

KnitWell: recording emotional state through creative, open-ended knitting practice

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Abstract

Research into the effect of craft practice on well-being suggests that craft has a positive impact on self-belief, self-worth, and well-being. This could explain why the UK is embracing a crafting revolution during the Covid-19 pandemic. KnitWell, a practice-based project, uses a 'free knitting' approach which explores choices of yarn, colour, gauge, and stitch in an open ended and creative way. This 'free knitting' approach is used to create a knitted journal, as an intentional parallel of initiatives which use 'free writing' with the aim of improving mental well-being. Somebody exploring the KnitWell approach might knit once a day for a month, to capture their emotional state at the time of knitting like a form of daily journaling. This doctoral research investigates the KnitWell methodology with 12 participants who undertake three month-long phases of activity, creating a daily knitted journal for a period of one month in each phase. The research is further complemented by autoethnographic enquiry by the researcher. KnitWell poses the question: what opportunities and limitations can this style of knitting offer as a means of recording an emotional state and what (if any) effect this activity may have, when undertaken daily, on mental well-being? Separate to this project, the researcher has several different experiences within the knitting industry, these include owning a yarn shop and developing classes for knitting and crochet, 2013-16, designing hand knit patterns, working as Brand Marketing Executive for Blacker Yarns, 2018-19, having hand knit designs published in leading books and knitting magazines internationally. This paper investigates two autoethnographic KnitWell activities which take place over differing intervals. The data includes: 'knitted journal' artefacts, photographs of the knitted journals and written journal reflection documenting thoughts on the opportunities for self-expression that each knitted journal project offers. In this paper, the researcher sets out to discuss the flexible use of stitch and colour to communicate emotional state, by exploring the approach taken to 'free knitting' within each of the two activities. Finally, they reflect on how this type of working differs from traditional fashion knitwear design practice and shines a light on the role of the designer through artefacts and methodology.

Introduction

Over the last 18 months, throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, knitting has reached new heights of popularity (Klass, 2020; Wood, 2020). Most academic research associating knitting and well-being concentrates on two specific elements. The first element is, the physical act of knitting, investigating whether the repeated forming of basic knit stitches has a calming effect on the body (Corkhill et al., 2014; Court, 2020). The second element is, knitting in a social setting as a purposeful leisure activity (Mayne, 2016). My research explores the potential of a different facet of knitting for well-being: KnitWell. KnitWell involves the creation of a Daily Knit Journal (DKJ) that explores a particular aspect of knitting practice within an approach called ‘free knitting’. Free knitting explores the choices one can make within knitting, such as yarn, colour, gauge, and stitch choice, in an open ended and creative way. Therefore, KnitWell sits between the two conventional modes of knitting within practice and research: the approach is more creative and complex than the repetitive forming of identical basic stitches, but more open-ended and exploratory than the practical projects typically undertaken by leisure knitters.

This paper begins with a short overview of my background as a knitter and the development and scope of the KnitWell methodology and then presents an autoethnographic enquiry into the KnitWell methodology along with reflections on keeping a Daily Knit Journal.

The Story of a Knitter (Researcher)

Like many, I was taught to knit at a young age by my grandmother, but I was too impatient to stick to it. However, this changed when, at 20, I was invited to my grandmother’s knitting group one evening in 2010. Walking into a warm living room with smiling faces and the dull sound of needles clicking in the background, I felt at home. I think back to that evening many times, as it changed the course of my journey in fashion and textiles, including at the time, my undergraduate degree in Fashion Design.

Moving forward, in 2013, with the help of the Prince’s Trust and a ‘Win a Shop’ competition run by Nailsea High Street, my own business Ewe Knit 20 was established. Ewe Knit 20 gave me the opportunity to build a thriving community of crafters in the local community of Nailsea, UK. Whilst engaging with this community, it was brought to my attention that for several people, knitting was a form of release; it gave them the opportunity to focus on something other than what was going on around them.

With the knowledge and insight gained from Ewe Knit 20, I went on to complete a Masters’ degree at Nottingham Trent University, UK in Textile Design Innovation in 2018. I used this as an opportunity to investigate more formally the role of knitting as an act that can play a therapeutic role in the everyday lives of individuals.



Figure 1. Examples of MA case study knitting (Rickard, 2018)

Independent of my research, I have several different experiences within the knitting industry. These include developing classes for knitting and crochet (2013-16), designing hand knit patterns, working as Brand Marketing Executive for Blacker Yarns (2018-19) and having hand knit designs published in leading books and knitting magazines internationally. When designing hand knit patterns either to self-publish or publish within magazines there are several necessary requirements to generate a successful design submission. This design process epitomises a conventional design practice that most fashion and textiles designers will recognise. KnitWell's design practice breaks away from this convention and is discussed in more detail below.

The KnitWell Project

The KnitWell methodology has been created as part of my doctoral research which invites 12 participants to take part in three iterative phases of activity, creating a DKJ for a period of one month (28 days) in each phase. Participants are issued with a yarn palette of varied texture, colour and thickness that is intended to enable them to express their emotions and cater for different moods. The research is complemented by autoethnographic enquiry by me - the researcher - which includes activities like those undertaken by the participants, but over differing intervals, with additional elements of exploration and reflection. The focus of the autoethnographic enquiry (Muncey, 2010) is directed at methodically exploring the capabilities of knitting within stitch, colour, texture, gauge, and shape, and how these aspects can be used as a tangible, tactile tool to record an individual's emotional state.

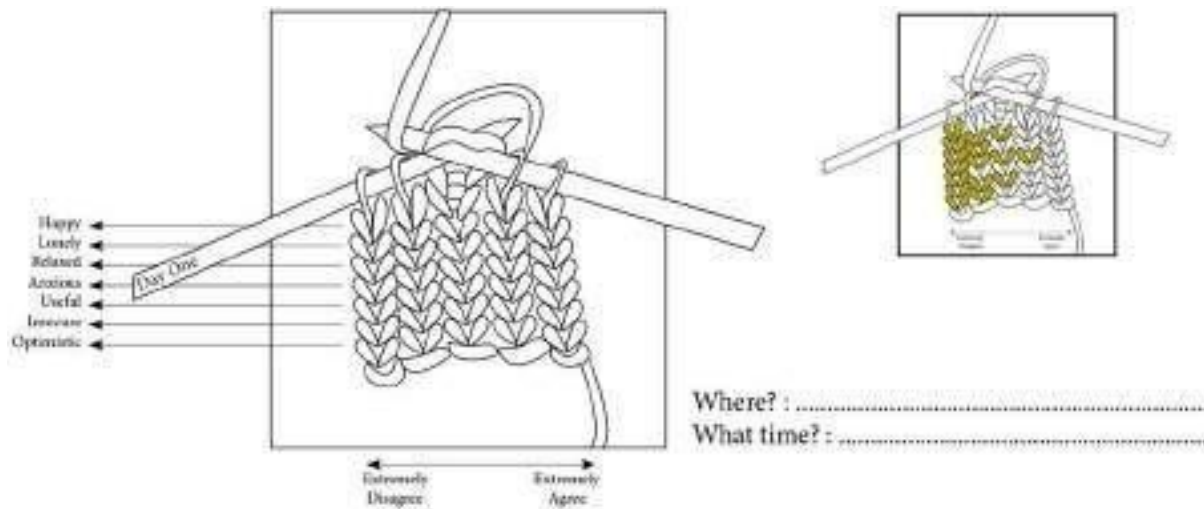


Figure 2. The Daily Wellness Knit Scale (DWKS) and to the right an example of how to complete the DWKS.

The reason for undertaking this autoethnographic enquiry is to test out the methodology, which allows me the additional benefit of analysing elements of the DKJ from a more intimate perspective. I am still at the early stages of KnitWell and within this paper I will present some initial analysis and findings.

The autoethnographic activities under investigation are two DKJs, which sit alongside the participant study. The DKJs follow the same approach as the participant study and use the same yarn palette. Throughout Phase 1, the focus of the DKJ was to use knitting to reflect on emotions from the day. Phase 2 followed the same knitting outline as Phase 1 but was accompanied by written reflection on the day and why specific stitches and colours were chosen. During Phase 1 and 2 a Daily Wellness Knit Scale (DWKS), Figure 2, was required alongside the knitting each day. The purpose was to give insight into the emotions and mood of the day, and how or if there are any similarities between the DWKS and the stitch/yarn choice respectively.

The two autoethnographic explorations include quotations from the written diary that I kept alongside the DKJ and reflections from my research journal. There is a detailed focus on stitch patterns such as I-cords, German short rows, and slip stitches.

Figure 3 shows Phase 1, completed over 28 days in May 2021. Figure 4 shows Phase 2, completed over 28 days during July – August 2021. Through inclusion of a written diary in Phase 2, it can be argued that it aided my understanding and reflections on specific days. However, these written reflections were very personal in some instances and not necessarily to be repeated here. Therefore, like Phase 1, the DWKS was crucial to interpreting the general mood from day to day when looking back at the knitting.



Figure 3 Phase 1, Daily Knit Journal, 28 days, May 2021. The Daily Knit Journal features: German short rows to change direction in the knitting, marled yarns and several I-cords protruding from the edge of the knitting and travelling over the top of previous days' sections



Figure 4. Phase 2, Daily Knit Journal, 28 days, Jul. - Aug. 2021. The Daily Knit Journal features: German short rows to change direction in the knitting (which creates areas of negative space), slip stitches and bobbles which distort the natural linear course of knitting

The focus of each DKJ has been established and now I will concentrate on specific elements of knitting that can be seen within them, for example I-cords. Traditionally, I-cords are known for how they create a narrow tube of knitting normally used for straps or edgings. Many will recognise the technique from French knitting dollies. I have found that I-cords allow space for the idea of breaking the horizontal line within knitting. It is also possible to create a 3D fabric with I-cords by working over the top of previous days as featured in Figure 2. By taking the DWKS into consideration it is possible to suggest that this 3D aspect allowed me – the knitter, to work back into previous days if the mood lingered, or if there was a need to connect back to it for example, if the same thoughts were lingering; this is evident on a few days in Figure 2.

From a layman's perspective, German Short Rows are seen to add shape and a different dimension to knitted fabric. However, as a researcher, they are very interesting to me. They pose questions like:

- Why have they been used?
- Have they been used to test different stitches?
- Has something happened to warrant a change in direction?

Additionally, by changing direction German Short Rows break the horizontal, linear line which is often formed within knitting. Are they used to reflect the fact that thoughts and feelings never quite travel from A to B without obstruction?



Figure 5. Phase One, Daily Knit Journal, May 2021. This highlights sections of German short rows in the knitting and multiples cast off edges which create steps.

Part of the KnitWell process involves the knitters looking back at the piece of knitting and identifying if there is a part that they feel more connected to. Figure 5 highlights aspects from the first DKJ that stand out to me as a researcher. It is not because – as a knitter – I remember the day necessarily, but both these sections use similar stitches: they use German short rows to change the direction in the knitting and then I have also created steps. “These were days where I felt progress during some part of the day and then something hindered that. The age old saying, one step forward and two steps back springs to mind” (EJR Research Journal, 2021). Both days are also marled with a baby yarn; one with pink cotton and one with mustard mohair. The use of baby yarn in both makes me think of my family. Looking back now, I can say it has been

quite a stressful year and being far away from them is difficult, and they are always on my mind; through stitch and yarn choice I feel like that is reflected here.

When contemplating the second DKJ, Figure 4, there is one piece that stands out, Figure 6. Aided by reflective notes in this phase I can say that I was having a “crisis of identity” (EJR Written Diary, 2021), which seems extreme; however, “questioning my place in academia, in relationships and in life” (Ibid, 2021) is a common exercise. This piece is a repeat of my name, Emily Joy Rickard, over 35 stitches. The repeat is shown in letters here: e-m-i-l-y-J-O-Y-r-i-c-k-a-r-d-e-m-i-l-y-J-O-Y-r-i-c-k-a-r-d-e-m-i-l-y. Emily and Rickard are plain knit stitches whereas Joy is purled which creates this contrast in the fabric, “my hands were moving, needles knitting stitch after stitch before I realised what I was doing. Sometimes, I repeat my name in my head to ground me, remind me who I am” (EJR Research Journal, 2021) and for this to appear in the knitting was a surprise to begin with, as “I simply was not aware I had done it” (Ibid, 2021).

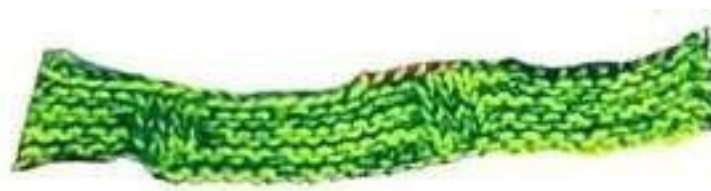


Figure 6 Phase Two, Daily Knit Journal, Jul. - Aug. 2021. This highlights 35 stitches that are a repeat of my name, Emily Joy Rickard.

Reflections

The DKJ has offered me the opportunity to knit my feelings and to help me take time to formulate words to express myself. Knitting allows me to think through how I am feeling. The stitches form and then I can see myself in them. I can discuss yarn choice, stitch choice, direction and more. Figure 6 is a great example of this:

- “Yarn choice – marled neon acrylic with teal mohair. The teal mohair is a favourite colour of mine and is comforting to use. The neon acrylic makes me uncomfortable. The two together support this feeling of being lost and questioning direction.
- Stitch choice – knit and purl. Each stitch is a letter of my name, grounding myself in every stitch.
- Direction – this is a long thin piece of knitting, as the stitches and colour did the talking for me today.” (EJR Written Diary, 2021)

Through self-assessment, it is evident that there is a difference between the meaning behind stitch and yarn choice. The yarn choices are more tactile, for example, what “feels nice running through my fingers” (EJR Written Diary, 2021). There are also memories connected to colours and yarn types that stitches are less connected to, whereas stitch choice focusses more directly

on mood and what happened during the day. There is evidence of this within the German Short Row explanation above and shown in Figure 5.

To the untrained eye, both Figures 3 & 4 look like interesting pieces of knitting, but it is not possible to read into them. The viewer may appreciate the colours and stitch choice, they may even make personal connections. However, each stitch is locked into the knitter's mind, it is only under invitation that we can divulge meaning. There is a safety here. It is not possible for someone to read the diary aloud. This diary is in code. Safe. This is an insight I will pursue with my participants.

An Unconventional Design Practice

Unlike my formal University training in Fashion and Textiles, where I was taught to experiment and that every experiment needed a technical file and a purpose for exploration, or even my own knit design work, where I start with a mood board to draw inspiration, KnitWell is about self-expression, developing a vocabulary of stitches. It is an exploration into the self, there is a freedom to explore without the pressure of why.

The purpose of the autoethnographic element to KnitWell is so that I can experience what my participants experience. KnitWell is a process I am designing to invite people to participate. I have designed the structure using my knitting knowledge. The Reknit Revolution by Amy Twigger Holroyd (2017) is an example of another project that similarly relies upon the researcher's knitting knowledge to create a structure for others to work within. Furthermore, the structure of KnitWell is designed to allow people to use their knitting practice themselves and achieve that sense of safety, self-expression, and reflection.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to investigate two autoethnographic KnitWell activities. Through self-assessment and questioning every choice I made, it is evident that there is meaning behind stitch and yarn choice that sometimes share the same definitions and other times stitch may mean one thing and yarn another. However, it is evident that together, both yarn and stitch choice communicate to the knitter an idea of their emotional state; yet to the untrained eye, it remains a mystery. There is a level of protection here for the knitter and is significant in terms of presenting an alternative method of journaling.

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