still very strong, though adapted for the modern era. Everyone interviewed indicated they engage at some level either with their guilds or friends who quilt (i.e. bees) and all participate in quilting-related social media sites daily. Active interaction was lower than Social and Gratification theory might suggest; almost all indicated they go to the social sites to “see what everyone else is doing” and to “be inspired” rather than to post their own content.

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