

# Staging Exclusive & Interactive Experiences: The Case of Music & Craft

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## **Introduction**

“The Internet is the greatest force of commoditization ever known to man, for both goods and services” (Pine and Gilmore 1999, 10).

Imagine for a second that you just formed a band. After writing and rehearsing a few songs you decide to do some recording with your laptop and free software. At this point you may be marveling at how digital technologies have transformed these capital intensive and highly specialized tasks into relatively affordable and accessible activities. However, when you decide to post, promote and sell your songs online, the real challenge becomes apparent: with declining entry barriers, digital technologies and global integration, the marketplace for cultural products - including music and craft - has become saturated and highly competitive. Indeed, Apple’s iTunes music store offers over 37 millions songs and Etsy listed over 34 million new cultural products in 2013 (Apple 2014; Etsy 2014). This ‘dilemma of democratization’ curtails the ability of independent cultural producers to command monopoly rents. Thus, between 2001 and 2006, for example, the annual incomes of musicians in Toronto declined by 25.9 per cent to \$13,773 (CAD) (Hracs and Leslie 2013) and craft makers often take on additional work to support their income (Jakob 2013). In response, cultural entrepreneurs are developing innovative strategies to market and monetize their products and to ‘stand out’ in the crowded marketplace (Hracs et al. 2013).

As Pine and Gilmore (1999) anticipated, many of these strategies involve adding experiential elements. However, experiences are often considered as a means of complementing existing goods and services or as a way to build brand recognition and loyalty rather than as products in their own right. Moreover, existing studies tend to focus on large global firms such as Prada and their efforts to use space and technology, through

their flagship stores and websites, to enhance the shopping experience and to build and differentiate the aura of their brand (Crewe 2010). As such, this chapter contributes to our understanding of the experience economy, consumption and entrepreneurship by examining the ways in which poorly understood independent cultural producers are using experiences as standalone products to help supplement and promote their goods and services. In so doing, we demonstrate how local producers are manipulating four different aspects of their experience offerings (exclusivity, interactivity, space and time) and harnessing consumer desires for symbolic value, authenticity and creative expression.

Here, independent or 'indie' refers to individuals or small groups who produce cultural goods, services and experiences. Within this broad group we focus on individual musicians who are not affiliated with record labels and craft makers who produce customized items or single collections in small numbers (for a detailed definition of craft and craft makers see Jakob 2013). Although this mode of do-it-yourself (DIY) production is often dismissed as a niche alternative, it is rapidly becoming a significant source of economic activity, employment and value in the cultural sector. In Canada, for example, over 95% of all musicians operate as independent entrepreneurs (Hracs et al. 2013) and Etsy.com, the online handmade goods retail platform, reported a 5000% sales increase between 2008 and 2011 (Jakob 2013).

The chapter begins by reviewing the relevant literature on the experience economy and the evolving nature of consumer demand. After outlining our fieldwork, it offers a four-part analysis of how independent musicians and craft makers structure and enhance cultural experiences by manipulating 1) exclusivity 2) interactivity 3) space and 4) time.

The chapter concludes by considering the effectiveness and sustainability of using experiences to generate distinction, value and loyalty.

### **The Experience Economy**

As the cultural economy continues to globalize and markets become increasingly integrated and competitive, the impetus to create and exploit new forms of value is intensifying. In geography, the competitiveness of firms is often linked to the production of new knowledge and products through innovation. For city-regions, competitiveness is said to flow from the ability places to develop and exploit local production, milieus and cultural activities (Scott 2000). Recently, however, this productionist perspective has been critiqued (Grabher et al. 2008; Power and Hauge 2008) and alternative frameworks for understanding value creation and the relationship between production and consumption have been put forward. Originating from studies in consumer behaviour (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982; Schmitt 1999) and strategic management (Pine and Gilmore 1999), the experience economy perspective has gained currency in economic geography. Put simply, this approach argues that consumption and consumer engagement are central to the creation of economic value (Lorentzen and Jeannerat 2013). By extension, the experience economy perspective argues that spaces are not mere production sites or containers of economic activity but rather important sites of consumption and ‘stages’ that shape exchanges between producers, intermediaries and consumers and the outcomes of such interactions (Lorentzen and Jeannerat 2013).

Thus, according to Pine and Gilmore (1999), contemporary firms must transition from providing products to offering experiences that enhance existing goods and services

and constitute new consumption opportunities and sources of value. Swiss watchmakers, for example, use interactive experiences such as workshops, exhibitions, museums and factory visits to legitimize and educate consumers about the value of their products (Jeannerat 2013). For producers, the benefits of offering experiences are obvious but why are consumers compelled to spend time and money on them? More importantly, as the volume and range of deliberately staged experiences in the marketplace increases, how do consumers choose between the competing alternatives?

### **‘I Speak Through My Experiences’ – The Evolving Nature of Consumer Demand**

The pioneering works of Veblen ([1899] 1912) and Simmel (1904) demonstrate that the consumption of cultural products allows people to communicate characteristics such as class, status, occupation, and individuality through a system of codes, symbols, and signs. Today, the desire for social distinction, prestige, and personality via consumption and style is intensifying (Bourdieu 1984). For Zukin (2004), shopping is the primary strategy for creating value and way for individuals to define who they are and what they want to become. Indeed, for consumers, choosing certain products over others allows consumers to exercise their judgment of taste and articulate their sense of class and cultural identity (Shipman 2004).

As Trigg (2001), points out however, the search for status through consumption is never ending and products that once conferred status can lose that ability. For example, whereas clothing used to be the quintessential signifier of class and way for elites to distinguish themselves from the masses, the availability of cheap knockoffs and counterfeit copies erode the value of luxury goods. This has compelled consumers to shift

their focus from goods to authentic and exclusive experiences that are more difficult to replicate (Gilmore and Pine 2007; Zukin 2010). According to Shipman (2004), when cultural products become available to all, sophisticated consumers can maintain their exclusivity by getting a better view.

In general, the attractiveness and value of experiences rests with their participatory nature but of course not all experiences are created or consumed in the same way. For example, Pine and Gilmore (1999) outline a four-part typology of experience realms (entertainment, education, escapism and esthetic), which features varying levels of intensity and engagement from consumers. Whereas entertainment or esthetic experiences often entail passive participation from consumers, escapist or educational experiences are often more active and participatory in nature. An entertainment experience, for example, may involve listening to a story about a product but an escapist experience may involve actively creating a personalized or entirely new product. To cater to a range of tastes, firms endeavour to create or 'stage' environments, artifacts and contexts that facilitate interaction and allow consumers to co-create their own experiences.

As a result, experiences allow individuals to create their own identities and simultaneously display social status and advance self-actualization (Boggs 2009; Lorentzen and Hansen 2009). For a growing number of contemporary consumers, self-actualization entails learning, doing, trying and making. In *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002), for example, Florida argues that members of the so-called 'creative class' prefer "authentic and participatory experiences" as opposed to passive and staged experiences such as those provided by Disney. Thus, unlike Veblen's 'leisure class' contemporary

creatives constitute an 'active class' who replace time-killing activities with a more purposeful utilization of leisure time and covet experiences that fire their creative impulses and generate new opportunities for workplace creativity (Banks 2009).

## **Fieldwork**

The empirical evidence and conceptual understanding of exclusive and interactive cultural experiences presented in this chapter comes from seven separate research projects (see Figure 1). The projects were planned and conducted independently but subsequent discussions and data comparison between the authors revealed that the projects featured remarkably similar objectives, data collection methods, and findings.

In addition to conducting over 300 interviews (combined), each author observed how products were marketed and experienced by visiting retail shops, fairs, marketing events, and music performances. The authors also participated directly in local markets as a musician and a craft maker. This personal engagement and familiarity, as noted by Valentine (2005), proved useful in establishing rapport with respondents and interpreting the rich results of the interviews and observation.

Although we freely acknowledge the lack of complete uniformity between the cases, the high degree of overlap convinced us that combining our data would generate a better understanding of cultural experiences and a more original contribution to the field. Such a combination allowed us to construct our arguments from a larger sample of in-depth interviews and years of observation and participation. Moreover, because this sample includes interviews with independent musicians and craft makers we were able to extend our analysis beyond one single industry.

**Figure 1: Summary of Fieldwork**

<b>Brian J. Hrcacs</b>	<b>Doreen Jakob</b>
<p><b>Prince Edward County (Ontario) 2004-2005</b>            Interviews with artists and craft makers: 19            Observation (studios, stores, venues)            Analysis of relevant media</p>	<p><b>Berlin 2005 - 2007, 2011</b>            Interviews with musicians: 8            Interviews with craft makers: 16            Interviews with Key Informants: 40            Observation (studios, galleries/stores, markets/events/festivals, clubs)            Participation (member of local artist collective)            Analysis of relevant media</p>
<p><b>Toronto 2007-2009</b>            Interviews with musicians: 51            Interviews with key informants: 14            Observation (concerts, bars, studios, music stores)            Participation (performing and recording with bands)            Analysis of relevant media</p>	<p><b>Durham NC 2011, 2013</b>            Interviews with craft makers: 30            Observation (studios, galleries/stores, markets/events/festivals)            Participation (member of two local craft markets, craft festival participation &amp; organization, classes &amp; workshops, studio artist at local ceramics centre, studio technician)            Analysis of relevant media</p>
<p><b>Stockholm 2012-2013</b>            Interviews with musicians and record store employees: 11            Observation (record stores)</p>	
<b>Doreen Jakob</b>	
<p><b>New York City 2005 - 2007</b>            Interviews with musicians: 16            Interviews with craft makers: 15            Interviews with key informants: 74            Observation (studios, galleries/stores, markets/events/festivals, clubs)            Participation (gallery work, member of local artist collective, workshops)            Analysis of relevant media</p>	<p><b>South West England 2012 - 2013*</b>            Interviews with craft makers: 19            Interviews with key informants: 13            Observation (studios, galleries/stores, markets/events/festivals, craft guilds)            Participation (guild membership meetings, classes &amp; workshops)            Analysis of relevant media            *with Nicola J. Thomas</p>

As these respondents operate in a variety of locations ranging from South West England and Durham (USA) to Toronto, Stockholm, Berlin, and New York City, the combination also allowed us to consider the use of experience-based strategies in rural areas as well as urban centers of cultural production. At a time of increasing globalization, labour mobility, and hyper-competition we believe that bringing together responses from as many independent producers as possible yields a more complete and nuanced account than either of the authors could have produced on their own. As such, we also believe that



any methodological unevenness is outweighed by the value of exploring these phenomena and establishing a foundation for future research.

### **Selling Backstage Passes – Generating Value Through Exclusive Experiences**

As digital technologies continue to spur the industrialization and democratization of cultural production, the cultural marketplace is becoming saturated. Concomitantly, consumer demand is increasingly reflexive, sophisticated, and volatile. As a result, independent musicians and craft makers face intensifying competition and struggle to attract and retain the attention and patronage of fickle consumers. To circumvent mass-produced or illegal substitutes, our research indicates that some cultural producers generate distinction and value through traditional artisanal production techniques and exclusivity. For instance, it is common for independent musicians to produce handcrafted albums that feature hand-painted artwork, photographs of the band, poetry, individual numbering, and handwritten thank-you cards. These albums are marketed as unique products that contain layers of value that are not offered by digital downloads or mass-produced CDs. As one respondent explained:

People want to be part of the club [and] they want to have the limited edition stuff... We have done releases in vinyl, which had been hand numbered. We offer hand etchings on the fourth side of the vinyl and add additional or extended tracks. It ends up being a package that you wouldn't normally see. It is not a mass-produced package and with all of the handcrafted detail we only issue about 300 units. We take it on the road and sell it for [CAD]\$25 instead of \$15 so we are selling them for a premium. When people start talking about the limited edition albums you get some buzz going and it helps promote the album and the live show. People start saying 'I was one of the few to snag this new cool album.'

As Shipman (2004) points out, consumers are willing to pay a premium for scarce products because of the select company owning these products puts them in. Thus, consumers must display high levels of cultural and social capital to find and obtain

unique products and limiting supply allows indie producers to generate distinction and value.

In addition to selling exclusive goods, some independent musicians are also enhancing the exclusivity and value of their live shows. Instead of targeting big venues and thousands of consumers at a time, some respondents are offering exclusive ‘salon’ style experiences that are limited to twenty-five people. Musicians interact directly with fans, through their websites and social media, to arrange small private shows performed at the houses of fans. These exclusive experiences can generate over \$500 (CAD) a night for musicians. This is particularly impressive given that the majority of the musicians in Toronto reported that because of high levels of competition, it is difficult to earn more than \$50 (CAD) for a live performance.

Independent craft makers also offer consumers opportunities to participate in exclusive private previews before the opening of craft shows and/or craft gallery exhibitions. Previews are usually invitation-only events hosted the night before the general opening for a selected audience of donors, collectors, buyers, senior politicians and representatives of arts and cultural institutions and are often free of charge. They often feature public speeches, the presentation of special awards, live music and signature cocktails. For craft makers, previews offer the opportunity to pamper clients and mingle with potential customers in an exclusive setting. For consumers, being invited to such an event symbolized the belonging to an exclusive club. Respondents in Europe and North America reported that exclusive previews generate higher sales than general admission.

Exclusive experiences allow consumers to ‘get a better view’ of the stage (Shipman 2004) and to cultivate and communicate their taste and individuality (Veblen [1899]

1912; Simmel 1904; Bourdieu 1984) which in turn generates distinction and additional value for cultural producers. Yet, as consumer experiences are controlled and staged by the producers, the relationships are one-sided. The following demonstrates that more balanced and intimate interactions between producers and consumers and hands-on experiences with products, production processes and producers add even greater levels of exclusivity and appeal to consumer desires for authenticity and self-actualization.

### **Co-Creating Onstage: Generating Value Through Interactive Experiences**

While exclusivity and value can be generated through limitation, customization and uniqueness, providing additional products and special events may not be enough to sustain the attention of more ambitious consumers. Thus, some cultural producers cater to consumers with immersive, participatory and interactive rather than passive experiences. The relationship between cultural producers and consumers has long been acknowledged as important for the Arts and Crafts Movement. As Charles Ashbee wrote in 1908, the ideal working life of a craftsman consists of “some collective grouping, a number of workman practicing different crafts, carrying out as far as possible their own designs, coming into direct contact with the material, and so organized as to make it possible for the workmen to be wherever necessary *in touch with* the consumer” (Ashbee [1908] 1977, 18, italics added).

Yet, interactions between producers and consumers appear to be accelerating for a variety of reasons. As the number of ‘desk jobs’ that eschew physical and creative aspects increases, individuals crave ‘hands on’ and mentally stimulating activities outside of work. In some cases this overlaps with do-it-yourself (DIY), maker, environmental and

anti-capitalist movements. Thus, hand-made and artisanal production is regaining its appeal as a form of self-fulfillment and authenticity (for a discussion about the resurgence in craft production and consumption see Jakob 2013). By involving consumers in the production process and facilitating ‘co-creation’ (Potts et al. 2008), producers are able to generate exclusivity, value and loyalty by blurring the boundaries between the previously distinct processes of production and consumption (Hracs et al. 2013).

Our research shows that interactions between producers and consumers can take different forms including live demonstrations. While live music performances showcase the production of music, craft makers demonstrate the skills and the many steps it takes to turn raw materials into craft objects. Experiences that encourage consumer education and interaction have long been critical elements for developing consumer appreciation for fine craft. In our interviews, craft market organizers, gallery managers and individual craft makers all talked about the enhanced value and connection that consumers feel towards the craftwork through watching the making process which in turn leads to greater sales for the makers. In addition, web 2.0 technologies allow for demonstrations to be on demand via video and social media. For instance, the craft blog network ‘craftgossip.com’ curates the 20 best newly posted craft tutorials and distributes them to its membership everyday. Similarly, the website ‘Now Play It’ sells recorded tutorials where established and emerging musicians teach viewers how to play their songs. To illustrate how popular tutorials are becoming, a simple search for ‘music tutorial’ on YouTube produced over 10 million results.

Although these interactive experiences help independent producers to educate consumers, market their products and generate income, their effectiveness is curtailed by their increasing ubiquity and passive nature. Indeed, consumers are increasingly interested in ‘getting their hands dirty’ and experiencing direct interaction with producers and materials. Thus, personal instruction, in the form of classes and workshops, are being offered as intense and intimate experiences that feature higher levels of exclusivity, interactivity and value for consumers.

As our interviews and personal participation revealed, classes and workshops come in many forms and no two experiences are alike. While most feature personal or group instruction by an expert, some develop or advance specific skills (e.g. learning to play a selected instrument), while others focus on specific projects (e.g. designing and making a chest of drawers) or mastering a specific technique (e.g. pulling and throwing ceramic handles and lids). Despite their individual dynamics, these classes and workshops share a common structure that enables and encourages consumers to directly interact, engage with and learn from cultural producers.

Consumers are drawn to these experiences because they are considered more authentic, facilitate creativity and self-actualization and result in a ‘story’ that can be converted into social and cultural capital (Zukin 2004; Gilmore and Pine 2007; Boggs 2009; Lorentzen and Hansen 2009). As one consumer explained:

I made our wedding bands from some gold that was in my family. [...] Not being artistically-inclined or crafty myself, and not working in a profession that really allows me to use my body creatively, I also like opportunities to do something with my hands [...] Our jeweler uses a lot of hand-based techniques, which we felt made the wedding ring more special. Making the bands myself represents another notch down the spectrum of meaningful ringdom, so to speak. It all creates a great story that we can tell forever.

Similarly, a lawyer in New York City emphasizes the emotional and therapeutic benefits of ‘making’ and taking classes with cultural producers when she says that these experiences make her feel like “a very complete person.” She further explains: “Everyone else in my office just gets drunk to deal with the stress of the job [...] and I do woodworking” (cited in Ryzik, 2010, C1).

For cultural producers conducting classes and workshops has numerous benefits. In addition to providing an extra (sometimes substantial) income stream, which helps to diversify their revenues, the act of teaching can be immensely rewarding. For the ceramic artist Demetria Chappo, teaching classes is “so inspiring as well as so grounding. Getting back to basics, reiterating technique and process is fruitful for my own work and often translates to the business side” (Design Songe 2014). Teaching also provides ample opportunities to introduce ones own work to a new audience and to cultivate future customers. In fact, introducing its new “Craft in an Age of Change” report at a presentation event in Bristol, UK in 2012, the UK Crafts Council explained that their program to teach ceramics in schools is not only meant to introduce children to making but more importantly raise them to be passionate consumers and collectors of craft in the future.

This statement supports the recent work by Jeannerat (2013) who demonstrates that watchmaking companies educate and ‘initiate’ consumers, journalists and brand ambassadors through interactive experiences (e.g. workshops, exhibitions, factory visits). Through these staged encounters consumers experience the idealized origin of the product, which is then legitimized and appreciate as real. Interestingly, whereas large global firms postpone the monetary transaction until the final purchase of the product and

do not typically charge consumers admission for these experiences (Jeannerat, 2013), independent cultural producers are selling interactive experiences as stand-alone products.

### **Locating The Stage – Enhancing Experiences Through The Manipulation of Physical and Virtual Space**

Geographers have considered how consumption spaces are produced, governed, and used, but the ways in which specific spatial dynamics shape and enhance experiences can be further unpacked. There is a need to move beyond the examination of flagship stores (Crewe 2010) and retail spaces of connoisseurship (Jeannerat 2013) to consider how independent producers manipulate and benefit from physical and virtual spaces in much less resource-intensive ways. This section will demonstrate that as experiences become more common, some independent cultural producers are staging experiences with specific spatial dynamics to enhance their exclusivity and interactive value. By providing examples of how specific activities and events are being staged in physical as well as online environments, it also highlights the diverse spatial spectrum of cultural experiences.

In line with Currid (2007), who argues that fashion shows, music venues, and art galleries are pivotal social settings that valorize cultural products and the identities of audience members, some cultural producers intentionally limit access to physical spaces such as parties, sales events and workshops to produce scarcity as well as social and cultural capital.

Our research suggests that musicians and craft makers stage cultural experiences in ‘secret spaces,’ including publically unknown music venues, bars, galleries, clubs and

studios, to enhance their attractiveness, exclusivity and value. In New York City, for example, secret places resurrect nostalgic memories of prohibition. To stage the experience of secrecy, many venues eschew signage and require secret passwords from their patrons. In some cases managers verify the authenticity of the code word or invitation before granting access. We found similar venues in Berlin and Toronto, including an experimental jazz club located in a difficult-to-find industrial unit next to a furniture showroom. According to the owner, this venue was designed to offer an intimate and exclusive setting and facilitate interactions between performers and audiences.

Secret places represent an additional layer of geography in which economic capital is trumped by the social capital of ‘who you know’ and the cultural capital of ‘what you know’ (Bourdieu 1984; Currid 2007). The mystique and exclusivity of these spaces can generate buzz and value but maintaining this status can be challenging. Once secret spaces become exposed and popularized they usually lose their cachet and local pressures of gentrification can also reduce the short lifecycles of these establishments (for a review of these tensions see Zukin 2010).

While secret clubs can literally restrict access and insiders can visually verify their exclusive membership, these strategies must be amended for use in online environments. As Currah (2003) points out, in cyberspace the power dynamics have been reworked and producers must deploy new methods of display to entice consumers. For musicians, simple websites that promote traditional products, like recorded music and live performances, are evolving to include virtual products and exclusive and interactive experiences (Denegri-Knott and Molesworth 2010). Websites provide platforms to



attract, reward, and stay connected with consumers and bands often sell the experience of joining an exclusive ‘members only’ club. In Toronto, many independent musicians offer members the experience of previewing new material (songs, videos, live shows, photos, contests) before it is officially released to the public and provide access to exclusive ‘members only’ content (rare demos, behind the scenes footage and photos, private performances). According to Choi and Burnes (2013) the value that music fans gain from their participation in online communities comes from the sense of identity that being a member of the community gives them. Indeed, consumers must display high levels of cultural and social capital to find and obtain unique products and are willing to pay a premium for the select company that owning and experiencing them put them in (Shipman 2004).

Traditionally, the ability of music consumers to co-create value was limited by the need for direct interaction between producers and consumers. However, the advent of the Internet and especially Web 2.0, offers the potential to overcome the need for spatial proximity and temporal synchronicity and opens up new opportunities for interaction (Choi and Burnes 2013). For example, to tap into the growing demand for interactive experiences bands stage remix contests that allow consumers to express their own creativity by reconfiguring the band’s audio and video content. An illustrative case of this much-emulated practice comes from the UK rock band Radiohead. In 2008, Radiohead created a remix on its website. Fans were invited to download (from iTunes for \$.99 each) five different stems - the bass track, the drum track, the vocal track, the guitar track and an FX track - to create a remix of the song ‘nude’ which would be judged by the band and fan community. In one month over 2,000 remixes were uploaded to the band’s

website. Despite being conducted completely online, offering this interactive experience helped Radiohead to deter the illegal downloading of its songs and sell five tracks at \$.99 instead of one to a horde of fans who were eager to interact with the band. Thus, the commercial success of this album was made possible by harnessing the desire to be part of an exclusive club and in this case the production process itself (Van Buskirk 2008).

Although consumers can never be sure how exclusive virtual spaces and digital content are, their willingness to believe constructed images suggests that virtual interaction and imagined exclusivity are powerful tools to create authentic and valuable experiences for consumers.

### **Choreographing The Stage: Enhancing Experiences Through The Manipulation of Time**

To enhance the distinctiveness and value of cultural experiences, cultural producers can blur the boundaries between physical and virtual space and strategically grant or limit access to specific settings. Increasingly, however, the staging of space is being combined with the strategic choreography of time. Music and craft festivals both embrace the heightened customer experience generated from temporality. For example, the first night bazaar held in Brooklyn, New York City, in 2011 featured independent craft makers as well as independent musicians for one night only, from 5pm to midnight. The event generated crowds so large that people lined up for up to four hours.

Many of the aforementioned demonstrations and workshops also strategically limit their duration and producers endeavor to enhance value by offering experiences that are not only 'one of a kind' but also 'one time only'. One particularly illustrative example of how different elements can be layered to generate increased authenticity comes from the

handmade online retail platform DaWanda.com. When it organized its first physical craft market in 2011 it limited the event to one day only and held it in a hip hotel in downtown Berlin. It also showcased selected craft makers, their work and individually designed wallpaper by each maker for each hotel room. By combining exclusive and interactive experiences and enhancing them with specific spatial and temporal elements DaWanda.com created a truly unique and highly valuable spectacle (cf. also design life berlin 2011).

With the success of these events, placing temporal limits on experiences has become a popular strategy of staging cultural experiences. Recently, for example, a growing number of so-called ‘pop-up shops’ have been erected in both crowded and secret locations in many cultural metropolises including New York City, Berlin and Toronto as well as in rural country towns (e.g. Devon, UK). In December 2012, for example, Etsy.com opened its first ever retail space in SoHo, New York City as a pop-up shop for ten days during the Christmas season. Much like the DaWanda event, Etsy did not stop at opening a conventional retail shop. Instead, the shop provided an environment curated by nine star designers and stylists that also changed every day as new artists made work within the shop for daily display. It also continuously offered different events from the time it opened to the time it closed including talks, discussions, concerts, performances, tastings and workshops.

Most intriguing to consumers, however, were the numerous opportunities to observe the making process and interact with the makers of the products displayed. As a customer explains: “What we really loved about the shop was that you had the letterpress set up and you had the sewing machines. So it was really hands on” while another states:

“You feel like this is a place where artists can flourish and you can actually see their work and make a connection with them” (quoted in Etsy 2013).

In addition, the shop offered Etsy an opportunity to transcend the spatial boundaries between its permanent online business and short-term offline activities. Indeed, one visitor talked about the opportunity to physically engage with makers: “The neat thing about here is having the interaction face-to-face with the makers. I have had lots of online interactions with people but it is nice to have that face-to-face interaction as well.” While another is looking forward to extending her experience to the online shop: “I’ll probably go home and go online and look up some more stuff” (cited in *ibid.*). Given its first success, Etsy has meanwhile organized more pop-up shops in New York City as well as in other cities (e.g. Atlanta, Chicago, Seattle, Portland, Salt Lake City).

While short-term spectacles are certainly exclusive, their authenticity, appeal and strategic effectiveness may decrease as one-of-a-kind events ‘pop up’ on every street corner. Moreover, staging these experiences requires resources, logistics and coordination that are beyond most independent entrepreneurs. Shows and workshops also increase the risk that independent producers will have their unique designs and techniques stolen and duplicated by ‘copycats’ (McCall 2008).

Thus musicians and craft makers are also developing longer-term and repetitive experiences for consumers that generate value through personalization, trust, loyalty and repeat business. With social media, continuous engagement between producers and consumers is easier than ever. By 2007, 80 per cent of all musicians maintained a MySpace page (Antin and Earp 2010). Today, using online spaces such as iTunes and personal websites to sell and promote products has become a necessity for success.

Modern social media applications such as Facebook and Twitter have fundamentally altered the relationship between producers and consumers and allow musicians and other independent cultural producers to engage directly with consumers on increasingly personal levels. Through the practices of ‘friending’ and ‘following’, producers invite consumers to experience their creativity, businesses and private lives. Our research finds that ‘creating conversations’ and making ‘meaningful emotional connections’ with consumers, also dubbed ‘friends’ and ‘fans,’ is vitally important to building a stable client base and surviving the volatile marketplace (Hracs and Leslie 2013).

As social media sites become saturated with information, however, maintaining connections with consumers becomes more difficult. Indeed, keeping consumers engaged requires cultural producers to constantly update their creative and personal content and this requires more and more time, energy and aesthetic labour. In some cases, producers resort to using scripted templates and for this, and other reasons, information and interactions available online can be judged to be less authentic and valuable than experiences that transpire through face-to-face interactions.

In addition to the intimate spatial settings offered by the aforementioned classes, regular retail events, including the growing number of craft markets and local music events, offer opportunities for establishing and maintaining producer-consumer relationships. For instance, at the Durham Craft Market, craft makers report that the market’s regularity (every Saturday morning from April - November) fosters a continuing relationship with consumers who regularly visit to buy but also to chat just about new products and about the private lives of the makers. Through these interactions, producers learn about their consumers’ tastes, their favorite forms and colors and intimate details

about their lives including where their kids go to college and where they spend their holidays. Over time, trusting relationships are forged and maintained which allow producers to develop personalized, and thus more valuable, products for an increasingly loyal group of consumers. Our findings echo recent work by Ocejó (2012) who examined similar relationships between bartenders, barbers and butchers and their customers. As he notes:

[Consumers] seek high-touch experiences in public places to acquire knowledge and goods that transcend the everyday experience of shopping and leisure consumption. Building ‘trust’ over time (to be able to serve someone a new drink they’ll like, or suggest a new hairstyle or different cut of meat, all based on their prior orders and tastes), building “confidence” as a worker to integrate cultural knowledge, technical skill, and interpersonal communication (head, hand, and heart) into their work, and taking control of the production process to create the “right” product and service are all part of that and all strongly feature deliberate temporality (Ocejó 2012)

Although the temporal aspects of cultural experiences remain under-theorized, it is clear that independent producers are strategically manipulating the duration of events, activities and relationships. While short or limited time horizons heighten the perception of exclusivity for fickle consumers, sustained interaction over time can build more trusting relationships and meaningful experiences for ‘regulars’. In the age of short attention spans and fast-fashion, building a base of loyal friends and fans helps independent producers to weather the cyclical trends and volatility in the marketplace.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter contributes to our understanding of the experience economy, consumption and entrepreneurship by examining how independent musicians and craft makers use experiences as standalone products to help supplement and promote their

goods and services. The four-part analysis highlights the ways in which these entrepreneurs stage exclusive and interaction experiences that cater to the evolving demands of contemporary consumers. Whereas consumers value exclusive experiences for their symbolic properties, interactive experiences attract consumers who want to develop and express their own creativity. Crucially, to make these experiences more authentic independent producers combine these dominant properties and enhance them with specific spatial and temporal elements.

On the surface, developing exclusive and interactive cultural experiences appears to bring great benefits to independent musicians and craft makers but there is a danger of romanticizing the economic effectiveness of these strategies and ignoring their physical and emotional consequences. As the literature on the precariousness of creative work and our own research highlights (McRobbie 1998; Hracs and Leslie 2013; Jakob 2013) independent cultural producers face a battery of risks and challenges including self-exploitation, temporal and spatial fragmentation, and extremely uncertain and low incomes. For instance, in 2006 musicians in Toronto earned average annual incomes of \$13 773 (CAD) which places them below the ‘low-income cut-off’ of \$20 778 (CAD) (Hracs et al. 2013). Moreover, the ability of online spaces to blur the boundaries between producers and consumers and facilitate intimate interactions brings benefits and challenges. Websites and social media allow independent cultural producers to establish relationships with fans, build brand loyalty, crowd source creative ideas and secure funding for new projects (using sites such as ‘Kickstarter’). Yet, these activities require investments of aesthetic labour, which limit the resources these entrepreneurs can allocate to developing new creative content and contributes to what McRobbie calls the

“corrosion of creativity” (2002, 61). Therefore, although offering cultural experiences may help independent cultural producers become economically self-sufficient, the majority are destined to fail (Banks, 2007).

As independent cultural producers allocate more resources to exclusive and interactive experiences it is also important to question the sustainability and ongoing effectiveness of these commercial strategies. With the marketplace for cultural goods, services and experiences becoming even more saturated and competition intensifying, producers and consumers are locked into a never-ending cycle of discovering and discarding sources of uniqueness and value. Against this backdrop, critics may contend that given their limited resources it may only be a matter of time before independent cultural producers lose their ability to offer authentic and valuable experiences. Yet, as the chapter demonstrates, enduring relationships with consumers can help producers mediate market volatility and digital technologies are constantly providing new ways to extract value from the desire of consumers for symbolic value, exclusivity, creative expression and self-actualization. Therefore, we submit that future research should examine the sustainability and ongoing effectiveness of using experiences to market and monetize cultural products and how these commercial strategies can be differentiated and enhanced with specific spatial settings and temporal choreography.



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