

## Surviving in the Creative Industry – Analysis of Innovation, Challenges, and Opportunities Faced by Small Art and Craft Enterprises in Sri Lanka

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### Abstract

The creative industries are experiencing steady growth and increasing popularity, particularly in Sri Lanka. Research has shown that handicraft businesses play a significant role in the economy of both developing and developed countries. As the creative sector becomes more integrated into the economy, creative firms face various challenges and opportunities. However, there is limited research on the challenges and opportunities faced by small art and craft enterprises in Sri Lanka. This study aims to address this gap by examining how these small enterprises survive in the creative industry through innovation practices, and by identifying the challenges and opportunities they encounter. The researcher identified that although the creative industry is flourishing in Sri Lanka, it is far behind its peers. Hence, this study aims to shed light on the functioning of small art and craft enterprises within the Sri Lankan creative industry. To gain a deeper understanding of the industry, a qualitative research method was utilised, including interviews with eight handicraft business owners in Sri Lanka. Several themes emerged through these interviews, including the importance of digital presence exposure, leveraging social networks for innovation, understanding consumer purchase intention, closed innovation practices, purchasing constraints, short-term vision, and creative value chain. Finally, the study offers key recommendations to help art and craft businesses thrive in Sri Lanka such as building relationships and networks to expand business reach, improving marketing campaigns to attract a larger customer base, and emphasising trust-building and brand development.

**Keywords:** Art and Craft Enterprises, Creative Value Chain, Innovation, Creative Industry

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background of the Study

Landoni et al. (2020) defined the creative industry as a sector that utilises innovative and creative practices of individuals, offering potential job opportunities. On the other hand, Potts, and Cunningham (2008) describe

creative industries as segments of the industry, where creativity is the input and intellectual property (copyrights and trademarks) is the output. The creative industry comprises fifteen subsectors including advertising, art market, craft, apparel, video filming and photography, interactive games, design, music, architecture, performing arts, computer and software

services, publishing and printing, TV, radio, and culinary (Herawaty & Raharja, 2018; Townley et al., 2009). However, variations in the definition of creative industries are diverse in different contexts (Berg & Hassink, 2014). In Europe, for instance, the creative industries are categorised into two groups: the 'core' creative industry, encompassing visual art and craft activities, and the 'partially' creative industry, which includes fields such as marketing, architecture, and media (O'Connor, 2007). Relatively, this study will examine innovation practices, opportunities, and challenges encountered by small visual artists and crafters in Sri Lanka, aiming to enhance their success in the industry. The art and craft sector are commonly referred to as the handicraft sector.

According to Jayawarna (2020), Sri Lanka's creative industry has shown consistent growth, from \$433.63 million in 2010 to \$845.41 million in 2014. The crafting sector employs around 62% of the creative industry workforce, contributing 5.3% to the country's GDP in 2020 (Hirimuthugodage, et al., 2020). There are approximately 83 established artists and 1000 crafters and encompasses three main sectors: Arts and culture, design, and media (Hirimuthugodage et al., 2020; Jayawarna, 2020). Micro firms, typically managed by a single owner and not seeking significant growth, are prevalent in the creative industries, with the majority employing less than 10 individuals (Jaouen & Lasch, 2015).

## 1.2. Problem Statement

Sri Lanka lacks creativity compared to its peers, as indicated by the Global Creativity Index (GCI) rankings (Hirimuthugodage et al., 2020). This highlights the significant challenges in harnessing the country's potential in the creative industry. Most existing studies in this field have primarily used quantitative research methods, with limited in-depth exploration through qualitative research. Therefore, the author intends to conduct qualitative research to examine the challenges and opportunities faced by the handicraft enterprises in Sri Lanka. Although the creative industry in Sri Lanka is experiencing growth and demand, small businesses in this industry still face significant obstacles in terms of survival, including the high-risk nature of accessing potential customers and the lack of financial, technical, and government support (Hirimuthugodage et al., 2020; Jayawarna, 2020). The findings of this study may benefit other researchers conducting similar studies and enhance their research based on these findings.

## 1.3 Research Aim

The research aim of this study is to examine the challenges and opportunities in terms of innovation faced by small art and craft enterprises in Sri Lanka.

## 2. Methodology

This research was conducted using a mono method qualitative research approach. The research process was commenced through the collection of primary data through semi-structured online interviews aimed at small art and craft business owners in Sri Lanka.

This study involves a sample of 8 handicraft business owners who can represent and provide a detailed discussion on the creative industry in Sri Lanka. Moreover, the purposive sampling technique was utilised in the selection of the sample. The data analysis procedure was conducted using thematic analysis.

## 3. Findings and Discussion

The details of the small enterprises are given in Table 1. The participants in this study were predominantly female artists and entrepreneurs in the art and craft sector in Sri Lanka. They were motivated by passion and sought personal satisfaction and gratification through their creative endeavours. While some initially started their businesses without a focus on profits, others aimed to earn money from their passion. The participants specialised in various areas such as acrylic and oil canvas paintings, traditional art, digital art, greeting cards, posters, and wedding favours. Most operated as micro-firms without employees, although one participant had three employees. All participants were founders and CEOs of their businesses, with industry experience ranging from 2 to 6 years.

**Table 1. Details of the small enterprises**

Code	Area of specialisation	No of employees	Years in business
01	Acrylic painting	1	2
02	Commission paintings	1	5
03	Canvas painting, string art, greeting card, shadow box	1	2
04	Oil painting, selling art supplies	3	5
05	Acrylic and oil painting, calligraphy	1	5
06	Craft, cards, painting, digital art, posters	1	5
07	Digital art, wedding favours	1	2
08	Acrylic painting, framed watercolour wedding favours	1	6

## Digital Presence

Consistent with Scheepers et al. (2022), the findings of this study revealed that most of the participants in the art and craft sector are leveraging digital tools and platforms to enhance their business reach. The participants reported using popular digital and social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook to establish an online presence and attract customers. These platforms served as valuable tools for promoting their work and adding value to their businesses.

A respondent stated, *“I started from Instagram, and it has benefitted me big time. I have reached some people who I thought I would not reach. So, that is like the biggest benefit of going digital for me”*.

In line with the findings of Putrivi (2020), and Shult (2015), the participants in this study affirmed that online platforms have played a crucial role in increasing demand and expanding their customer base. They reported that utilising social media platforms has significantly improved their business reach compared to offline methods. Furthermore, participants emphasised the importance of digital tools in editing and marketing their products which helped raise awareness of their business.

A respondent stated, *“I think in my business, for everything except creating the actual artwork, I use the help of platforms. Whether it is, you know, taking a picture, or editing it or posting it or even for advertising. Even communicating*

*with my customers is through social media platforms. So, I mean, it is very convenient and cheap at the same time and with all the digital tools that you have today, it has never been easier.”*

Additionally, in line with the findings of Guha et al. (2021) and Shafi et al., (2019), the participants of this study highlighted the cost-effectiveness of digital platforms for marketing their businesses. Small art and craft firms opt for word-of-mouth and social media strategies to create business awareness, instead of expensive marketing methods. This resonates with the findings of Guha et al. (2021), that small artisans who often face financial constraints, rely on intermediaries for resources.

A respondent stated, *“I mostly use Instagram and Facebook as my main channels and it is not heavy on my wallet, in terms of marketing and reach, which I am happy about. On Instagram, we have a whole section dedicated to supporting small businesses which I feel is a very great and cost friendly way to market my work”*.

Moreover, Bianco et al. (2019) found a growing demand for digital artwork, which participants recognised as a significant opportunity. Participants believed their focus on digital art made them innovative, cutting costs by providing soft copies instead of physical materials.

A respondent stated, *“I mostly take on softcopies so, I don't have the hassle of printing*

*the artwork and framing it, compared to other businesses that invent and sell goods, I would say that my business is a pretty good, because I do not have the hassle of purchasing tangible goods and stuff. So, I think in that way, digital art is an opportunity that I have”.*

Scheepers et al. (2022) noted that going digital in the art industry can be mentally draining due to technological complexities. Few participants reported challenges in software maintenance, platform engagement, and experienced stress in managing their businesses.

A respondent stated, *“I think one of the challenges I faced was to put in a capital. Although I do digital art, you must pay for platforms to purchase them and to maintain them. We need to upgrade the software and all of that.”*

A respondent stated, *“The amount of physical and emotional labour that comes with art is honestly not talked about enough. It’s just so tiring sometimes to repetitively do paintings and stuff... one downside to using Instagram is that the algorithm is not always easy to deal with. I have come across many instances where I have noticed that my friends could never see my posts on their feeds. This is a tricky business, but I am trying hard to figure it out”.*

### **Social and Personal Networks**

Boren and Young (2011), Turner (2023) and Gundolf et al. (2018) emphasised the importance of broad networks for artists in the creative industry to gain exposure. However,

the findings contradict this notion, as most artists prefer working in isolation and rely on their own marketing efforts for audience reach.

A respondent stated, *“I do not have an art network., mainly because I prefer working alone and I find it difficult to collaborate with someone who is not in the same wavelength as me. My art style may not match another artist and I feel that’s a disadvantage for me and my business”.*

As stated by Hirimuthugodage et al. (2020), most artists prefer to work in isolation, because they believe that there are limited networking opportunities in Sri Lanka.

A respondent stated, *“I do not have an art network mainly because I believe that artists have poor exposure to the world, and because the government does not seem to provide much of a benefit to artists in the country so there is limited exposure”.*

Boreng and Young (2011) noted that artists often collaborate with their existing and known social networks; some participants in this study expressed their preference for working with known networks. A few participants mentioned having personal connections within their social network and enjoying collaborations to combine talents and generate new ideas.

A respondent stated, *“I do not really have a huge external network, but I do have personal networks. So, I work with known businesses who I have already worked with in the past. So that is convenient for me, so I don’t have to feel*

*awkward working with new and unknown people. So, it's fun to work with different people because it brings in new ideas”.*

A respondent stated, *“When we collaborate with another artist, it helps share our audience and you can basically integrate both your art styles. This provides a greater audience, and you can create new ideas”.*

### **Consumer Purchase Intention**

Guha et al. (2021) found that consumer purchase intention and buyer attitude significantly impact small businesses in the handicraft sector. Similarly, Koswatte (2020) and Kalubowila and Rajapakse (2021) noted that Sri Lankans have a poor sense of brand consciousness and spend relatively little on art and craft. Additionally, Koswatte (2020) observed that premium pricing negatively affects buyer attitude, unless consumers develop an emotional attachment to the product. This study's findings align with these observations, as most artists face challenges in selling their products in Sri Lanka, due to the purchasing attitudes of the local population towards art and craft products.

A respondent stated, *“I cannot focus on the long-term because most people in Sri Lanka do not have a mind-set to purchase artwork. I realised that nobody is going to be willing to purchase even if there was no economic problem in the country right now”.*

Another respondent stated, *“I think pricing and costs are major challenges for me because*

*customers in Sri Lanka have little to no basic awareness on the costs that comes with an art business and are always trying to bargain and be a cheapskate which is annoying. They clearly are undermining the seriousness and effort it takes into creating such labouring work.*

### **Closed Innovation**

Snowball et al. (2021) and Putrivi (2020) emphasised the importance of innovation for survival in the creative industry, as it requires adapting to changes in demand and supply. Similarly, Chollisni et al. (2022) and Liu (2021) highlighted the significance of open innovation, collaborating with other firms to add value. However, the findings contradict this notion as most participants prefer and practice closed innovation and conduct their own market research to identify demands.

A respondent stated, *“I feel like anything that you do is innovation. I feel like, even a stroke that you make on a canvas is innovation like I said, I'm not doing this business full-time, so I don't really collaborate or anything. I just do my own research and browse through the internet to identify what people want”.*

Another respondent stated, *“I conduct my own research because based on demand only we are supposed to create the products. So, I would say doing my own research helps me to be more innovative”.*

## Purchasing Constraints

According to Landoni et al. (2020), artists and crafters in the industry lack a steady income and prefer wide profit distribution. Similarly, participants face financial hindrances, such as purchasing materials, locating supplies, and poor financial grants in Sri Lanka (Kalubowila & Rajapakse, 2021). The findings indicated that locating and purchasing supplies and raw materials in Sri Lanka is a major financial constraint for most participants. This is due to fluctuations in the economy, transportation difficulties in the country, and taxations in the country.

A respondent stated, *“I face financial challenges in purchasing materials. Especially these days, the prices of everything have gone high... it’s extremely difficult to purchase products from other countries due to increased taxes and import restrictions. On top of that it takes a long time to bring them down to Sri Lanka”*.

## Short-term Vision

Small art and craft enterprises often operate short-term due to the reasons for starting the business. Owners aim to build a career through their passion and may lack skills and capital funding (Choudhary & Mishra, 2022; Yang et al., 2018). Market vulnerability in Sri Lanka further contributes to the short-term focus (Romein & Trip, 2011). Although the findings of this study indicate the importance of a long term business plan, most participants have a

short-term business plan, indicating short-term investment in the business.

A respondent stated, *“I would say I’m focused on short-term at the moment. I’m trying to meet my short-term needs and I don’t really have a long-term vision because I do this because it’s my passion, and with the way things are going right now in the country, I’m facing more issues in the short-term rather than in the long-term”*.

Another respondent stated, *“A long-term business plan is very important, if I had it, I think I would be elsewhere in the business. I wouldn’t be having very few followers and still be in this level if I had a long-term plan”*.

A respondent stated, *“I guess I’m not really focused on the long run right now, because I cannot manage my time with my personal life. So, I just have a short plan, based on the current situation”*.

## Creative Value Chain

Bhatiasevi and Dutot (2014) noted the variation of the creative value chain in different business sectors. While Madudova (2017) and Wang (2018) observed that art and craft firms operate in small quantities. Similarly, the findings indicate that participants conducted production in small quantities due to resource limitations and order-based earnings. Moreover, the primary activities in the value chain varied among participants. Some focused on receiving orders, production, packaging, shipping, and selling, while others included idea presentation, customer preferences, materials purchase, and

Instagram marketing within their value chain. Hence, the primary activities in the art and craft value chain differ significantly among businesses.

#### 4. Conclusion

This paper has provided an overview and evidence of the opportunities and challenges faced by small art and craft industries in Sri Lanka, along with the innovation practices used to survive in the industry. This research has argued that it is important to build networks to enhance business reach and building trust is important in branding the business to a broader audience. Key challenges identified were purchasing constraints due to unavailability of supplies, poor consumer purchase intention, short-term vision limiting capital and funding opportunities, and building social networks. Likewise, the identified key opportunities included digital presence exposure, closed innovation practices, and specialisation.

#### 5. Recommendations

***Building relationships and networks:*** According to Santoro, Bresciani, and Papa (2020), networks and alliances foster innovation in the creative industry. However, most handicraft businesses in this study practiced closed innovation, facing branding and awareness challenges. Therefore, collaborating and improving networking activities can enhance competitiveness, and expanding the customer base. Forming team networks and seeking low-cost operations are

valuable for building long-term profitable relationships (Kuhn & Galloway, 2015).

***Improve marketing campaigns:*** The research findings revealed that participants lacked marketing activities and funding, while being unaware of government support in Sri Lanka. However, the Arts Council and the Laksala institute provides promotion and aid to handicraft sectors (Teo et al., 2020). Obtaining help from such institutes and government credit facilities can enhance marketing, help reach a larger customer base, and improve business efficiency while reducing costs (Silva, 2019).

***Brand and trust building:*** Brand building and trust are crucial for small art and craft businesses (Kuhn & Galloway, 2015). Consumers in Sri Lanka have a negative buying attitude towards art and craft products, often requiring an emotional connection to the product, to make a purchase (De Silva & Hemachandra, 2012; Kalubowila & Rajapakse, 2021; Koswatte, 2020). Therefore, it is crucial to foster two-way interactions between businesses and customers, to strengthen relationships. Utilising social media platforms would effectively establish two-way communication, foster trust, and create awareness about the business. Creating value in products and incorporating cultural values can improve buyer attitudes in Sri Lanka.



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