

Why Gen Z are turning into old codgers

From crochet to paper folding, traditional crafts are on the rise among today's young creators. But what accounts for their rediscovery?

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Tom Daley was spotted knitting poolside at the Paris Olympics – and Gen Z are following his lead | CREDIT: Getty

Poolside at the Olympics, [Tom Daley](#) attracted attention with his latest knitting project. Over in the US, [Ella Emhoff](#), stepdaughter of presidential candidate Kamala Harris, has been making knitting cool again to 340,000 Instagram followers. Have the youth of today all become old fogies?

There are currently more than 11.8 million videos tagged 'grandma hobbies' on TikTok.

Fast fashion? No thanks, it's all about knitting – John Lewis has seen sales of crochet hooks rise by 20 percent compared to last year, while its beginners hooks have rocketed by 171 percent.

So why is it that young people are being drawn to traditional hobbies?

'Crochet has helped with healing my mind and stopped me from feeling distracted'

Kimberley Cookey-Gam, 28

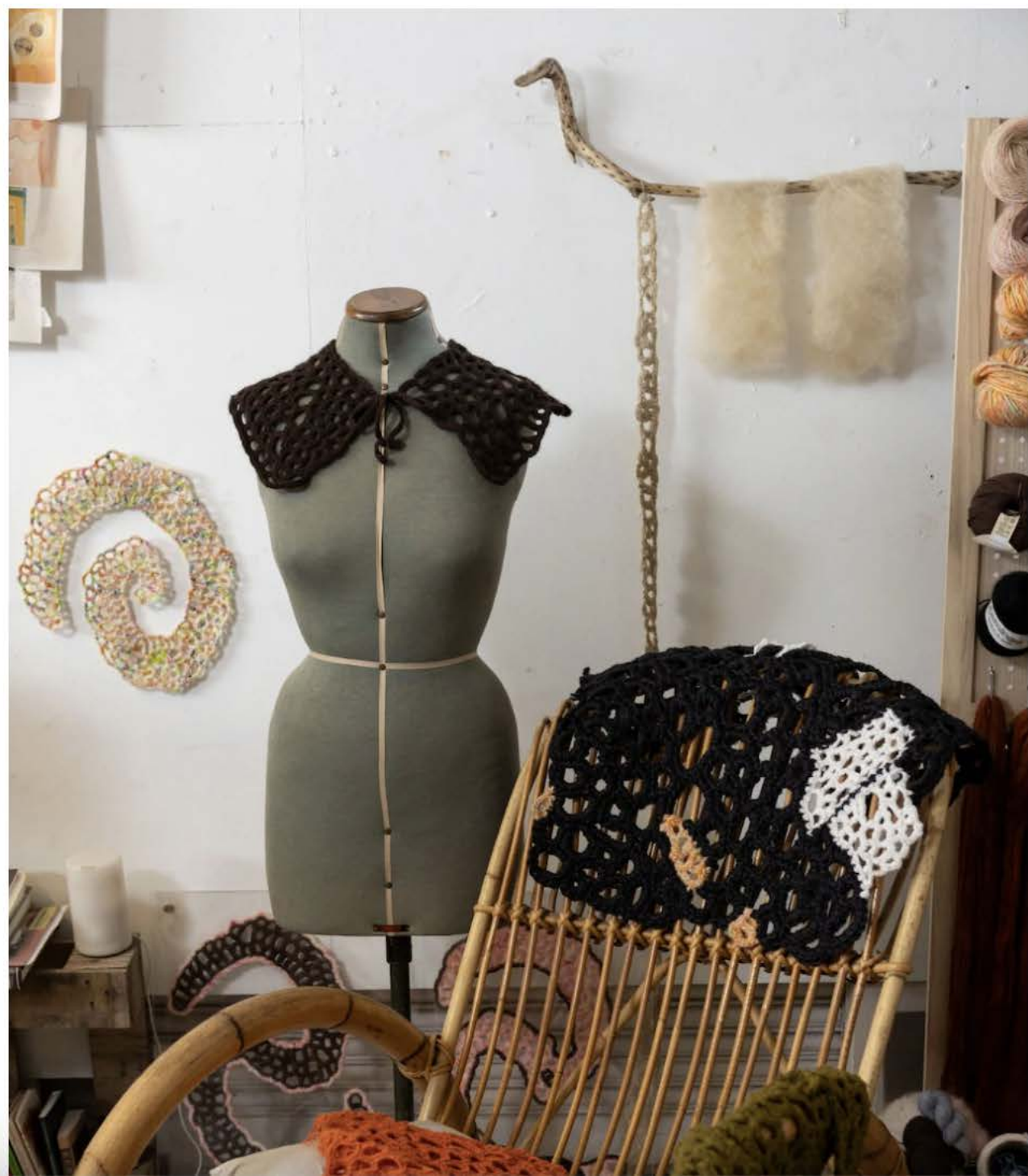
One common answer is the mental health benefits of doing things in a slower and more considered manner.

“It’s so grounding,” says 28-year-old Kimberley Cookey-Gam, an artist who specialises in free-form crochet. “It was a way for me to get out of my own head and focus on something. I think that crochet has helped with healing my mind and stopping me being distracted: I have to focus on what’s in front of me.

“There’s been such an increase in people being diagnosed with conditions like [ADHD](#), and I think it’s important to have a grounding in something which can’t be made quickly. You relinquish instant gratification,” Cookey-Gam continues. “With crochet, you have to carve out the time and space to make something real. It feels like you’re slowing down time.”

In a lot of ways the slow process of making something is the antidote to the fast-moving, instant gratification dopamine hit of the online world on which today’s young people grew up, thinks chartered psychologist Dr Jo Perkins.

“Delayed gratification comes with a sense of accomplishment and a boost in confidence,” says Dr Perkins. “You finish with something to show from puzzling it out. As humans, we’re not designed to live smooth, easy, convenient lives. We are born scientists, we want to discover, learn, and figure things out; having constant access to instant gratification denies us access to our brains. It’s no wonder people are starting to reject it.”



“We’ve become more disconnected than ever through spending so much time at work, or online. That means we’re drawn instinctively to connect,” says Dr Perkins. “If that happens to be over hobbies, the simple things, then we’re cognitively wired to seek that out. The online world doesn’t offer that.”

Amelia White and Lauren Watson, both 24 and living in London, worked together to found The London Lace Club last October. An old fashioned hobby, but one which prioritises connection and collaboration.

“The most rewarding aspect for us is all the people we get to meet,” explains White. “Lace making is unique because of the importance it places on community making. If you’re a lacemaker it’s essential that you go to your local lacemaking group – the culture of working in a social environment and sharing is intrinsic to the practice.”



Kamala Harris's stepdaughter Ella Emhoff has been making knitting cool again to 340,000 Instagram followers | CREDIT: Instagram

“Lace making groups and lace schools have existed in the UK since the 16th century but in the last hundred years these groups have started to resemble knitting circles,” continues Watson. “They are still steeped in traditions that we don’t want to lose (such as the communal aspect of lace making), however it’s still a craft that is quite inaccessible to many people, specifically young people and people of colour. By starting a club that is open to all, we want to open a new era of lace work for everybody wishing to learn.”

‘I started to think I could make some kind of living from it’

Sabine Van der Sande, 33

In a generation for whom [side-hustle culture](#) is commonplace, old school crafts can lead to financial reward.

According to Etsy, an online marketplace which specialises in handmade goods, 53 percent of makers started due to financial challenges, and of those 23 percent said selling their handmade products had helped them offset rising cost-of-living pressures.

“Over the last few years there has been a growing trend of people seeking work options that allow them to balance their personal interests and professional lives,” says Dayna Isom Johnson, Etsy’s Trend Expert at the launch of the site’s Time Honoured Textiles campaign. “Running an online business offers the freedom to set their own schedules, as well as offering opportunities to showcase their talents and skills, while earning extra income.”

There’s big money to be found in old-fashioned, one-of-a-kind pieces for those with talent.

Sabine Van der Sande, a 33-year-old hand weaver working in South London sells luxurious home furnishings, from rugs to tea towels, from her website for hundreds of pounds.

“It just happened,” Van der Sande explains. “I kept getting commissions through word of mouth and I started to think I could make some kind of living from it, so I got my husband to design me a logo and set up a website. I’ve been lucky, people tend to approach me.”

Customers, she thinks, get something more from her handiwork than they might from a mass-produced equivalent. “Each of my textiles is made entirely by hand, each strand is individually threaded, and most of my wool is hand dyed. This is a labour intensive process and the resulting inconsistencies add life and depth. At its heart, I hope my textiles bring comfort and encourage care. We might not need to hand weave anymore but there are lessons to be learnt in making something slowly, deliberately and with care. It can teach us the value of textiles, as well as the environmental cost that comes with them.”

‘I took lots of inspiration from social media’

Lindsey Newns, 36



Lindsey Newns started her own business selling crochet kits and patterns

It can also be physically cheaper to make rather than buy, 36-year-old Lindsey Newns from Gloucestershire, founder of Lottie And Albert, which sells crochet kits and patterns. “The most popular kits I sell are the ones where people learn to make something practical for themselves, rather than buying it. People love to crochet bags.”

Another reason old-fashioned hobbies could be having a resurgence is because the internet has made it easier to find and learn older skills that were being lost. Newns has also become something of an online crochet influencer with 49,000 followers on Instagram.

“Somewhere around the 1970s or 80s, when mass production came in, homemade things began to get a bit of a bad name,” ponders Newns. “If you had to homemaker your things, it wasn’t seen as affluent or cool. I think that created a generational gap where people weren’t being taught by their older family members so they started to die out. That’s where YouTube and the online community have come to plug the gap.

“I taught myself crochet via YouTube in 2015,” says Newns. “In the past, I might have had to find a group or attend a class, and I didn’t have time for that, especially after having children. What got me hooked was joining Instagram and discovering this whole world of crochet. I took lots of inspiration from social media, seeing all the incredible things people were making. It showed me how cool crochet could be. That enlivened my enthusiasm.”

‘The anticipation and the pay-off is something that people are interested in watching’

Bethan Aspland, 27



Bethan Aspland's videos of papercraft iris folding have earned her a large Instagram following | CREDIT: Roger Moody/Guzelian

For certain hobbies, there’s something which scratches the particularly social media friendly itch, thinks 27-year-old Bethan Aspland who has racked up 113,000 Instagram followers with videos of her papercraft iris folding – a skill most commonly learned at the WI.



'Iris folding' is an artistic technique typically associated with the WI | CREDIT: Roger Moody/Guzelian

"I think it's done well online because it's aesthetically pleasing," says Aspland, whose iris folding kits ship to 54 countries worldwide. "Because you work from the back, you can't see the result until the end. It looks scruffy while you're making it, so you have to just trust the process and be patient. The anticipation and the pay-off is something that people are interested in watching which online algorithms amplify."

'People don't believe my works are hand-made cross-stitch until they see them up close'

Robert Hodge, 32



Robert Hodge combines cross-stitch with digital imagery | CREDIT: Jeff Gilbert for The Telegraph/Jeff Gilbert for The Telegraph

As well as helping more people connect with forgotten hobbies, modern technology has also added a new intrigue to old-fashioned crafts.

Robert John Hodge, 32, originally dreamt of being a painter, but after moving to London and struggling to afford studio space, he realised that technology could help him to express himself and breathe new life into a dying art: cross-stitch.

“Cross-stitch is already a digital medium, it is stitching pixels, and therefore using it instead of traditional fine art media like painting would actually enhance what I was trying to express,” he enthuses. Using photoshop to create his patterns, Hodge spends months painstakingly cross-stitching them into reality, crafting artworks which delight audiences.

“By transcribing digital imagery into a craft medium, I can use that traditional craft language while speaking to today’s world,” Hodge explains. “A lot of people don’t believe my works are actually hand-made cross-stitch until they see them up close. They’re recognisably digital because the patterns are big and complex, like a jpeg image, but that’s not what people expect when they think of cross-stitch. It also creates something that, for me, is the complete antithesis of the computer: tactile, warm, and rooted in the physical.”



Hodge uses photoshop to create his patterns, before painstakingly cross-stitching them into artworks | CREDIT: Jeff Gilbert

Reinterpreting older traditions also enables ‘young fogies’ to meet their contemporaries where they are. Lucy Gascoigne does so, both literally and figuratively, with The Wandering Tea Room which she set up nine years ago aged 29, with support from The Prince’s Trust.

“My aim has always been to have my own tea room but I redirected my focus,” she explains. “I converted a horsebox so I could go on the road around Nottingham where I live. I take my tea room out to artisan markets and events, wedding venues, and even people’s homes.

“People love afternoon tea, because it’s so social, there’s plenty of time to unwind and chat. My horsebox tea room makes it feel even more personalised, which people adore. It’s about going back to basics and having that good quality time with people. Social groups have changed too, I think people tend to have a wider circle of friends nowadays, and an afternoon tea appeals to everyone, whether they’re young or old, drinker or non-drinker, because it’s an evocation of a time when everything was a bit less hectic.”

In a world where everything is interconnected and a button press away, perhaps there’s something soothing for the youth of today in reconnecting to a simpler, more homely past.

“The way we choose to spend our time, these old fashioned hobbies, they take us back to a time when life genuinely was simple,” thinks Dr Perkins. “We are reconnecting with the past, and being with our parents and grandparents. It’s a craving for a simpler, less complicated life. It hearkens back to childhood or a golden nostalgic past.”

While the disharmony between old and young is often played up, the truth is that younger generations have never been more desperate to reach out to their forebears. Perhaps rediscovering ‘grandma hobbies’ is the first step.