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# Social interaction at craft fairs

## Furthering communality, visibility and trade

### **ABSTRACT**

*Although digitalisation has had an impact on the business of fairs, especially during the years of the pandemic, the Covid-19 crisis has clearly shown that social interaction is vital for small businesses, such as craft enterprises. The physical co-presence of craft objects, makers and users as well as the immediateness of personal contact play a major role at craft fairs. Fairs revolve around trade, which is furthered by the many cultural and social aspects that constitute them. We argue that social interaction in marketplaces goes beyond economic transactions and show that face-to-face interactions are essential for building trust and social order. We identify different types of social interaction at craft fairs, all of which are collaborative – fostering a sense of community, developing products and increasing their visibility – in addition to being an economic transaction. This study is based on ethnographic research on craft fairs and craft producers in the field of furniture and garment making. We conclude by arguing that the findings on craft fairs can also be generalised to other cases.*

### **Keywords:**

craft fairs, marketplaces, social interaction, collaboration, information, economic action.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Despite digitalisation, physical fairs continue to disseminate and fuel interest in crafts. Craft fairs are events organized by a formal organization inviting several dozens small and medium sized craft companies with a strong focus on handcrafted or designed products, mostly located in or close to cities. Such an event is a stage to exhibit and sell craft objects, facilitate immediate contact between maker and audience and sometimes even allow those attending to observe or experience the making process – all of which makes it a particularly fruitful social phenomenon to study. An integrated part of fairs is trade, and in some cases, trade is the dominating activity, meaning that the notion of the marketplace is apt. In addition to the economic view on fairs, sociology stresses the social embeddedness of economic actions at fairs, pointing to the combination of the marketplace with ‘a large element of

festivity and a break from the normal toil of life' (Aspers & Darr, 2011, p. 760). Thus, the interactions taking place at fairs are often referred to as 'part-business, part-pleasure social activities' (Potier, 2022, p. 139). From this perspective, fairs are materialisations of market interaction and, therefore, events configuring the craft and design industry as an organisational field (Lampel & Meyer, 2008). The notion of 'organisational field' acknowledges the institutional life of fairs, including '[...] key suppliers, resource and product consumers, regulatory agencies, and other organizations that produce similar services or products' into an aggregate of related and relevant organisations (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991, P. 148). This field may revolve around trade but is also characterised by a non-market, even festival-like condition (Chen, 2009).

Here, we study craft fairs. Our study focuses on craftpersons and reveals how economic and non-economic interactions are interlaced at fairs. Although much research in the field of craft has addressed technological transformations (Kroezen & Heugens, 2019; Poni, 2002; Raffaelli, 2019) and, particularly, digitalisation (Mangematin et al., 2014; Petkova, 2016), apart from studies mentioning the case of Etsy (Aspers & Darr, 2022; Krugh, 2014; Luckman, 2013), we are still short of understanding about the potential of physical fairs for craft-based production. Since socio-cultural embeddedness and the emplacement of production and consumption are central aspects of craft objects (Bell et al., 2021, p. 4), we argue that craft is a case in point to understand the various types of social interactions and their interplay, physically taking place in marketplaces such as fairs. Craft fairs are a specific case of commodity fairs that differ, for instance, from sample and trade fairs (Allix, 1922) because of the presence of the craftsperson (compared to a merchant or agent), immediate contact with consumers and intermediaries (compared to samples shown) and the sales opportunities physical fairs offer (compared to commercial contracts).

This article contributes to the existing literature by addressing the following question: What type of interaction takes place at fairs? This question sheds light on the field of craft production and the role of fairs in this industry. We show, by analysing social interactions, what outcomes the fairs further for the individual craftpersons but also for the institutions of the field and the field itself. Thereby, we can show both the rationale of the actors and to what the unintended consequences of their behaviour might lead. Empirically, we use ethnographic data that have been gathered since 2020 (ongoing) in Switzerland. The study is located in two historical craft fields: fashion and furniture making. The data set consists of 52 interviews (31 craftpersons, five fair organisers and 18 visitors). Interviews were conducted in the workshop (with craftpersons), at one international design and craft fair (with visitors) and in the office (with fair organisers). The interviews lasted between one minute (with a visitor) and 2.5 hours (with a craftsperson). Additional document material (e.g., marketing brochures, websites or media coverage) was collected. Most craft firms are one-person companies; some hire sales personnel, but most of them cover all stages of the production process themselves. The existing interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded using Atlas.ti. First, open coding was applied, followed by narrowing down codes and building analytical categories that allowed us to discern the meaning of interactions on fairs. We used an abductive logic of analysis (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014). It is against this totality of empirical material that the robustness of our findings must be seen.

## **CRAFT FAIRS AS A PARTICULAR FORM OF MARKETPLACE**

Historically, fairs (etymologically deriving from the word feast) took place at the temporary intersection of religious, commercial and climatic incidents, reflecting a periodic rhythm established by the sovereign power (Allix, 1922, p. 534). As a commercial institution, the fair resembled a marketplace that periodically recurred and was accompanied by a festival that framed trade activities with a variety of entertainment, increased population and decorated streets (Allix, 1922; Braudel, 1982). In these times, fairs were characterised by periodicity, internationality and infrastructure, and the fair hired its own personnel, set up a town-independent administration and developed and protected its policies (ibid 1922, p. 544). Even now, fair organisers conduct boundary work – that is, define the boundaries of and govern the marketplaces by rules, membership or sanctions and thereby create and maintain distinctions between who is in and out of the marketplace (Aspers & Darr, 2011, p. 775).

Craft fairs are organised. Some fairs frequently hold ceremonies (e.g., fashion shows) or open competitions (e.g., design prize awarded by a changing jury) that grant exhibitors prestige, thereby creating an internal hierarchy among the craft producers, and increase the status of the fair, as experts are employed in the jury (e.g., designers, museum curators, chief editors) and attractiveness on the fair market. Organisational presence is central for craft firms because it is an opportunity to assemble resources and gain consumer acceptance (Lampel & Meyer, 2008, p. 1030). As an event of exhibition and representation, fairs are an arena of mutual observation. Therefore, the focus lies less on what is being sold than on what other craftspeople exhibit, advertise and showcase (Skov, 2006). Presence is also important when it comes to commodities. Compared to other forms of trade, a trade condition of fairs is that merchandise is present at fairs in any form – that is, ‘exhibited’ (Weber, 1922, p. 91). Importantly, on this basis, a basic sense of trust between maker and user or seller and buyer is established, which is important for trade relations (Aspers & Darr, 2011). Co-presence as a prerequisite for enhancing trust is an important aspect that applies to craft fairs, since crafted objects require a knowledgeable user. It also stimulates a sensory experience that can only unfold when the physical object is presented in its entirety. Research acknowledging the social dimension emphasises the potential of fairs and trade shows for having an impact on professional careers and occupational communities (Jourdain, 2022; Naulin & Béliard, 2022), facilitating social interactions (Braudel, 1982; Potier, 2022), ordering social relations and hierarchies (Entwistle & Rocamora, 2006; Skov, 2006), shaping and transforming markets and industries (Anand & Peterson, 2000; Aspers & Darr, 2022) and influencing various forms of exchange (Moeran & Strandgaard Pedersen, 2011; Potier, 2022). Based on this, we define a fair as an ordered physical space for a given period, representing a selection of members of a particular field, market or sector that is organised by a complete organisation to further social interaction, including, potentially, trade. Based on this reading, formally, fairs are partial organisations (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011), which are materialising instances of, for example, social orders and status hierarchies, conviviality and communality, social relations, information sharing and sense-making among field members.

## TYPES OF INTERACTION

To better understand the role of fairs, we study which types of interactions make craft fairs particularly attractive to attend. We identified different means of social interaction that are significant, all of which stress collaboration among the participants. Whereas marketplaces are based on economic transactions and strategic exchange, fairs display additional types of interaction, including community building and visibility. Here, we provide some short glimpses into the multitude of interactions that can be observed in the field. We analyse these under three headings. In practice, many of these activities are interlaced.

### Community-building interaction

There are many examples of collaborative interaction at fairs, such as typical community-enhancing activities like socialising and gathering. These activities promote the spread of practical information, including sharing insights, educating members of the community and merging knowhow and skill. The purpose of this type of interaction can be found in creating synergies that enable collaboration and enhance the feeling of being together among and across peers. For instance, one of the handbag designers explained how interaction between makers creates a feeling of belonging:

If we meet at a fair, we can quickly go, ‘Hey how’s it going?’ And it’s not like, ehm, I’ve had so and so many customers or the like, but more like, ‘Hey, how’s it going? Are you making any progress? Is it going well?’ We mean it candid and honest, and I think that’s very nice.

Such collaborative interaction is an active mode of participation, enhanced when chat and gossip become the communicative basis to build, transform and maintain a sense of community. In this sense, the notion of community traverses peer boundaries (e.g., professions or communities of practice) and includes anyone who is interested in collaboration (e.g., media, public viewers or governmental actors).

Such a personal ‘one-on-one encounter’ between maker and user is typical for fairs and invites a more trustful relationship that can lead to a potential sale afterwards. Collaborative interaction thus refers mostly to the notion of the public fair.

### **Production-oriented interaction**

Production-oriented interaction is also largely collaborative and refers to activities such as scouting, increasing visibility and collecting inspiration without direct engagement, which allow for the passive sharing and observation of impressions and ideas from competitors. Thus, this type of interaction means that actors evoke and receive impulses that affect the development and production of products. Productive interaction relates to the craft product and foregrounds interactions that refer to production-relevant knowledge and skills (e.g., finding reliable production factories or sharing advice about emerging technologies). Makers and users alike indicate that the fair is an area for getting to see what is currently ‘going on in the field’. For example, one of the garment makers indicated how important this was after the pandemic:

People want to see what is new in Swiss design companies. There are so many creative heads. And I also love to stroll through the corridors and see the other exhibitors and their products. And it was really like that, the doors opened and there were so many people inside that I thought, ‘Thank God! This is a real fair atmosphere.’ It was amazing, and it was good for us!

Other informants stressed that listening to visitors can actually be both more informative and educational than any customer survey. Craftspersons hear how visitors stop by, look at and speak about the products: ‘Oh, have you seen this?’ One craftsperson said, ‘It is a kind of evaluation, a test, that you, your ideas and products are exposed to. You recognise a lot by just listening to them’. Production-based interactions help craftspersons to learn who their audience is, how they evaluate their object or what they are interested in. Exposure to visitors was frequently mentioned as a positive aspect of fair participation, typical of physical forms of marketplaces. The passive mode of production-based interaction thus refers to a trade show-like notion of the craft fair (Maskell, 2014).

### **Economic interaction**

Trade, as a form of economic interaction, can be the focal motivation to organise or participate in a fair, but it does not necessarily have to be the main focus. In addition to trade, other forms of economic interaction include the active exchange of economic information – meeting and engaging in conversations with potential consumers and creating and maintaining supplier, peer and consumer relationships – or passively observing the hustle and bustle around the stall. Economic interaction, seen in a broader fashion, facilitates trade and the strategic exchange of property rights. Such a commercial transaction does not necessarily need to happen on the spot but can also take place in the aftermath of the fair, as a handbag designer explains:

In terms of visibility and acquaintance, fairs are important. And for sales, of course! Not to forget, I sell a lot after the fair as well. So, in retrospect, the aftermath uses to be very good. Orders come in, sometimes even a year later, placed by people who fell in love with one of the bags.

Thus, the purpose of economic interaction could potentially and subsequently lead to trade. The transaction at the fair might be an encounter between maker and user, which results in taking home a business card or brochure. Others highlight the physical co-presence that enables touch and feel, which makes a follow-up trade more likely. Although many craft producers sell their objects on the spot, they regard the other two forms of interaction mentioned above as essential. Thus, economic interaction refers to the notion of a sales fair, which is most prone toward being digitalised in the form of, for example, online marketplaces or a web shop. Often, economic interactions might profit from preceding collaborations, either with a community or a production focus. Hence, in practice, the three types of social interaction presented here are interrelated and combined.

All three types of interaction subscribe to the idea of immediate, face-to-face encounters and show the high degree of collaboration that characterises this industry. Essentially, but not only, because craft fairs cater to various organisational goals and actors' interests, they managed to maintain a leading role in constituting and driving craft-based production.

### **CONCLUSION: THE RELEVANCE OF FAIRS**

Historically, many aspects have been drawn on to explain the decline of the fair – for example, stationary commerce or the technological advancement of logistic services (Braudel, 1982, p. 94 f.). To these factors, we can surely add digitalisation and the natural experiment of the pandemic, and the sharp decline of physical fairs would perhaps then be unsurprising. The hypothesis that physical fairs are outdated seems plausible.

However, in reality, there is less empirical support for a larger trend of decline regarding fairs. The survival and attractiveness of the fair for crafted objects can be sought through the potential of exhibiting the object in its entirety and presenting the maker in person. In this sense, '[c]rafted objects become objects of desire and a point of intersubjective connection through which awareness of human feeling is experienced' (Bell & Vachhani, 2020, p. 695). Fairs enable sensory experiences that digital technologies cannot replace. Even after the pandemic, craft fairs are sensational events driven by organisational concern, individual curiosity and public interest. Thus, this paper advances the economic sociology of marketplaces, especially fairs, by employing craft as a case in point to show how and why personal contacts matter. Moreover, it emphasises the importance and meaning of fairs as a community-building event, productive setting and economic endeavour. Finally, studying crafts can contribute to problematising taken-for-granted changes in society and the economy.

In this contribution, we have shed light on the role of fairs as a site and event enabling social interaction between makers, users and intermediaries. Moreover, we discussed the overall orientation of the activities and their role for the participants. We identified three means of social interaction at fairs. Economic interaction emphasises trading relations, consisting of the strategic exchange of property rights – that is, sales or transactions between parties for the purpose of self-information and potential follow-up trade. In addition to the expected economic interactions, we found that two other types of social interactions were important for craft fairs. Community-building interaction addresses communality and contributes to the collective sensemaking of the actors in personal encounters at the fairs. This constitutes the fair as a community-based, sometimes festival-like, unit. Productive interaction concerns inspirational and informative exposure, which is constitutive of the competitive setting of marketplaces, especially fairs. This interaction establishes the fair as a pool of motley ideas and impressions, allowing for mutual observation and comparison. Considering these means of interaction together constitutes the fair as a marketplace that is not exclusively, but significantly, set up for economic activities.

Seen in the light of our analysis, this study connects to existing research well but clearly adds to it by showing that, perhaps contrary to the expectation of the demise of physical fairs due to acceleration of forms of digital transaction and interaction, it is very much alive. Hence, despite the advantages the internet has brought about in terms of 'the efficient production and dissemination of information in diverse forms, and sellers and buyers [being able to] share knowledge about product quality, design and cost across the globe without the need for social interaction' (Aspers & Darr, 2011, p. 775 f.), we agree that physical engagement and encounters provided by fairs seem not to have lost their significance. Rather, as Aspers and Darr (2011) conclude, 'the more archaic face-to-face encounters between sellers and buyers at trade shows are actually expected to increase, rather than decrease, with the growing pace of technological advance' (p. 776). Similarly, the need to establish basic trust relationships and the social order of the marketplace makes the craft sector rely heavily on physical face-to-face interaction.

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