

Theme - Creative practitioner identities

Title: Could artists' perception of their identity be limiting their potential as creative entrepreneurs? The case for skills development for independent artists in Zimbabwe

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Track – Cultural and Creative Industries

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Abstract

The question of how artists perceive their identity in relation to their work has been considered by researchers with many concluding that artists can be considered entrepreneurs as much as they can be considered artists and both can be true at the same time. Indeed, the identity question extends to how artistic output is classified, with some artists preferring to refer to their artistic output as “art” while others external to the artistic processes refer to the artistic output as “products”. However, if artists can be entrepreneurs, it is also true that artistic output can be art, products or artistic products. While these may seem to be synonymous terms, their implications on successful creative entrepreneurship and artists' potential to sustain a livelihood from their artistry cannot be disregarded. This is especially true in developing economies like Zimbabwe where demand for artistic products is undermined by macro-environmental factors including high unemployment, low income and high cost of living which make for a challenging economic climate. Artists need the commercial awareness and skills associated with agile entrepreneurship to operate successfully in such an economic climate. This developmental paper seeks to explore literature on the impact of artists' identity on creative entrepreneurship. The paper will also explore if entrepreneurial artists have distinguishing characteristics that can be adopted by “pure” artists to embed commercial practices in their creative process. The benefits of embedding an entrepreneurial approach to the artistic process will be outlined for consideration by artists.

Keywords: Creative Entrepreneurship, Identity, Artists, Cultural and Creative Industries

Research Context

This paper contends that embedding commercial skills and knowledge into the creative processes of Zimbabwean artists can lead to an evolution in the way that artists perceive themselves, how they approach their work and ultimately the sustainability of their livelihoods as artists and creative entrepreneurs. However, evolution in the perception of artists' identities and reorientation of the arts in Zimbabwe into creative enterprises with artists seen as creative entrepreneurs or as entrepreneurial artists will take time. Zimbabwe is chosen for this paper because the author is currently doing a research degree looking at innovative marketing strategies for international market development for artists working in creative and cultural industries in Zimbabwe. Investigating influence of artists identities on their creative entrepreneurship can help to develop further understanding of present context in the creative and cultural industries in Zimbabwe.

Literature review

The literature review below explores western research, theories and concepts of artists' identity, how identity influences their entrepreneurship and what can be done to embed commercial awareness into artist identities as pathway towards creative entrepreneurship.

According to Werthes et al. (2017) artists' identity is an important part of who they are and what they do. The relationship between their creative output and how they want to be perceived are also influential to how they identify themselves. Beyond their identity being closely linked to their work and its output, identifying themselves as artists allows them to belong to a community of like-minded people, to benefit from arts networks and in some case the identity adds to their job satisfaction (Spaeth, 2021). Indeed, to achieve success as an artist, to gain recognition and critical acclaim for their work cements that sense of belonging and serves as a motivating factor much more than achieving entrepreneurial success (Baláž, et al, 2022).

This singular focus on pursuing artistic success and its interplay with identity can, for some artists, result in poorly formed or a total lack of awareness of the importance of creating a business model upon which their artistic work can exist (Höllen et al., 2020). Others like Avila et al. (2023) found that the tensions experienced by artists contemplating developing an entrepreneurial identity came from a disconnect between their passion for creating artistic products and entrepreneurial tasks for which they had little or no passion. Unless artists already have a source of income to fund a livelihood, it is important that the artistic process is underpinned by entrepreneurship to guide them towards a sustainable model that enables the creation of a livelihood from their talent (Stenholm et al., 2024).

Knox (2018) describes the process of embedding creative entrepreneurship into one's artistic identity as a journey that artists must go on, especially for arts graduates if they are to develop a sustainable economic and artistic career. According to Brown (2007) artists must recognise that the arts is a business and to survive within the arts business requires commercial awareness which can help artists to recognise market dynamics and where they fit within that ecosystem. Knox (2018) rightly points out that art and business must co-exist in order to put external value on the art that artists create especially if that artist creates their work and expect to derive economic value. Thus, it is important that we explore how building entrepreneurship into an artist's identity is important for sustainable artistic careers.

Artists and entrepreneurial identity

Arts entrepreneurship is not a new concept and while artists may not choose to be identified as entrepreneurs, the act of putting their artistic works up for sale or making them available for purchase suggests that entrepreneurship is part and parcel of their creative process and personal motivation (Bridgstock, 2013). That arts entrepreneurship exists more widely within artists who may not identify as entrepreneurs is also evidenced by Werthes et al. (2017), who found that artists act in entrepreneurial ways but do so over time as their confidence as artists grows to a point where they also feel confident enough put their works up for sale. Additionally, Pollard and Wilson (2014) found that confidence in one's artistic abilities has a strong influence on the artists' willingness to build an entrepreneurship mindset into their personal identity. Belief in one's abilities can also drive passion in creating an opportunity to increase visibility of one's work which motivates artists to acquire skills to promote their creations.

From artists to creative entrepreneurs

The difference between artists and traditional entrepreneurs may not be as broad as it may seem, at least not at face value. Poorsoltan (2012) suggests that artists and entrepreneurs share three key traits which should make it possible if not easy for artists to embed an entrepreneurial mindset into their identity: internal locus of control, tolerance of ambiguity and risk taking. All three traits are true of artists because their belief in their talents is strong enough to drive them to pursue a career as an artist. A career as artists, especially independent artists, is a demonstration of risk-taking because from the onset there are no guarantees of being accepted or of success as an artist, but this does not deter an artist's commitment to their work. Lastly artists' tolerance for ambiguity is found in their creativity, being able to function without the structure of formal workspaces (Poorsoltan, 2012).

However, Lee et al. (2022) also suggested that there is more to artists developing entrepreneurial awareness than merely identifying themselves as entrepreneurial artists because they need entrepreneurship training to effectively run their businesses. Entrepreneurship training can help to reduce the identity tension between "artist" and

“entrepreneur” by outlining the benefits of embedding entrepreneurship in their mindset and identity. Werthes et al. (2017) go further to suggest that beyond the intrinsic traits, training can be especially useful for helping artists to see how entrepreneurial thinking can benefit their craft and the creative process. Fillis (2004) recommends that entrepreneurship training targeted at developing artists into entrepreneurs should be built around their intrinsic traits, their areas of artistic interests and have clear links showing how it enhances the creative process. Arts schools are embedding entrepreneurship training (Leet et al., 2022; Bridgstock, 2013) to prepare students for careers in CCIs or as independent artists. This, according to Knox (2018), helps to prepare graduates for a career in which they can make commercial decisions to support their creative processes for economic success and sustainable creative entrepreneurship. Sustainable creative entrepreneurship requires knowledge of marketing, finance, accounting, understanding quality and competition as well as economic impact of demand and supply (Hollen et al., 2020). All of this can be developed through training and by embedding commercial practices in the creative process, (Lee et al., 2022).

The Zimbabwean context

Zimbabwe has a vibrant creative and cultural industry (CCI) in which many creatives work as informal or independent operators (Zhou, 2017). According to the British Council's (2020) report on Creative Industries contribute 6.9% to Zimbabwe's GDP, employs 22000 people and exports US\$22millions worth of products annually. Artistic products produced within Zimbabwe's CCI range from very valuable stone sculptures made by sculptors from sculptor generational dynasties to low quality, low value curios and handicrafts produced by craftspeople and traditional artisans (Basera et al., 2022). The largely informal nature of the CCI also means that the majority of operators in the sector have low levels of education and no entrepreneurship training or access to such training (Verhoeven et al., 2018). For many creatives in Zimbabwe's CCI, identifying themselves as artists gives them authenticity, a sense of belonging and purpose which connects them to the products they produce (Nyoni, 2018). The lack of entrepreneurial training or commercial underpinning in the artistic process means that entrepreneurship does not figure in their perception of themselves even though selling their products is important to their survival (Verhoeven et al., 2018).

Research objectives,

The objectives of this study are;

- To investigated whether western theories around entrepreneurship are accepted and appropriate for consideration?
- To assess how western ideas around entrepreneurship and commercialisation of art can be introduced without appearing patronising and imperialistic?

To explore how such an education programme might be developed, delivered, and promoted successfully in Zimbabwe, given the local context?

- To explore if there is any appetite for such education and training in the artistic communities?
- To determine how much do Zimbabweans artists see themselves as 'artists' rather than as 'entrepreneurs' or 'businesses'?

Research Method

The study will apply grounded theory as a methodology in inductive approach to data collection and as also use grounded theory as a research method particularly in the qualitative data collection workshops. Turner and Astin (2021) suggests grounded theory's applicability as both a research methodology and research method work well together because of the possibility to immerse the research within the study subject or phenomenon. The theoretical framework built on an inductive approach with grounded theory methods is appropriate for this study because the study seeks to develop theory from observing and learning through the experiences of people working in the CCI in Zimbabwe, (Randall and Mello, 2012).

The data will be collected in small group workshops where participants will be guided to work through their experiences by answering a set of questions and tasks which progressively lead to identification suggestions to consider for developing their own identity as creative entrepreneurs. Workshops as methods of data collection have been used widely in social sciences and it is the focus on human interaction make them ideal for this study, (Treloar et al., 2017). The constraints placed on learning by Covid-19 lockdowns furthered the usability of workshops as data collection through online workshops whereby researchers used online workshops as data collection methods, (Shamsuddin et al, 2021).

Directions for future study

This paper has demonstrated that artists' identity can influence their approach to creative entrepreneurship and that the tension that exists between art and entrepreneurship can be minimised. The paper has also shown that appropriately targeted entrepreneurship training in arts schools and in the community can help artists to embed commercial awareness and entrepreneurial concepts into the creative process for success sustainable careers. However, in the context of Zimbabwe this research will investigate whether the western centric theories and concept of creative entrepreneurship reviewed in this paper can be applied in Zimbabwe's CCI with similar outcomes. The research will also investigate whether the same entrepreneurship traits found in western artists and entrepreneurs exists in the Zimbabwean context as cultural difference can result in different traits. Understanding these intrinsic characteristics will help trainers and educators to design entrepreneurship training that

resonates with the artists' passion and areas of interest and can be delivered with sensitivity to the local context.

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