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# You Have One New Message

Knitting intimacy for connecting opinions, people and the world

## **ABSTRACT**

*Knitting is often practiced as a group activity that takes place in the domestic environment. Besides the collectivity, using motifs with meanings has also facilitated communication between people. Building on these ideas, a workshop was designed to facilitate discussions about everyday concerns or experiences, both on personal and societal levels, to strengthen communication with the self and others. In the workshop, the thirteen participants were asked to design a motif to convey a message to themselves, to the group or to the society. Through a group discussion, the motifs stemming from personal experiences were knitted, shared and discussed. The topics emerging from the workshop indicates that knitting affords intimate exchanges between the self and others, and connects people by facilitating socio-political discussions, such as on environmental sustainability, women rights and self-development.*

## *Keywords:*

Knitting; Intimacy; Affordance; Workshop; Crafts.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Traditional knitting examples in Turkey usually apply motifs that have names and meanings. Although some of the commonly used motifs are no longer meaningful in the current societal structures, decorating artefacts with personal messages provides an interesting discussion and stimulates further thinking about what might be contemporary messages that we want to share via crafting.

Although we live in different parts of the world, we often experience similar emotions and problems. Especially global crises indicate how connected we are to each other. However, at times the connectedness becomes hidden, perhaps as a result of the lack of communication. In this paper, I present a workshop that asks its participants to design and knit a motif to communicate either with themselves or with others. With this workshop, I aimed to create a platform to overcome the challenges of oral communication that might come from being an introvert or from the lack of language abilities by using knitting as an intimate and connective practice.

Building on the rooted tradition of communicating through textile crafts and their motifs, this paper proposes that craft practices like knitting can gain certain agencies and impact everyday actions by facilitating conversation, reflections or new actions. With their connection to culture and history as

well as everyday life, knitting motifs with meanings can prompt personal reflection and afford new experiences. When discussing motifs for Easter egg drawing in Romania, psychologist Vlad Glăveanu (2012, p. 193) proposes a similar approach and argues that when affordances of existing practices are observed creativity may emerge in new ways both for thinking and making. Accordingly, in this study, the affordances of knitting and motifs were tackled to review the contemporary personal or societal topics that we might need to communicate with.

To discuss if knitting and motifs can facilitate such an exchange, in the next sections, I will first discuss the affordance of knitting and how it generates intimacy between the knitter and the produced artefact as well as among people. Then, I will discuss organizing a workshop as a method of inquiry and will discuss how it was useful in this particular study. After this, I will describe the workshop and some of the motifs that were designed. Finally, the paper will conclude with the discussion on knitting and how it affords building intimate connections with the self, other people and society at large.

## **INTIMACY AS AN AFFORDANCE OF KNITTING**

Hand-knitting is perhaps one of the most mundane craft practices. It is often learned from family elderlies or at arts and crafts courses in school. Despite being practised as a textile craft and fibre art, the most common perception for knitting is still closer to a hobby practice that elderly do. However, this perception has been changing over recent decades. Young people are interested in knitting more and more as a cool and creative craft activity (Fields, 2014, p. 151). This revival also brings multiple platforms with it to learn how to knit online, to knit together with strangers and to share the results within a community (ibid.). The interests from young people show that knitting has been transforming its meaning and its perception in the society by gaining new roles for instance regarding identity building (Fields, 2014) or social aspects of learning (Prigoda & McKenzie, 2007). Looking into what knitting might afford can illuminate how knitters or knitted artefacts gain ever-transforming agencies in society.

### **Affordances of Knitting**

Previous studies show that craft practices and crafted artefacts can become actors of change by creating an impact upon its maker, user or environment. Since our thinking is shaped by our material engagement (Malafouris, 2013), perceiving and working with crafts in new ways can contribute to the ways in which we think and relate to our surrounding and societies.

Crafts as creative practices emerge through social and material engagements over long periods. When makers are crafting their creativity develops in relation to other makers, the places that the practice is taking place and the time of the practice (Glăveanu, 2014, p. 2). As a result, any craft practice can be perceived as a collective act that takes place between people from various locations, generations and backgrounds, as well as between the social conditions that the practice relates to, such as the materials, use areas and the making environment. The collective endeavour among people and things highlights that craft practices can be shaped by humans and nonhumans while also shaping both humans and nonhumans.

As humans, we experience what is happening in our surrounding and through these experiences, we can understand and perceive the world. The environment and what it contains *afford* us to have various experiences. Through their affordances things, spaces or materials facilitate and encourage certain actions while informing human perception (Lehmann, 2015, p. 31). The affordances of things can contribute to the development of creativity as well since they can *guide, facilitate* or *constrain human activity* (Glăveanu, 2012, p. 193). Through their affordances, things can shape the development of a craft project as a result of enacting making in various ways (Glăveanu, 2014). These proposed ways are not limited to practical approaches but can also contain mental perception of the craft elements.

In its long history, knitting has been developing as a collective and self-reflective activity. Often, knitting does not require an assigned workspace, similar to a studio or workshop, rather it is a mobile practice that can be done regardless of the location. The mobility of knitting makes the practice suitable to be practised in any location and affordable for many people. Considering that historically the

materials for knitting, such as yarns and tools, are generated from the sheep that are owned by the family, its connection to home, which is one of the most intimate places for most people, is even stronger. Thus, the mobility and small-scale-ness of knitting can afford intimacy and intimate exchanges among knitters.

### **Connected by Intimacy**

Craft educationalist Rachel Mason (2005) proposes that knitting is commonly perceived as part of “home-based crafts, handicrafts, hobbies, folk arts, domestic crafts, feminine or hidden stream arts” and it is usually associated with leisure time (ibid.). Although this pre-conception positions knitting as a *less serious* creative practice, it is also empowering as it becomes an intimate practice that is connected to homes, places for privacy while making it relatable for most people.

In line with these findings, a recent international survey found out that knitting was typically done at home and as a group (Riley, Corckhill & Morris, 2013). The participants of the survey stated that when they knit as a group, they feel connected and gain a sense of belonging that improves communication and practical skills. The same survey results also pointed out that people tend to feel calmer and happier after knitting as a result of the feeling of accomplishment (ibid.). The strong connection to home-like environments and inner wellbeing hint that knitting provides a positive and intimate relationship with the self and others.

Through this intimacy and expressiveness, knitting, and crafts in general, can become tools for self-explanation and communication (Aktaş, 2015, p. 37). Indeed, traditionally motifs for knitted pieces were often assigned meanings to convey a personal message or express the self along with being used merely as decorative elements. For instance, in Turkey some motifs were used to deliver messages directed at various entities, such as (1) spiritual beings to protect from the evils, (2) animals, to be protected from them as well as to ask them to bring luck, health and strength, and also (3) other humans to deliver personal information, such as marital or social status (Özbel, 1976; Erbek, 2002). The use of motifs is also very common within other textile crafts such as for making rugs (Erbek, 2002), knits (Özbel, 1976), and embroidery (Barışta, 1988, 2001).

Besides affording self-expression, knitting can also facilitate building intimacy with others. Often, knitting has been practised collectively both before its revival among the young people and after that. Through knitting circles in different forms and contexts, it continues to nourish social interaction among knitters facilitating discussions that are not limited to the practice of knitting. The examination of knitting as part of various fields such as “leisure and health studies, women studies, and material culture studies” (Mason, 2005) also indicates that it maintains a close relationship with social interaction and self.

Since craft practices, including knitting, often rely on local values but still convey a universal meaning, they are also relatable for wider groups of people (Niedderer & Townsend, 2018, p. 196). Therefore, knitting, as well as other crafts, can become a vehicle to make a positive impact on the personal and the community level. On a personal level, the intimacy embedded in creative actions results in improving the inner wellbeing (Mason, 2005). On the community level, intimacy can become a connective tool.

Thanks to its various elements, such as motifs or being done as a group, knitting can connect different people, interests and topics while stimulating conversation. Considering that in our everyday appliances, such as technological devices or informative panels, we communicate with visual symbols, working with meaningful motifs can still connect people. The symbols and icons lead people in their practices, such as by showing the button that turns on a machine or lowers the volume providing nonverbal communication between humans and nonhumans in a way that proposes new actions and experiences to people. As these icons are known and are a significant part of everyday lives in most parts of the world, they facilitate the same practices for people of different ages, genders, cultures, and ethnicities. The wide-spread knowledge about icons reveals that nonverbal communication can become an important tool to connect people from different parts of the world as it overcomes the language barriers. Knitting has already been used for delivering messages to large groups of people gaining a role

in creating public awareness. This role can be further emphasized by interweaving the existing experience of motifs into societal discussions.

### **Knitting Opinions**

Over recent decades, the collective aspect of knitting has been used for making a societal and political impact. The practice of knitting has been employed, for instance, for social improvement, political criticism, and community building (Pethney, 2008). Presenting crafts as tools for activism, writer and maker Betsy Greer (2014) highlights the importance of creating things since this ability shows us that we have power. Greer explains that crafts can convey emotional messages, can start a dialogue between people, can initiate political conversations, and can be used for community building (ibid.). Using craft-making to communicate also records contemporary memories and instances (Williams, 2011). Therefore, when crafts are practised with a (political) agenda, they become *connective* (von Busch, 2010). They connect people through their artefacts, and different types of practices or knowledge by bringing various personal perspectives together (ibid. See also Aktaş & Veryeri-Alaca, 2017).

By using the connective power of knitting that emerges from its intimacy, this study provides a platform for communicating with the self and others. Utilizing knitting to start conversations about the conditions that we live in can become an effective way to start making a change on a personal level. This potential capacity of knitting can also transform crafts into being change-makers. To study if and how knitting affords intimate, collective and expressive action, for this study, I designed a workshop based on knitting and designing motifs to start conversations with the workshop participants about our current problems or concerns. Next, I will describe the workshop.

### **THE WORKSHOP: YOU HAVE ONE NEW MESSAGE**

Having these ideas in mind, in summer 2019, the workshop, “You Have One New Message”, was initiated with making a public call for participants. It was organized at Halka Art Gallery in Kadıköy, İstanbul. The gallery followed its typical announcement process by including the call in their weekly newsletter and by sharing the information on their social media accounts. The workshop was designed to last three hours. To reach a large group of people the same workshop was offered twice, once on the weekend and once during the week. Both days were limited to ten people, and in total 13 people participated.

All participants were female urbanites between ages 22-40. The group involved designers, musicologists, primary school teachers, education researchers, and a social worker. All participants stated that they had heard about the event through the art gallery’s public call that indicates the group had a common interest in art. The only pre-requisite for participation was to have the basic skill of knitting since the workshop did not aim at teaching how to knit but only to use it as an intimate platform for thinking and reflecting. To achieve a resemblance to the feeling of home, the participants sat around a large table and enjoyed their biscuits and teas while knitting.

Organizing a workshop is a method of collecting qualitative data. Workshops as research methods are often organized by people who have experience and knowledge in the topic of the workshop and evolve around a pre-defined but flexible agenda (Ørngreen & Levinsen, 2017, p. 72). This provides a platform to fulfil the participants’ expectations while also fulfilling a research goal (ibid.). In this case, workshop method functioned as a platform to think through making and to facilitate group discussion at the end of the session.

The workshop started with a short presentation to show different ways of nonverbal or non-text-based communication examples (Figure 1). These examples included a wide selection, such as early mathematical notations, craft motifs and icons from appliances. Then, the participants were given 30 minutes to develop a visualization that carries a meaning for them (Figure 2). They were encouraged to think freely and were shown examples of how to visualize their ideas. After this, participants knitted a 30x30 cm size piece individually but as a group. This size was selected to complete the knitting in the given time. Finally, everyone presented their motifs and the idea behind it to the large group. While the discussion was taking place, most participants continued knitting and commented on each other’s short

presentations. Thus, the workshop was designed like a practice-led group discussion which provided being in contact with the motif idea through knitting while explicitly reflecting on it.

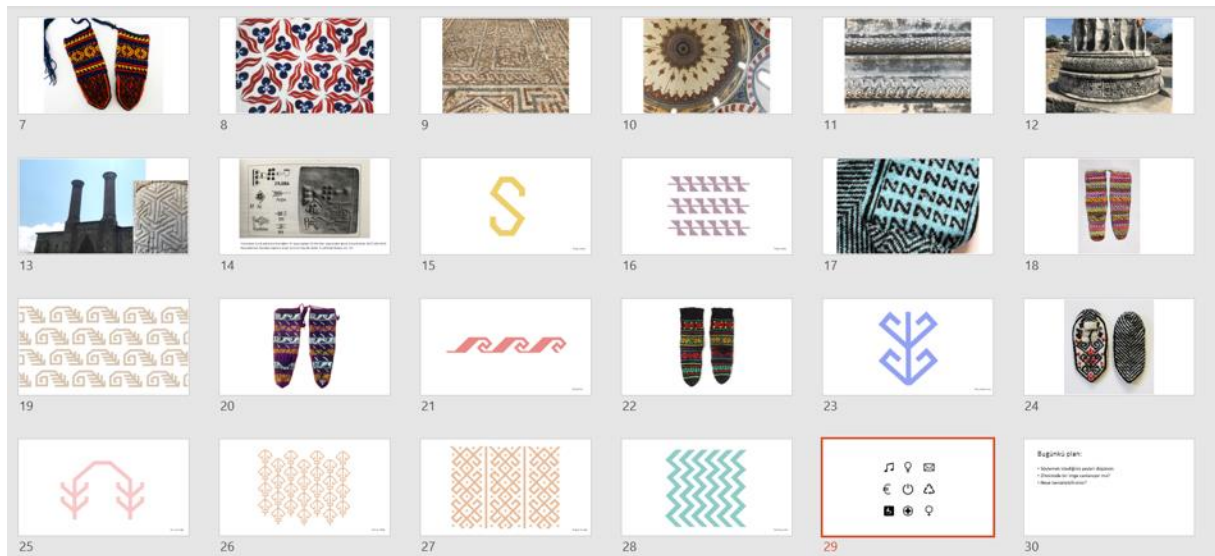


FIGURE 1. Nonverbal communication examples that were shown in the presentation at the workshop. Photograph: Aktaş, 2019



FIGURE 2. A paper with squares was used to create the motif and prepare it for knitting. Photograph: Aktaş, 2019

During the workshop, as the organizer, I also designed a motif and knitted with the participants. After the very first presentation about the motifs, I became a participant in the workshop. As a participating observer (Bernard, 2006), my knitting together with the participants also changed my role from the one who was *in charge* to being a *peer*. Changing my role to being a participant generated a more homogenous structure by removing the hierarchical role of the organizer. As I designed and knitted a

piece, I was also making an example to the other participants through which we could discuss technical aspects as well. This was important since it gave an idea about what might be the outcome clarifying the expectations. Also, when I became a workshop participant, I could gain the insider's experience about, for instance, how to draw the motif, how long it might take or what might be challenging. Thus, I could facilitate their participation in richer ways. Yet, my role as a facilitator and helper continued during the workshop when someone needed support with their knits. I documented the process with photographs and recorded their voices during the final discussion, which was when everyone presented their ideas to each other. After the workshop, I also wrote a reflective text on the workshop.



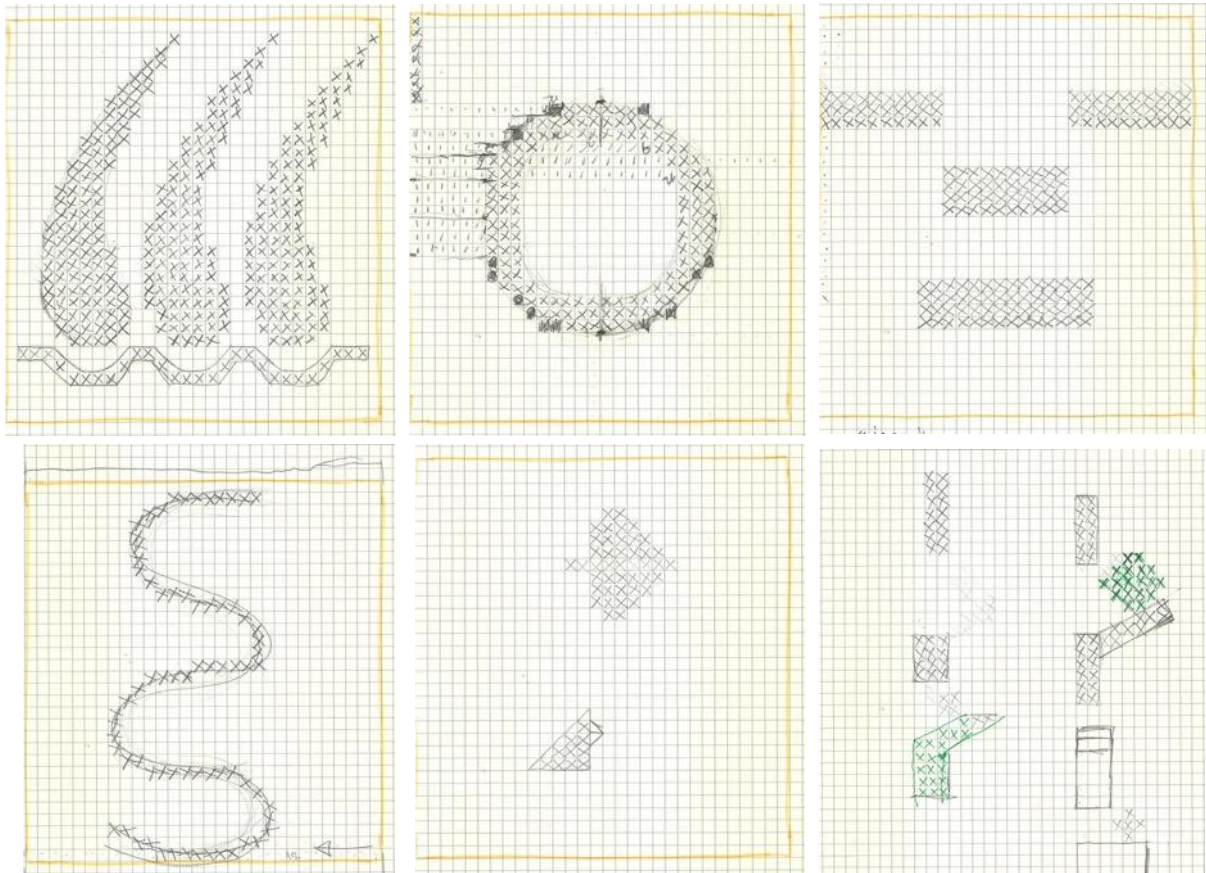
**FIGURE 3.** Several outcomes of the workshop. Photograph: Aktaş, 2019

During the workshop, all participants were able to come up with a motif idea that they could personally relate to. However, since the experience level in knitting was diverse, some participants were unable to finish their pieces. One week later, we met with some participants in their free time to collect the knits that were completed during the week after the workshop. These pieces were then sewn together, and the large piece was wrapped around a tree in one of the parks in the neighbourhood to leave the messages to the public. An information sheet about the motifs was also attached to the large piece (Figure 3). Two months after the workshop, one of the participants sent a photo of the tree with the knits still around it.

Next, I will present some of the motifs and their meanings and discuss how knitting and designing motifs became a powerful tool to start societal discussions, especially on our relationship with the environment and human behaviour.

### KNITTING MOTIFS TO CONNECT WITH THE SELF AND THE WORLD

During the workshop, thirteen motifs were designed. They were different from each other both with their visual appearance and the meanings behind them (Figure 4). Although some were directly emerging from personal experiences, such as a new mother’s challenges with her work/life balance, most of the motifs tackled general and societal problems such as the relationship with the environment. Also, although some motifs aimed at personal growth, most of them delivered a political message, such as the ones about women rights. Often, these motifs tackled the role of the humans in the world and the ways that they exist, criticizing the destructive lifestyles.



**FIGURE 4.** Selected examples from the motif designs. Upper row from left to right: Woman hair, Hoop, Human. Lower row from left to right: Balance, Free as a bird, Motherhood.

In most motifs, the personal experience brought a questioning of current societal, political and environmental conditions. Accordingly, although the motifs cannot be strictly grouped into different categories, three themes were appearing from the discussion several times.

The first theme emerging from the motifs was about expressing personal difficulties, such as feeling depressed, finding harmony in life or finding a balance between being a mother and an individual. For instance, **Cycle** tackled the fast lifestyles. Reflecting on her personal experiences, one participant, a product designer, designed a motif to remind herself of finding the balance in life by voluntarily being in an ongoing transformation.

The second theme concerned human behaviour at large to seek understanding what is happening around us and how humans are existing in the world. These motifs were often questioning various human behaviours that the participants witnessed, such as violation of women rights, building healthy personal relationships and becoming more tolerant of different opinions. **The Human Motif** questioned the role of humans in goodness and evilness (Figure 5). By stating that everything starts with being a human, the participant, who was an English teacher, was questioning how to challenge what

being a human and human-centred mean. Her main reference point was the difference between human actions and humanist actions (Figure 5).



FIGURE 5. The human motif, to remind that being good or evil is a choice of humans. Photograph: Aktaş, 2019

Some of the motifs that tackled human behaviours also questioned how to develop personal tactics to be more attentive to societal conditions. One participant referred to the act of knitting and built a resemblance with the slowness of craft and perceiving society more insightfully:

How do you materialize what you have in your mind? And how can you recognize these changing things on your own? I think this [knitting] experience was like reaching a personal and societal awareness by knitting my personal reactions slowly, loom by loom.

The last theme was about the environmental crisis and how humans relate to the environment mostly in reference to deforestation and bushfires. For instance, **human and nature motif** questioned the artificial distance between humans and nature, inspired by the idiom: *we are in a war with nature, we will lose if we win*. Drawing from the environmental crisis and continuing deforestation in the world, the participant who was a social worker pointed at the unity of humans and nature. By designing a motif based on a human in the form of a tree, she discussed how humans were not different from trees (Figure 6).



FIGURE 6. Human and nature motif: “We are in a war with nature. We will lose if we win”. Photograph: Aktaş, 2019



While some motifs discussed the unity and co-dependence between humans and nature, suggesting to renew our perspectives over nature, some other motifs also pointed out what we can learn from nature, such as from animals or natural energy resources, to find the balance in life. When discussing the need for re-positioning humans in nature, two participants started a discussion on the role of the humans:

Participant 1.: I saw a graffiti the other day that said “Try not being a human”<sup>1</sup>. We do need to try not to think like a human. We can try thinking like an animal. When we see what’s happening in the world looks like animals are better beings than humans.

Participant 2.: As I read in a book, indeed from the evolutionary perspective, we are not great designs. We are not that amazing. We have many flaws. And we cannot interpret or understand moral values that well either.

While presenting their works, all participants reflected on their knitting experiences too. Most of them described what they had in mind and what was the outcome and how the practice of knitting transformed the initial ideas. Sometimes, these differences were results of not being skilled in knitting and making technical mistakes, but almost all the participants decided to keep their mistakes as they were, rather than starting to knit a new piece. One participant stated that:

I’ve thought about contrasts. In life, everything has a contrast. And these contrasts designate our direction and choices. We always choose a side ... And we always try to be on the good side. But perhaps what’s important is to mix black with white. To move forward with small steps. I felt like these looms resemble these small steps. ... I am one of those who try to do one thing but do it in its best way. However, we can only develop by making mistakes. That’s why when I was knitting, I decided not to fix the mistakes in looms. ... We always make mistakes, and this is how we develop. It is good to enjoy the mistakes.

As the examples indicate, most motifs searched for ways of living in harmony with the self, nature and society. All examples derived from personal experiences, such as being a primary school teacher or a designer, but constructed relations with society.

The presentations of the motifs often continued with a discussion and feedback by the other participants in a naturally occurring way, without my asking about their opinions. This showed that the topics that the participants personally selected were relatable for the others as well. As each participant presented their work, the others also commented on them turning it into a group discussion. While discussing, most participants referred to the books, films, mythology and artists in a way that they were willing to share what they know and what they want to learn.

An interesting reflection on the study is on gender. Although the workshop was open to everyone, all participants were women and several motifs referred to being a woman, such as being a mother, being tender to kids, and societal perception of women behaviours. This insight might argue that women still need more instruments to express themselves in society and knitting might fulfil the need for creating more space for expressing the self and finding a voice. However, more workshops and in-depth interviews with participants would be needed to further understand the relationship between gender, need for communication and knitting.

## DISCUSSION

All thirteen motifs that were produced during the workshop were founded in personal experiences. Although some of them at the end delivered a personal message, most made connection with this experience’s societal reflection or how the social situations project upon the personal experiences. The references to the act of knitting while describing how to perceive the world shows that the slow act of turning yarn into textile formed a suitable ground to mirror the act of knitting over our everyday actions. The discussions and the motifs created in the workshop demonstrates three affordances of knitting:

1. Knitting can afford intimate relationships with the self and with others. During the workshop, participants who did not know each other before the event shared personal experiences with strangers. Their personal complex situations for instance about making a major life decision or reflecting on how

one feels about their personalities show that the shared practice of knitting did bring them together and facilitated self-reflection. Recognizing that knitting can afford an intimate and more open relationship with the self and others can help to discuss delicate topics. Through engaging with an intimate practice, a group can generate its own dynamism that results in significant and transformative self-reflection. By turning towards the self and questioning what we want to tell the world we can empower the self and pay more attention to our experiences through critically reviewing our everyday problems in a gentle manner.

2. Knitting can still afford non-verbal communication through designing motifs that can be applied in today's societal needs. The richness of topics that the motifs touched upon shows that knitting with a purpose of communication can afford multiple exchanges, going beyond a hobby craft. The group discussion also confirms this situation since participants often shared their supportive, approving or critical expressions over each other's message and the motif design.

3. Knitting can afford increasing personal agencies through connecting with others and the society at large. The results of this workshop indicate that when craft practices are used as conversation starters, the knitters can also make a change in their perceptions of a particular topic. This is also a result of thinking through making. All motifs questioned human agencies by discussing what we were capable of changing. Often the participants referred to the wide range of recent news at the time, such as domestic violence or bushfires. These references explicate how participants were reflecting on the societal problems.

Examining the practice of knitting through the lens of affordance provided a new understanding of knitting that goes beyond being merely a creative activity for producing textile. By exploring what can be done with knitting, theory of affordances presented possible ways of connecting opinions and people through self-reflection. Glăveanu (2012) also argues that by implementing affordances as a theoretical perspective, craft practices can be understood beyond their meaning to the individual and brings a more relational and action-oriented formulation to the practices. A similar approach emerged from the workshop as well: most of the participants started reflecting on their personal experiences in relation to their societal participation since they were projecting their experiences onto the changes in their surroundings. This type of a discussion was possible mostly by perceiving knitting as a practice that can create action and shared understanding among people.

Embracing the techniques of knitting, making looms and following a structure was often utilized to make resemblances with our actions in life. In a similar sense, anthropologist Tim Ingold (2013, p. 21) perceives making as a process of growth. According to Ingold, this growth happens on the personal level as well as the material knowledge level (ibid.) Expanding on Ingold's proposal, the findings show that three types of affordances bring three types of growth:

Firstly, the makers, or the participants, grow as they reflect on and connect to themselves by discovering new ways for self-communication. Also, as they are able to design and produce an artefact in a short time, they gain self-confidence. The participants expressed their satisfaction with being able to complete a piece in such a short time. Also, the participants who could not finish were willing to still bring their pieces to a meeting point after one week showing their enthusiasm for the accomplished work.

Secondly, the practice of knitting, or crafts, grow as well, as it becomes relevant for societal, environmental and political discussions. For instance, in the workshop, the perception of knitting was changing as it became more connected to thinking and delivering a message, rather than merely having the purpose of making a garment. At the same time, knitting was also being explored from a historical and societal perspective such as its being eco-friendly or gender-based practice. As von Busch (2010, p. 124) states, when makers use crafts to start a political discussion, they bring their ideas into the practice and transform these practices. While doing this, creativity is also employed in various ways to afford new actions. Expanding on Glăveanu's (2012) proposal of examining affordances of existing practices to develop new ways of making and thinking with them, with this workshop identifying knitting as an act of thinking and reflecting blurred the limits of what might be expected from this practice and built connections to many other daily topics. With their motifs, knitting has already been employed as a self-

expressive communicative tool, but in the workshop, the participants transformed knitting from a practice of textile making to an act of thinking by explicitly reflecting on their process.

Finally, social participation grows as the makers are better connected to themselves and society. Especially if the results and the process are shared with the community, the personal and practice-related growth can be also projected onto society. Therefore, the practices and experiences emerging from such workshops can also bring a sense of awareness to its participants.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This workshop builds on the idea of knitting as an intimate practice that has the power of connecting people. By utilizing intimacy as an affordance of knitting, the workshop facilitated self-reflection over personal experiences and societal discussions. Currently, we need solidarity and understanding more than ever to overcome shared global crises, such as climate change or human rights. To reach such an understanding a common language that can overcome cultural, educational and financial barriers is needed. Knitting, and crafting at large, can become efficient tools to facilitate such connective endeavours since they are relatable and accessible for a large group of people. Knitting as a collective and connective practice can afford intimate actions of self-reflection, societal projection and self-expression to facilitate growth on personal, practice and societal levels.

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<sup>1</sup> “Be a human” is a slang expression in Turkish used when someone wants to remind another person of the right manners.