

The art of branding: an explorative pilot study into aspects of branding utilized by artisan entrepreneurs

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ABSTRACT

Artisan and craft businesses have been and continue to be growing sectors. Branding plays a crucial role in the lives of artisan entrepreneurs and other entrepreneurs in the craft sector. With scant research into artisanal branding, this pilot study employs a theoretical framework to consider how artisan entrepreneurs build their brands. Pilot studies of qualitative research are recommended as a foundation for conducting a larger study, especially as a basis for developing contextual sensitivity. Five semi-structured interviews were conducted with artisan entrepreneurs in the UK. Initial findings indicate themes such as the use² of storytelling, quality concerns, personal branding, the value of media and the importance of distribution stream in the branding. It is also found that there is a dilemma between pandering to customer tastes and following their own line of creativity. Based upon the findings, it is recommended to substantially increase sample size for such a heterogenous sample where each craft is seen as different from others.

Key words: branding, artisan, entrepreneur

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Introduction

Craft is a growing sector (Jakob, 2013), both from a business and research perspective. Branding plays a crucial role in the lives of artisan entrepreneurs and other entrepreneurs in the craft sector and has been found to be linked to the artisan's social status and personal brand (Dana and Salamzadeh, 2021). Despite this, there is scant research on this topic. Existing studies have opted for focusing on other areas such as value creation (Smagina & Ludviga, 2021) and different forms of capital (Pret, Shaw & Drakopoulou Dodd, 2016).

Due to a scarcity of research in this field, there is scope for an explorative investigation into the branding aspects of the craft entrepreneur. This study employs the research question: how do craft entrepreneurs use branding? The aim of this study is to undertake a pilot study for qualitative research, whilst also uncovering the key elements of branding and thereby developing a framework, which will serve as a basis for further research directions.

Qualitative pilot studies have been used in entrepreneurship research to understand the key elements that bear further consideration in a larger qualitative or quantitative study (Aslan et al., 2016). As Nunes et al. (2010) point out, there are many benefits in employing a qualitative pilot study. First, insights about the context can be gained (i.e., greater contextual sensitivity) that enable a better focus on the issues at hand as well as greater insight into the more suitable data collection instruments and approaches to theoretical sampling. The use of a pilot study also gives greater credibility related to the validity and reliability of its data, which are often key concerns for qualitative studies (Gani et al., 2020).

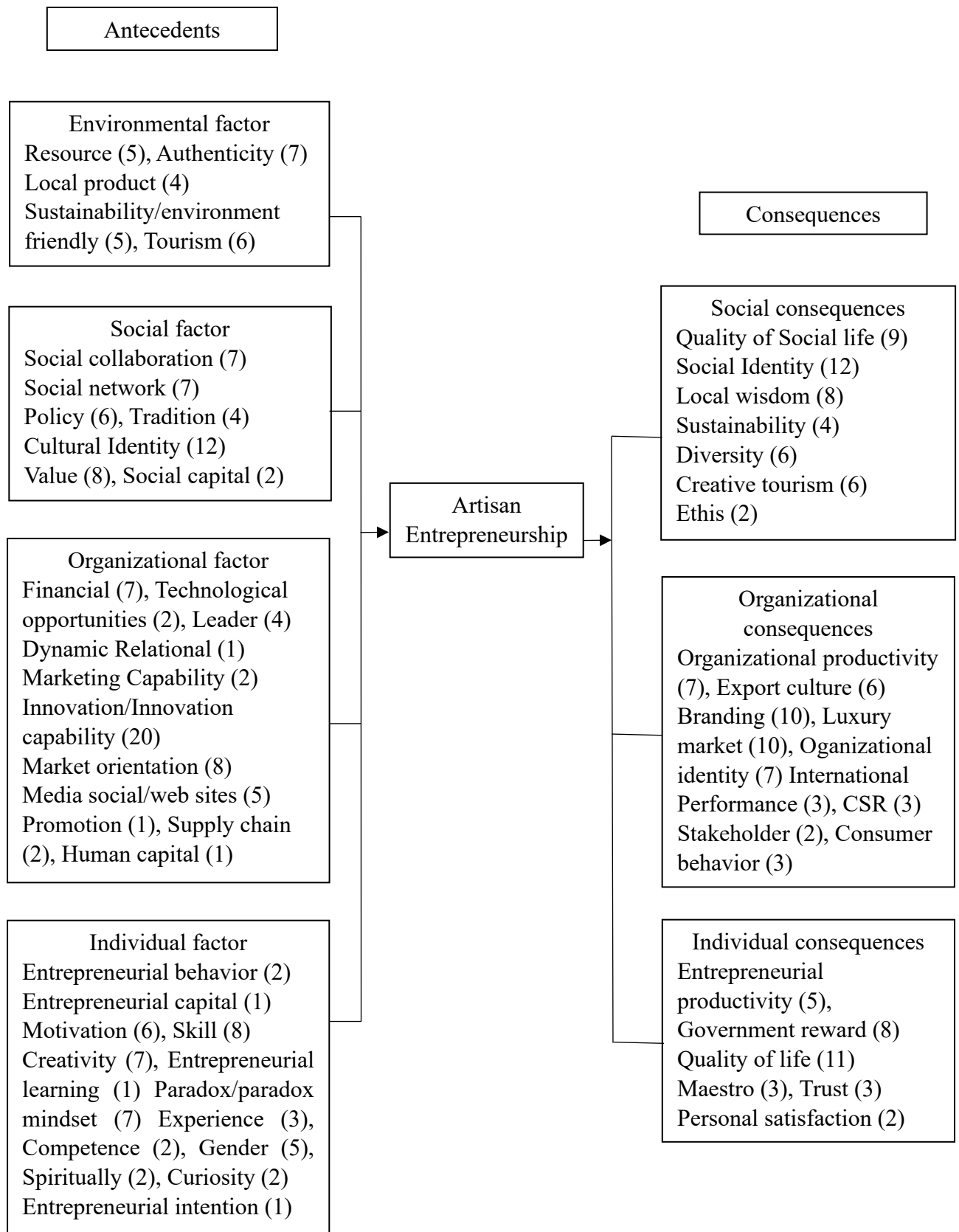
This paper first presents the key characteristics of craft entrepreneurs, and then the specific branding elements that are utilized by craft entrepreneurs, as found in existing studies. Following this, the methodology is presented, then the findings from the semi-structured interviews. The results section presents key findings, considers existing research in light of the findings and then puts forward a conceptual model based upon the findings for further research. The conclusions section considers the effectiveness of the pilot study and key findings, offering implications for a larger study.

Key idiosyncrasies of craft entrepreneurs

Craft entrepreneurs are frequently driven by a deep passion for their craft (Kraus et al., 2018). Research by Gorgievski and Stephan (2016) indicates that they are often intrinsically motivated, valuing self-expression, creativity, and the satisfaction derived from their work. In contrast, mainstream entrepreneurs may be more motivated by profit and market opportunities (Shane, 2003). Craft entrepreneurs' strong commitment to their craft is a defining characteristic that sets them apart. Craft entrepreneurs are also known for their focus on product quality, uniqueness, and authenticity (Fillis & Wagner, 2005). They operate in niche markets, catering to consumers who appreciate artisanal, handmade, and locally sourced products. Mainstream entrepreneurs, on the other hand, often target broader markets and may prioritize scalability and market reach (Ward, 2015). Craft entrepreneurs' emphasis on niche markets allows them to differentiate their products in a highly competitive environment. In a 50 year review of the

literature, Hasanah et al. (2023) highlight the key themes of studies into craft entrepreneurship, as shown Figure 1:

Figure 1: The antecedents and consequences of artisan entrepreneurship



Source: adapted from Hasanah et al. (2023)

As can be seen in Figure 1, this is an emerging topic and as such the number of articles is rather low. The most attention of research to date has been on innovation, as well as cultural identity and social identity. Branding is also increasingly covered in research, though there is still plenty of scope for further studies in this area.

Craft entrepreneurs commonly engage in artisanal production processes, creating products by hand or in small batches (Cooper et al., 2019). They often prioritize local sourcing, supporting local communities and emphasizing sustainability. Mainstream entrepreneurs, especially in industries like manufacturing, may rely on large-scale production processes, automation, and global supply chains (Teece, 2018). Craft entrepreneurs' artisanal production methods contribute to the uniqueness and individuality of their products. Craft entrepreneurs frequently foster strong ties with their local communities and customer base (Pavlou et al., 2021). They engage in community events, collaborations with local artists, and direct interactions with customers. The community engagement of craft entrepreneurs creates a sense of belonging and support that can be a significant driver of success. Most importantly, craft entrepreneurs often employ branding strategies that highlight the authenticity and provenance of their products (Beverland & Lockshin, 2004). This authenticity is deeply rooted in their brand identity and storytelling (Escalas, 2004). In contrast, mainstream entrepreneurs may prioritize traditional marketing strategies and economies of scale (Kapoor & Agarwal, 2017).

Branding in craft entrepreneurship

Building upon the previous section, which considered the distinction between craft entrepreneurs and mainstream entrepreneurs, this section will specifically examine how craft entrepreneurs employ branding in their field of business, under the key themes that were found in the review of the literature.

Authenticity as a Cornerstone of Branding

Authenticity is a central theme in the branding strategies of craft entrepreneurs (Beverland & Lockshin, 2004). Craft entrepreneurs frequently highlight the handmade nature of their products and emphasize local and sustainable sourcing. By doing so, they convey a sense of transparency and a commitment to quality, which resonates with consumers seeking genuine, non-mass-produced alternatives (Visconti et al., 2019). Crafting an authentic brand identity is crucial to the success of craft entrepreneurs, as it differentiates their offerings from mass-produced alternatives (Gentile et al., 2007).

The promotion of a sense of authenticity has been encountered in studies involving hand-made goods and is reinforced through historical aspects and narratives (Bell, 2022). It has also been found to be a key antecedent to the brand image and developing a positive consumer relationship, such as in the craft beer industry (Rodrigues, Pinto Borges, & Sousa, 2022; Bowen and Miller, 2023). Some authors (e.g., Mulholland, Ricci, & Massi, 2022) argue that the artisan brand is a guarantee of authenticity and gives legitimacy to craft products. The theme of authenticity also extends beyond the product itself to the work processes (Bell, 2022) and the

narrative surrounding the founder and craftsman as a ‘master of their trade’ (O’Neil, Ucbasaran, & York, 2022). The latter of these will be discussed further in the following section.

Storytelling and Narrative Branding

Storytelling is another powerful tool in the branding toolkit of craft entrepreneurs (Escalas, 2004). By weaving their brand story into their identity, they create a deeper connection with consumers. This narrative approach not only communicates the journey of the entrepreneur but also instils a sense of heritage and tradition (Kim and Kim, 2018). Craft entrepreneurs often position themselves as the embodiment of their brand, enabling them to forge a personal connection with consumers and generate emotional engagement (Fogel et al., 2017).

A number of studies have linked storytelling to the development of other aspects of the brand. A study of female craft entrepreneurs in South Africa linked the unique stories of the entrepreneurs to providing a degree of authenticity (Peer and Reyneke, 2022) (see previous section). A qualitative study by Mars (2023) found that narratives had the following key themes: idiosyncrasy, inclusivity, interconnectedness, and unfolding development.

Building Trust and Loyalty

Building trust is pivotal for craft entrepreneurs, especially as they often command premium prices for their products (Kim & Lee, 2019). A consistent brand identity and the delivery of quality products reinforce the trust that consumers place in the brand (Veloutsou & Guzman, 2017). This trust, in turn, leads to brand loyalty, as consumers are more likely to make repeat purchases and recommend the brand to others (Del Chiappa et al., 2020). Thus, it seems that crafting a compelling brand that fosters trust and loyalty is paramount for the long-term success of craft entrepreneurs.

Costa and Franco (2022) in their study of cooperation of craft entrepreneurs found that wherever knowledge is transferred, then trust is built. This also relates to branding in linking the use of story-telling relating to both the crafter and the product to build authenticity and, through this transfer of knowledge from crafter to customer, build trust. However, this is not confirmed in any studies, to the author’s knowledge, and there is scant research on the theme of the role of trust in craft entrepreneurship.

Challenges and Opportunities

As craft businesses expand, they encounter challenges in maintaining brand consistency (Coviello & McKechnie, 2017). Ensuring that the essence and values of the brand remain intact while the business grows can be a daunting task. Additionally, addressing the diverse needs and expectations of a broader customer base can prove challenging. Nevertheless, it also presents opportunities for craft entrepreneurs to refine their brand strategies, adapt to new

market segments, and continue growing while preserving their authenticity (Gutiérrez et al., 2021).

In terms of creating opportunities on a general level, Roy's (2020) case study of an artisan entrepreneur found that planning takes place regarding how to market the product and the craft entrepreneur takes a course in start-ups to familiarize with such unfamiliar aspects, before launching the business. However, a larger sample would shed more light on the importance of planning and education in the development of the brand.

In summary, most studies in this field have tended to focus on one sole element of the branding elements, but some have also found distinct links around 2 themes in the sphere of branding.

Methodology

This study concerns an area upon where the existing research is somewhat scant. Therefore, this study adopts an explorative approach as a means towards building on existing theory and studies, as well as opening up avenues for further research. The findings may also serve to consider ways of supporting craft entrepreneurs through the insights given.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were used as the basis for answering the research question, as the research aims involve developing a deep understanding of different phenomena (Saunders et al., 2012). As a part of the protocol, 10 questions were set as a means of keeping the interview on-topic (Bryman & Bell, 2011), involving how the business was set up, perspectives of what constitutes success and failure, factors affecting success or failure, advice to other prospective entrepreneurs, motivation for becoming an entrepreneur, challenges, and attitudes to planning.

Sample

According to Morse (2000) sample size is affected by factors such as: quality of data, scope of the study, nature of the topic, and amount of useful information from the participant (p.1). Dworkin (2012), in a review of sample size policy, indicated that sample size varies between 2 and 50 participants in articles. Thus, as a pilot study, 5 participants were selected. The interviews took place in 2022.

Only the founders, i.e., the craft entrepreneur, participated in this study to ensure that results consist of the perception of the craft entrepreneurs' own experiences and opinions rather than that of the company. The sample was selected randomly from those available on the Crafts Council, which is a network for craft entrepreneurs from across the craft sector and has a searchable database of over 800 leading craft makers from across the United Kingdom (UK). From 21 willing participants, the selection criterion was to have a business selling one's own craft, regardless of the craft itself. In this way hobbyists were excluded from the sample. No

distinction was made in the sample between those starting off a business part-time and those that have moved to a full-time entrepreneur.

Data Coding

According to Miles and Huberman (1994), thematic analysis can be employed with themes a priori based on theory or findings in the literature or emergent themes can be detected based upon the data. With the deductive approach, this qualitative study uses the themes of 9 schools of strategy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), with the exception of the configuration school that was found to be unsuitable for this study. This approach aims to condense a wide and varied set of text data and is employed to develop a model relating to building or adding to existing theory (Costa et al. 2016). The first stage of coding was to read through the data a few times for an overview of the materials. Then literature was read thoroughly to consider key elements of the schools to be looked for in the data. Then the transcripts were read in detail. Dey (2003) describes this approach as iterative as it involves going back and forth during analysis.

Findings

Based upon willingness and access to participants, the sample of this study included a range of artists. However, most of the sample (more than a quarter) were ceramicists. The following table gives a breakdown of the crafts (occupations) of the sample:

Table 1: Occupations of craft entrepreneurs in the sample

Ceramicist	1
Textile Artist	2
Weaving	1
Jeweller	1
Metal Worker	1
Total	5

Source: own work

Table 2 highlights the key themes that emerged as a result of the data analysis, categorized into a main theme and associated sub-themes.

Table 2: The key themes and subthemes in the sample

Theme	Subtheme
Premium product	Quality Mastery High Price Back Story Uniqueness Appearance Tradition
Online Networking	Use of media Personal brand (heritage, style, etc.) Promotion Story
Offline Networking	Authenticity Story Emotional connection Trust-building Exhibitions (outlets)
Marketing in general	Timing Skills Creative desires vs. selling well 'Victim of fashion' / zeitgeist

Source: own work

Discussion

The findings of this study explore the range of branding related issues found in the literature. The artist was confirmed to be a key element of the brand (Fogel et al., 2017). as well as the central role of narratives and storytelling (Escalas, 2004). The findings also confirmed that these served as a basis for building a relationship with the consumer (Fogel et al., 2017). Interestingly, few members of the sample referred to authenticity itself or the need to confer this, i.e., it was not a continuous theme across the sample, though this could be due to it not being a conscious decision to 'be authentic', but rather authenticity is the intrinsic nature of the artist. Further research into the craft entrepreneurs' self-awareness with regard to the need for authenticity and how it relates to their values would be a fruitful area for further research.

The online and offline networking were linked to an awareness of potential customers, and need to communicate the story, which the sample referred to as 'exposure'. It can be seen as well that aspects of the story seemed to bridge across a number of the themes, be it a back story, a personal branding story or as a basis for building emotional ties, trust, and a belief in a quality product.

The study also uncovered elements not mentioned in the literature review that may present a fruitful direction for further investigation. There is certain a strong role to be played by the exhibitions and galleries in promoting the brand and giving an opportunity for the craft entrepreneur to communicate personally the narratives upon which trust and emotional ties are built with the customer. In fact, the sample also felt a degree of frustration that the outlets had a high cost and there was little turnover in return. This seems to indicate a short-term focus on returns rather than seeing the bigger picture of how communicating the story and building personal relationships with the customer may payoff later on, as the brand and reputation of the crafter begins to grow. Further research would be needed to give insight into the short-term vs long-term focus of craft entrepreneurs, but it would certainly explain how there may be a limit in how much it costs to get the narrative across to the customer.

Although it was found in the literature that there are stark differences between mainstream and craft entrepreneurs, the story does not end here. There also appeared to be large differences between entrepreneurs from different crafts, even with some examples of an 'us v. them' mentality. This finding will aid in developing further qualitative studies as it seems to indicate the need for a larger sample with such a heterogenous group, in order to a reach saturation.

Conclusions

This explorative study puts forth several contributions that build upon existing theory, concepts and develop research in a scantily investigated sector. The methodological strategy was explorative in nature, to answer the research question: how do craft entrepreneurs use branding? The key aim of this study was to uncover the key elements of branding through a qualitative approach and consider the findings of this pilot study as a means for developing future research directions.

The study is limited by the small sample size, which has led to some areas found in the literature as not being found in the study or only in a small number of responses. ‘Authenticity’ was not referred to much, despite being found in the literature. There was also no mention of the use of social objects, such as business cards, logos and badges, to name but a few. It is hoped that a wider study will uncover more of these areas and inspire other researchers to continue studies in this emerging topic that has increased in relevance due to the emergence of craft entrepreneurs in many sectors of the economy. The method employed in this study was with a limitation that the sample was limited to those that had recognised the need to join the UK crafts council as a means of building their reputation and reaching out to customers. In this way, although there was a cross-section of different craftspeople, those that did not take this initiative might present a different strategic approach. Moreover, several craft entrepreneurs made statements that some crafts experienced more growth than others, or that some simply appealed more to the general public. Likewise, it was found there was a certain degree of prestige derived from being involved in projects with entrepreneurs from different crafts. Thus, it seems a quantitative study could consider clustering craft entrepreneurs by craft to examine potential differences and similarities.

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