

Article

Unconventional Entrepreneurship: Women Handicraft Entrepreneurs in a Market-Driven Economy

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Abstract: The objective of this paper is to investigate a unique type of entrepreneurship in women handicraft entrepreneurs. Data were collected from six women handicraft entrepreneurs by using in-depth interviews. Born after the 1980s, they strive for survival in a highly competitive marketplace. They are all passion-driven entrepreneurs. They have to engage in other activities (ranging from teaching handicraft classes to working in another full-time job) to financially support and sustain their handicraft work. It was found that challenges include high rental rates in the city, long product development processes, small market sizes, and insufficient knowledge in digital marketing. Almost all of them are skillful, innovative, and passionate on the artistic side, but reactive and passive on the business side. Measures were suggested to empower such women entrepreneurs in view of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals.



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1. Introduction

Young people, especially females, find it difficult to start their own businesses in the beginning stages [1]. The objective of this paper is to investigate the unique type of entrepreneurship of women handicraft entrepreneurs, which is unconventional. This study also investigated whether women handicraft entrepreneurs are motivated by necessity, driven by opportunity, or otherwise. What are the challenges that they face during the survival process?

“Entrepreneurial orientation consists of three dimensions: innovativeness, proactiveness, and risk-taking” [2] (p. 461). In other words, this also refers to a company's ability to innovate in areas of operation and actively participate in the market [3]. In the past, entrepreneurship meant starting a new business or creating a new service or product [4]. Nowadays, the meaning of entrepreneurship includes a corporation's ability to innovate, take risks in the market, and have something new in its business operations [5]. As defined for the purpose of the business plan, entrepreneurship is regarded as a business process rather than a discrete incident. For example, business executives use it in their strategic efforts to make their firms more competitive.

Corporations with a greater entrepreneurial orientation (EO) may strive for this in order to gain higher strategic performance [6,7]. Entrepreneurial orientation could be applied to individuals [8]. Innovativeness is important for artistic development. Regarding proactiveness, it is better for entrepreneurs to anticipate customers' expectations and capture market share quickly. Risk-taking is one of the common characteristics of entrepreneurs. It is expected that entrepreneurs with a higher entrepreneurial orientation might have better business performance.

This paper starts off with an introduction, followed by a review of the relevant literature and a presentation of the research questions. After outlining the methodology and findings, the results and managerial implications will be discussed.

2. Literature Review

Entrepreneurship is dominated by males, with two early-stage male entrepreneurs for every female entrepreneur. Generally speaking, men are still much more confident than women when it comes to skills and knowledge mastery for starting a business. Surprisingly, female startup rates grew faster than those for males, which showed a sign of the reversal of the general preconceptions of gender in entrepreneurship [9].

In social identity theory, people tend to classify themselves and other people into social categories. Within a particular social category, they can find self-identity [10,11]. There are in-groups and out-groups. In-groups are groups with members within a closed boundary, providing a sense of belonging, such as towards a club or an organization. Out-groups contain members that do not belong to in-groups.

Within a particular in-group, such as women entrepreneurs, there are common characteristics and behaviors. Women entrepreneurs could be less aggressive [12] and attract less funding support [13].

Studies on barriers to female entrepreneurship have indicated that household responsibilities and business skills are the main difficulties for women entrepreneurs in Malaysia and Kenya [14,15].

Raghuvanshi et al. [16] summarized fourteen barriers to female entrepreneurship: less interest in entrepreneurial activities, financial resources, strategic practices, slow growth, lower monetary return, high failure rate, lack of institutional support, lack of family support, lack of marketable skills, lack of social connectivity, lack of entrepreneurial management, absence of technological know-how, lack of education, and lack of propensity to take risks.

In a survey conducted in Malaysia, the main reasons for women to quit their jobs and start businesses were the pursuit of personal growth, independence, and economic payoff. They commonly shared a passion for business, listening and communication skills, and self-discipline. As entrepreneurs, they need to have confidence, leadership, creative thinking in problem solving, efficiency and effectiveness in executing plans, business knowledge, analytical skills, skills for balancing between personal and business lives, and flexibility. Women entrepreneurs in Malaysia faced challenges such as shortages of professional staff, shortages of general staff, issues of development and growth, financial constraints due to high overheads, and a lack of consultation advice from experts [17].

According to another study in Germany, entrepreneurs venturing in creative activities were comparably young and well educated. They started their businesses more frequently on a part-time basis and in teams (less often with employees), preferably in big cities. On average, start-ups in creative industries require fewer financial resources than other start-ups. Moreover, the survival rates in creative industries are significantly higher than those in other industries within the first three years after starting up [18].

Necessity and opportunity entrepreneurship is gaining attention among scholars. When a person voluntarily leaves his or her paid job to set up a business, he or she is regarded as an opportunity entrepreneur. In contrast, when a person leaves his or her previous job involuntarily because the business closed, he or she is regarded as necessity entrepreneur [19]. This classification is purely based on economic considerations.

Another type of entrepreneurship is hobby-related entrepreneurship. One develops a business in their spare time. It might start off as an interest [20]. Due to the great involvement of such entrepreneurs, the hobby finally becomes a business. We may still argue that a hobby-related entrepreneur is actually a type of opportunity entrepreneur. Nevertheless, not all hobby-related entrepreneurs are opportunity entrepreneurs. For example, it is possible to keep one's part-time business as a hobby without quitting one's full-time job. This may be explained in terms of passion [21].

Passion is defined as “emotion that stirs humans with energy” [22] (p. 515). Emotion drives the rational planning and implementation of a business. Entrepreneurial passion refers to an emotional state of an entrepreneur with cognitive and behavioral elements [22]. One with passion usually has an objective or target that he or she can pursue. For entrepreneurs, having a target is a driving force of doing business [23]. Chen et al. [23] proposed three characteristics of a passion: (1) positive feelings, (2) affecting one’s behavioral intentions or even actual behavior, and (3) orientation toward a target [23].

Passion has been studied as an element in the entrepreneurial process. Passion is associated with persistence and business growth [24,25]. Thus, a concept of unconventional entrepreneurship has been proposed [26].

There is a literature gap in studies relating to women handicraft entrepreneurs in a market-driven economy. Thus, the following four research questions are proposed:

- Do women handicraft entrepreneurs have entrepreneurial orientation elements, such as innovativeness, proactiveness, and risk-taking? Are there any new dimensions?
- Are women handicraft entrepreneurs in a market-driven economy necessity-motivated, opportunity-driven, or something else?
- What is the new model for women handicraft entrepreneurs?
- What are the challenges faced by women handicraft entrepreneurs?

By answering the above four research questions, we will have an overarching picture of women handicraft entrepreneurs in the context of a market-driven economy.

3. Methodology

The aim of study this exploratory in nature. Thus, a qualitative approach would be most appropriate. In-depth interviews were conducted in order to obtain richer data on the process, which also allowed for more interaction between the interviewer and interviewee.

While the creative economy is growing worldwide, starting businesses in different types of handicraft has become a trend among younger generations. Handicraft businesses belong to the cultural and creative industries, which are dynamic and knowledge-based private sectors. This involves inputs of creativity and intellectual capital in order to provide goods and services with cultural, artistic, and creative contents. The economic activities involved can be divided into three processes—namely, content creation, production, and distribution [27].

The interviewees in this study sold products that included craft goods, visual art, design goods, and even books. Therefore, in accordance with the 11 component domains listed under the Hong Kong Standard Industrial Classification (HSIC) Version 2.0, handicrafts mainly fall into “art, antiques, and crafts”, followed by “design”. However, the first category is dominated by jewelry manufacturing (wholesale and retail), so data for handicrafts are insignificant and underrepresented in the figures. In addition, the handicraft industry is mostly composed of small businesses; therefore, a small proportion in the “visual arts and design goods” domain is expected [27] (p. 3).

A sample size of four to ten is considered appropriate in qualitative studies [28]. The sample size for this study was six. All handicraft entrepreneurs were based in Hong Kong and obtained their income through their handicraft skills.

The basic profiles of the interviewees are presented in Table 1. Their real names have been replaced with participant numbers to protect their privacy. All of the interviews were conducted in Chinese, and the scripts were prepared by a professional translator. Most of them started their businesses four to five years ago. In order to sustain their businesses, four out of the six women entrepreneurs were engaged in teaching handicraft classes to cover their basic living expenses. There were two purposes for this: One was the direct revenue from the tuition fees, and the other was to expand their network and gain more exposure.

Table 1. Profiles of women handicraft entrepreneurs in Hong Kong.

Names/Brands of Participants	Products/Services	Start of Business Month/Year	Involvement (Full-Time/Part-Time)
1. Participant 1/Bubble Dreams Garden	Illustrated music box/paper music box workshops	June 2016	Part-time
2. Participant 2/HEI~there	Pressed flower accessories/workshops	August 2015	Full-time (previously worked as digital marketer)
3. Participant 3	Postcards, stickers, masking tapes, caps, drink holders, mirrors, hair bands, tote bags, and key rings	2016	Part-time (full-time designer)
4. Participant 4/My Fancy Handmade	Handmade flower crochets, earrings, necklaces, lapel pins/workshops	2011	Part-time
5. Participant 5/CarrieFish Zentangle	Zentangle cards, Zentangle design sketches/Zentangle workshops	2016	Full-time
6. Participant 6	Artworks, commercial graphic design, watches, eco bags, paper products/watercolors, ink wash, computer illustration workshops	2019	Part-time (previously worked in advertisement, now studying art, recently developed interest in Chinese painting)

All in-depth interviews were carried out in October 2019, each lasting for 45 to 60 min in duration. A content analysis was carried out based on the transcripts of the interviews, and “distinct themes” were subsequently identified [28]. Two independent coders were involved in the coding process [29] in order to increase the reliability of the selection [30]. If disputes between the two researchers occurred, meetings between coders were held to solve the issues [31]. A third researcher was invited to the assessment and a final decision was made based on the consensus among all researchers.

The six women entrepreneurs had their own unique skills: Participant 1 made music boxes; Participant 2 made pressed flower accessories; Participant 3 made use of illustrations by drawing on postcards, stickers, mirrors, and so on; Participant 4 specialized in handmade flower crochets, earrings, and necklaces. Participant 5 was a Zentangle drawing expert, and Participant 6 made use of computer illustrations on watches and paper products.

4. Discussion

4.1. Identification of Entrepreneurial Characteristics

Are women handicraft entrepreneurs innovative, proactive, or risk takers? Are there any other new dimensions? Several characteristics were identified in the interviewees during the interviews, which included “innovative”, “reactive”, “passionate”, and “skillful”.

4.2. Innovative

Innovation is defined as “a process whereby a new thought, behavior, or thing is conceived of and brought into reality” [32] (p. 19). The development of handicraft products involves innovation, as originality is a major selling point.

- “This is also an original product, there is no such thing as a ‘children’s music box’ in the market, so it is special, and it became my signature product.” (Participant 1).
- “I heard from others that my two characters are more distinctive than others.” (Participant 3)
- “Not many competitors mix colors on flower crochets like I do. [. . .] By challenging the conventional practice of making pairs of earrings with symmetric designs, I hope that my design can be more creative.” (Participant 4)

- “I mainly focus on mindfulness while other competitors spend more time on drawing patterns. [. . .] I am thinking about drawing Zantangle without using a pen . . . Body movement will be used instead.” (Participant 5)

4.3. Reactive

Many of the participants did not seem to have a business mindset. They started their businesses out of passion rather than necessity; therefore, some of them did not have a comprehensive business plan. Due to their lack of retail experience, they did not have a clear picture of their target customers and pricing strategies. Instead, they would make changes via trial and error. They could introduce products by following market trends or passively adjust pricing according to customers’ feedback. For instance, Participant 4 was slightly confused when the sales performance did not match with customers’ verbal feedback, so she decided to sell her goods at lower prices in order to boost sales.

- “I don’t know what kind of customers I should reach or what kind of products would be suitable for target customers.” (Participant 3)
- “I once increased the selling price, but the feedback was negative. Most customers are willing to buy at original prices without hesitation. Thus, I decided to keep the original pricing. [. . .] However, now I receive feedback that my pricing is too low.” (Participant 4)

4.4. Passionate

Passion is an important factor for businesses to sustain. It is very common to have no sales at all in the period of beginning a start-up business.

- “At that time, I didn’t have a blueprint to guide the creation of my product, such as painting style, meanings that my paintings convey, content, and what kind of method to deliver the messages [. . .] Therefore, I drew tons of painting compositions and outlines of my grandparents.” (Participant 1)
- “It is true that some competitors use thick wire for making crochets. Yet, I want to try using narrower wires for making some flower crochets. Also, narrower wires may be more challenging [. . .] I hope to challenge myself by crocheting the smallest and biggest flowers in the world.” (Participant 4)

4.5. Skillful

Being skillful is a crucial ingredient for success for handicrafters; apart from attending courses, many of them master their handicraft and teaching skills through repeated practice.

- “I finished an illustration course [. . .] I drew tons of painting compositions and outlines.” (Participant 1)
- “I worked in marketing for 9 years and I was always responsible for press releases. Therefore, I always write press releases to increase the exposure of my brand.” (Participant 2)
- “I will design my products according to the theme of the handicraft fair.” (Participant 4)
- “I will communicate with the students using neutral words basically. If I notice that students have certain characteristics, such as a lack of self-confidence, then I will try to encourage them.” (Participant 5)

Four characteristics were identified in the interviewees: “skillful”, “passionate”, “innovative”, and “reactive”. Four out of the six interviewees clearly expressed their creative thinking during the interviews. They were original designers and considered their products to be the best.

Having the necessary skill is a necessary condition. There is evidence showing that innovativeness is in a design process. Entrepreneurs need skills to turn an innovative idea into a real product or service. It takes time for the whole process. Thus, being passionate is the key to success. The women entrepreneurs in the study were found to be a bit passive in

response to changes in the market. Most of them tended to be conservative. This may be due to the fact that they were too engrossed in the design processes.

In summary, the women handicraft entrepreneurs did not fully conform to the traditional entrepreneurial orientation elements of “innovativeness”, “proactiveness”, and “risk-taking”. Instead, they were “skillful”, “passionate”, and “reactive”. Only the “innovative” element was preserved. “Skillful” and “passionate” were new dimensions. To them, both “proactiveness” and “risk-taking” did not align with their beliefs and personal preferences or styles.

5. Necessity-Motivated, Opportunity-Driven, or Otherwise

Codes from the analysis of the scripts for all participants are listed in Table 2. Regarding the second research question, “Are the handicraft entrepreneurs’ necessity-motivated, opportunity-driven, or otherwise?”, three distinct themes were identified from the interviewees: “self-actualization”, “positive living”, and “self-enjoyment”.

Table 2. Coding of the participants.

Code	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 4	Participant 5	Participant 6
Self-actualization	X				X	
Promoting positive living	X		X	X		
Self-enjoyment		X		X		
Time-consuming product development	X	X				
Small local market		X	X	X		
High rental		X				X
Ineffective social media engagement			X			X
Skillful	X	X		X	X	
Passionate	X			X		
Innovative	X		X	X	X	
Reactive			X	X		

5.1. Self-Actualization

Three out of the six participants engaged in full-time jobs in the creative industry, such as marketing, graphic design, and advertisement, before taking part in the handicraft business. Some did not mention their past and current occupations in the interviews, while two of them reported that making crafts helped them destress and handle negative emotions from family and/or work. By starting a small business, the women entrepreneurs were able to gain more independence and search for the meaning of life. It was more common for them to start a business on a part-time basis, especially at the beginning stage, so that their full-time job’s income could be used to cover the operation costs. This way, they could test the feasibility of running their businesses full-time.

- “I recalled the reason that I paint, it is because my grandma passed away and I felt sad.” (Participant 1)
- “My physical and mental health was negatively affected by work stress and emotional distress. Mindfulness and meditation improved my well-being.” (Participant 5)

5.2. Promoting Positive Living

After discovering the psychological benefits that handicrafts bring, some participants started to promote the attitude of positive living through their products. This could be achieved by developing characters, conveying messages in stories, incorporating different elements in products, etc. This philosophy may help their brands to stand out so that customers purchase not only for the design of the products, but also the underlying beliefs. Hong Kong is known to be home to one of the world's most stressed populations. When living in a fast-paced, densely populated city with a high cost of living, the process of making crafts helps people to slow down and learn to appreciate the uniqueness and delicate details of handmade items.

- “As an illustrator, I want to bring happiness to everyone through painting.” (Participant 1)
- “I hope that everyone can relax and be happy after seeing my work and share this positive energy of support and encouragement.” (Participant 3)
- “I hope that the product colors will inspire my customers. [. . .] Another message I want to mention is that the color of the product can be changed according to your mood, you can add different colors as you prefer. Just like how we can add different colors to our lives. I want my customers to understand that each color is unique. The message is to make your life be more colorful.” (Participant 4)

Handicrafts are usually small items that are affordable for young individuals; buying handicrafts at holiday markets and on online platforms is popular among hipsters, especially in Asian regions; for example, there is the culture of the “small bliss” (blessing) in Taiwan, which is a mindset that guides young people to happiness. Even though most of them cannot afford luxury lifestyles or costly works of art, they can define their self-identity by buying stylish handicraft items to decorate their living spaces or carry around.

5.3. Self-Enjoyment

Most of the participants focused on specific types of handicrafts and promoted the culture of making and buying handicrafts. Furthermore, some of them had a strong passion for sharing the beauty of the medium that they engaged in in order to let more people learn about the form of the craft. They invented new products and organized workshops to teach certain skills of craft making. Compared to using DIY packs, customers who join such workshops may find it easier to make crafts with materials that have already been prepared for them under the guidance of instructors.

- “It is because I love flowers and I love making handmade accessories. Around 4–5 years ago, embedding pressed flowers into phone cases or cardholders was popular in the handicraft industry, which inspired me to put pressed flowers into accessories to create a new product.” (Participant 2)
- “I love flowers and making accessories very much. I would like to add these elements in my handmade products. [. . .] Actually, I pay attention to accessories in retail shops. I want to make some accessories by myself and introduce them to the market.” (Participant 4)

Based on the above evidence, three themes emerged, which were “self-actualization”, “positive living”, and “self-enjoyment”. In a developed economy such as that of Hong Kong, the unemployment rate is around 2%, i.e., it is not difficult to secure a job, and not many individuals are forced to work as entrepreneurs due to unemployment. The participants in our study served as good examples of opportunity entrepreneurs. Furthermore, it seems that handicraft entrepreneurs do not belong entirely to the category of opportunity entrepreneurs. Hobby-like entrepreneurship is somewhat related to self-enjoyment, as shown above. The women entrepreneurs shared their products and manufacturing processes with customers and promoted a new lifestyle. Thus, this is well explained by the traditional entrepreneurial orientation and models [26].

6. Passion-Driven Entrepreneurial Model

The entrepreneurial model of these handicraft artists in the market-driven economy is unique. A new entrepreneurial model is proposed: passion-driven entrepreneurship.

The women handicrafters usually started their businesses on a part-time basis to test their suitability for pursuing a career as entrepreneur. In addition, they had to generate income from other full-time/part-time jobs to support their handicraft careers due to the high cost of living in Hong Kong. To illustrate this, the following relevant excerpts are listed:

- “I started offering classes to teach people how to make personalized music boxes. I made lots of attempts to find the most suitable teaching methods.” (Participant 1)
- “My income is unstable and low, and I barely managed to break even. My husband serves as a helper in his leisure time. I am a full-timer, so most of the duties are performed by me.” (Participant 2)
- “I can make crafts as long as I can finish the full-time company tasks on time. So it doesn’t really affect me. Or I should say, money is a crucial factor, which affects how I maintain my cost of living while engaging in handicrafts or graphic design.” (Participant 3)
- “I have a full-time job to support this business. I hope that I can have my own workshop. I will not engage in full-time handicraft business in the foreseeable future.” (Participant 4)
- “According to my capacity, I can only teach a maximum of three two-hour classes a day. The rest of the time will be used for preparations of copybooks and voluntary work. I will not reject any job opportunities at this moment.” (Participant 5)
- “In the past two years, I have been working as an artist and student. Besides, I also do some teaching, which is my major source of income. My students range from children to adults. Last semester, I taught a painting class at the Open University of Hong Kong, and now I keep teaching kids. For this semester, I teach them ink washing, computer illustration, and different watercolor techniques. Moreover, I also deliver art therapy lessons, as well as teaching kids to do simple drawings.” (Participant 6)

It is difficult break even when starting a new business as a handicraft entrepreneur. Full-time entrepreneurs have to count on their part-time jobs, which are mostly teaching handicraft classes. If they work part-time, the new business would be supported by their full-time jobs.

Handicraft artists in market-driven economies have to engage in other activities (ranging from teaching handicraft classes to working in a full-time job) for financial sustainability. What is the underlying driving force? The answer is passion. They belong to a new type of entrepreneurship—passion-driven entrepreneurship—which is unconventional [26]. Without passion, they cannot sustain their beliefs and maintain the abovementioned business model.

Passion and skills can be developed from leisure and hobbies. Young individuals today may not be satisfied with taking a traditional career path in a big company. One solution is being a freelancer or “slasher”. Being a handicraft entrepreneur is one of the options. They can fully take control of their own time and are less likely to feel bored [26].

7. Challenges

With reference to the third research question, “What are the challenges faced by handicraft entrepreneurs?”, several themes emerged from the interviews.

7.1. Time-Consuming Product Development

Product development is usually the most time-consuming process for many handicraft entrepreneurs because, after conception, they have to carry out an array of experiments to find the most suitable materials for generating the expected results with a feasible production time and material cost.

- “The biggest difficulty is production because I went to the paper mill yesterday to see which materials are more suitable for my production process [. . .] I have created a lot of things, but I need to maintain quality by doing experiments, it takes time, and paper is a problem.” (Participant 1)
- “The most difficult part is product development, from conception, materials, to production. This procedure is time-consuming [. . .] As I finish it all by myself, I don’t have enough time for the whole production process.” (Participant 2).

7.2. Small Local Market

Half of the participants expressed complaints about the local market. Geographically, the market’s population is smaller than those of its neighboring regions. First of all, not many consumers in Hong Kong have the habit of buying locally produced accessories, with more individuals preferring imported luxury brands. Secondly, customers’ willingness to pay for handicraft products is low, which may be due to the unawareness of the high cost incurred in developing such products and maintaining businesses. Thirdly, the market in Hong Kong changes quickly; it would be difficult for handicrafters to make considerable profits if they followed trends.

- “It is difficult to sustain a business in the Hong Kong market. First of all, due to the fast-changing trends, the market for cultural and creative industries is relatively small. Although a large number of fairs are held in Hong Kong, they are not concentrated and are usually on a small scale. Also, those who participate in the fair are mainly there for profit-making purposes. Moreover, many local consumers who come to the fairs target low-priced practical products. Apart from that, consumers also fancy luxury brands, such as Lane Crawford.” (Participant 2)
- “If you’re not a designer or illustrator like us, you may not highly value this kind of creation. Especially in Hong Kong, people mistakenly think that handicrafts can be massively produced by a factory. Fine art requires a lot of time to create. Only those people who are die-hard fans or truly like the brand’s character will repeatedly purchase your products, whereas other people won’t want to spend any money on it.” (Participant 3)
- “When making purchases, Hongkongers are concerned about reasonable pricing and quality. If the brand is not famous, they are only willing to purchase the product if the price is low. Under such a consumer culture, Hongkongers usually look for cheaper products [. . .] Hong Kong customers tend to ask for discounts even when they love my products.” (Participant 4)

7.3. High Rental Rate

Another major challenge for business operations in Hong Kong is the skyrocketing rental price. As businesses in the handicraft industry are often on a small scale and often not making high profits, it is hard for the owners to afford even short-term booth rentals and storage. It would be a dream to have a small shop in a shopping mall. It is a big obstacle for them to expand their businesses, as it might limit their exposure if they cannot showcase their products in fairs or other locations. They also avoided keeping a large quantity of stock, so they might not be able to take orders in bulk.

- “The rent of a small temporary booth in Hong Kong is more expensive, costing around 120 USD for 2 days in the marketplace.” (Participant 2)
- “I don’t want to produce a large number of products, as storage is a big problem.” (Participant 6)

7.4. Ineffective Social Media Engagement

Social media, as a free online platform, has become an important channel for small business owners to communicate with customers and reach out to new markets. However, some participants found it hard to promote their businesses.

- “I found that most of the likes on my ‘Cartoon Tapes’ posts on Instagram are from secondary school students. So I made cartoon tapes and stickers for them but they turned out to buy other products. The customers who made purchases were completely different from who I had expected.” (Participant 3)
- “In recent years, people don’t give likes or follow you easily. Most of the time they would take a look and give a ‘like’; after that, they would not pay attention to your post, and even forget about you. [. . .] Perhaps it is because I failed to find the right target audience or used the wrong strategy. In fact, I have paid to advertise 1–2 posts, which many people liked. However, the number of followers didn’t increase subsequently. I am not sure if that is my problem.” (Participant 6)

In summary, their challenges included the small market sizes and high rental fees. Women entrepreneurs with limited budgets may not know how to make use of social media and have invested most of their time in product development. In addition, the low product volume makes it difficult to expand a business quickly. Most of them are design-oriented without practical business sense.

8. Managerial Implications

As entrepreneurship policy in Hong Kong was not designed with a gendered lens, practices adopted by other developed countries could be taken as useful references. For example, the US government set up the Office of Women’s Business Ownership to coordinate and implement gendered policies on entrepreneurship. In terms of conventional gender roles, many women have to shoulder the burden of household and family duties, which consumes much time and energy. Psychologically speaking, many women lack confidence and self-esteem for start their own businesses. Interestingly, there were some common characteristics among the women entrepreneurs interviewed for a study by The Women’s Foundation Hong Kong (TWFHK), in which all interviewees referred to time spent studying, working, or travelling overseas as instrumental in providing them with a different perspective and motivating them to take risks to establish their own businesses. Some of them said that they had not started out with grand ambitions, but were pursuing their passion and flexibility instead, while others said that they had become more ambitious as they tasted success [33].

Access to capital is a significant challenge for women entrepreneurs around the globe, as women are less likely to take risks; even if they do, it is harder for them to receive hefty loans with favorable terms from banks [34]. Apart from resorting to bank loans, venture capital (VC) is a major external financing source, but it is also an industry traditionally dominated by men, while women tend to obtain additional capital from friends and family. The current network supporting women entrepreneurs is fragmented; for example, the Women’s Foundation organized a “Mentoring Program for Women Leaders” [34] (p. 12), but there is little support from the government. In addition, there was a Women’s Business Start-Up Assistance Scheme launched by the Hong Kong Women Professionals and Entrepreneurs Association (HKWPEA) [34]. The TWFHK runs a Mentoring Program for Women Leaders that includes entrepreneurship panels and an entrepreneurs’ mentoring circle where experienced women business owners can coach up-and-coming women entrepreneurs. However, these approaches are not sustainable. The government may consider introducing public–private partnerships to link existing resources and to introduce more comprehensive programs by coordinating concerted efforts of banks, private-sector companies, and civil society in order to provide women entrepreneurs with seed funds and other necessary resources for starting and scaling up businesses.

A non-governmental organization, social enterprise, or commercial organization that specializes in entrepreneurship should be established in order to cultivate future women entrepreneurs. The function of the organization is to provide supporting services for business knowledge and small offices/places for product development. A subsidy scheme for start-up businesses should be provided by the government or non-government agencies so that women entrepreneurs can obtain a small amount of financing for the establishment

of new businesses and/or for maintaining their business operations at the beginning of an entrepreneurial career.

A centralized business scheme for women handicraft entrepreneurs would be another innovative business idea. Women handicraft entrepreneurs could focus on the development/improvement of their products, while business operations and management could be delegated to specialists or managers. The artistic role of women handicrafters is thus highlighted, and the business part is handled by a professional manager. However, this might not be feasible on a one-to-one basis in the initial stages. Thus, business experts could manage the business strategies and marketing for several artists at the same time. The above concept is already used in the entertainment industry and could be translated into the handicraft industry.

9. Conclusions

In summary, women handicraft entrepreneurs are passion-driven entrepreneurs in the city who clearly belong to the category of unconventional entrepreneurs. Basically, they do not need to worry about making their living in Hong Kong, as they possess earning power. They might decide not to join the traditional workforce. Instead, they can afford to pursue their dreams.

Women handicraft entrepreneurs in Hong Kong struggle between dreams and reality. They are very skillful in creating artworks, such as illustrated drawings or pressed flowers. They are passionate and use their full-time or part-time income to support the achievement of their dreams. On one hand, this option would be more sustainable, as they could make a living without fearing business shutdowns. On the other hand, with limited time and energy, it is difficult for them to fully develop their potential.

They have a strong design mindset, but lack business knowledge. All of them assume the dual roles of handicrafters and sellers, which may sometimes be in conflict with each other. As handicrafters, they have to make their products as ideal as possible. As businesspeople, they need to maximize their output and profit. However, given their limited time and staffing, they are confined to small-scale production. Thus, it is difficult to strike a balance between the two roles. Almost all of them are skillful, innovative, and passionate on the artistic side, but reactive and passive on the business side. In terms of traditional entrepreneurial orientation, they are innovative, but not proactive and risk taking. Instead, they are skillful and passionate.

Thus, the status quo situation is a small number of handicrafters selling a relatively small amount of products in a non-profitable manner. In order to sustain this, they are engaged in teaching handicraft classes or in other jobs. Thus, this is their entrepreneurial model.

Their challenges include the long process of product development, the small local market, the high rental fees, and ineffective social media engagement. Women entrepreneurs are skillful, passionate, and innovate, but reactive. Applying the social identity theory, women handicrafters see themselves as artists, and are hence reluctant to hard-sell their products, rendering them passive in their business manner. Because they are so engrossed in creating their artworks, attention is not devoted to offline or online engagement with target customers. Supplementary schemes could be offered through non-governmental organizations to empower those women entrepreneurs in view of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals.

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