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Artisan Entrepreneurship in a Digital World

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University of Glasgow

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Abstract

Artisan entrepreneurship, long associated with tradition, lifestyle motivations, and resistance to change, is undergoing a transformative shift in the digital world. No longer passive or digitally indifferent, many artisan entrepreneurs are now embracing digital tools with purpose, strategic intent, and global ambition. This thesis explores how artisan entrepreneurs in emerging economies, with a particular focus on Malaysia, navigate this transformative shift and challenge conventional assumptions about their role in digital economies.

Guided by Nambisan's (2017) digital entrepreneurship framework, the study examines how digital artefacts, platforms, and infrastructures shape artisans' identity formation, business strategies, and cultural expression. Rather than treating digital engagement as purely instrumental, this research highlights its emotional, symbolic, and context-specific dimensions.

The central research question is: *How do artisan entrepreneurs in an emerging economy negotiate and experience digital entrepreneurship?* A mixed-methods approach was employed. A preliminary survey helped map the landscape and identify suitable interview participants, followed by 25 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with artisan entrepreneurs. These interviews explored their lived experiences, digital strategies, and ongoing negotiations around visibility, value, and identity online.

Thematic analysis revealed four key findings: (1) artisans actively challenge traditional stereotypes, positioning themselves as globally minded entrepreneurs who integrate cultural heritage with commercial ambition; (2) they operate independently, often without institutional support; (3) they engage with digital platforms selectively, aligning strategies with personal values and brand identity; and (4) they face emotional and structural challenges, including platform dependency, cultural misrepresentation, financial insecurity, and burnout.

This thesis contributes to both digital and artisan entrepreneurship scholarship by foregrounding the agency, creativity, and resilience of artisan entrepreneurs in emerging economies. Theoretically, it extends digital entrepreneurship beyond high-growth and tech-dominated contexts by showing how artisans' appropriate digital infrastructures to sustain, scale, and reimagine their businesses without losing the cultural integrity and individuality that defines them as artisans. Practically, it offers insights for policy, support systems, and platform design better attuned to the realities of small-scale creative entrepreneurs in the digital world.

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And to my soulmate — until we meet again, in a softer lifetime. That time, it'll be forever.

I hope you are proud of me.

And I, you.

Author's Declaration

“I Noor Syerie Rahayu Binti Zulkifli declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, that this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.”

Printed Name: Noor Syerie Rahayu Binti Zulkifli

Signature: _____

CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Research Context

On a quiet morning in her sunlit home in Kuala Lumpur, Julia carefully sews her third handcrafted *Batik* handbag of the day. This piece is adorned with *Bunga Raya* motifs, Malaysia's national flower, shaped into a butterfly that symbolises her quiet entrepreneurial transformation. For Julia, the act of making is more than a livelihood; it is an expression of freedom rediscovered in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. After leaving her corporate job, she embraced artisan entrepreneurship, using her creativity to reconnect with identity and purpose. The finished bag: a product of heritage and innovation, is photographed and uploaded online. Within hours, it is purchased by a buyer across the world. What began in the intimacy of her home now traverses continents, blending tradition with technology, craftsmanship with connectivity.

Julia represents a new generation of artisan entrepreneurs: digitally fluent, yet culturally rooted; committed to preserving tradition through crafts, while actively engaging with the digital world. Her story is not isolated but reflective of a broader shift in artisan entrepreneurship. Artisans, once seen as marginal figures in economic development and mostly tied to local markets or family-run businesses, are now finding their way into digital platform economies, using storytelling and e-commerce to navigate this digital landscape.

Beyond the changing digital landscape, this shift is also shaped by several forces: the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, growing market demand for authenticity and handmade goods, and the increasing availability of digital tools that open new possibilities for artisan entrepreneurs. While the traditional image of the artisan remains culturally significant, it no longer captures the full complexity of contemporary artisan entrepreneurs that are digital. To understand this shift from traditional business models to digital strategies, it's important to first explore where it all began and how the essence of artisan entrepreneurship has evolved over time.

1.2 Evolution of Artisan Entrepreneurship Literature

Artisan entrepreneurship has long been part of global trade, connecting people through the creative industry (Rashid and Ratten, 2021). It carries a deep history that has evolved in step with shifting economic systems and cultural traditions (Hoyte, 2018). In pre-industrial societies, artisans played a central role in production, deeply rooted in cultural elements within community life (Von Briel et al., 2021; Bakas et al., 2019; Pret and Cogan, 2019). They were known as skilled workers who often embedded their business practices within guilds or familial networks (Igwe et al., 2018). As documented by Friedrichs (1976), artisans operated within tightly regulated guild systems that governed quality, pricing, and apprenticeships. These systems reflected the artisan's dual identity at the time, as both cultural custodian and economic actor.

Similar patterns are observable across diverse civilisations, such as in ancient Roman and Greek markets, where artisans were essential to the development of urban economies, contributing both practical goods and cultural symbolism (Hawkins, 2016). In Egypt, Hanna (2011) traces the thriving artisan economy of early modern Cairo (between 1600–1800), where artisans conducted business through traditional practices and close engagement with consumers in local market bazaars. These examples demonstrate that artisan entrepreneurship has long existed at the intersection of economic survival, social capital, and cultural expression.

The 19th century marked an early stage of commercial-artisan hybridity. For example, Franklin Muzzy, a U.S.-based craftsman in the 1830s, transitioned from being a solitary producer to managing a workshop with employees and formal trade relations (Toner, 1990). This reflects to the enduring adaptability of artisan entrepreneurship that are far from the typical, traditional stereotypes that have historically been linked to it.

In 1991, Popelka and Littrell were among the earliest scholars to recognize artisans' contributions to the tourism industry (Popelka & Littrell, 1991). However, their work did not generate sustained academic interest. Despite its long-standing presence, artisan entrepreneurship remained underexplored in scholarly research for much of the 20th century. It was only in the late 1990s that researchers like McAuley (1999) began calling for more serious engagement with artisans' businesses. Since then, interest has grown gradually, but the field remains limited, spread across business studies, anthropology, cultural heritage, and international development literature (García-Rosell and Mäkinen, 2013; Teixeira and Ferreira, 2019).

Today, scholars recognise that the literature on artisan entrepreneurship is growing (Ratten and Usmanji, 2022), with an increase in publications in top journals (Pret and Cogan, 2019), especially within the fields of entrepreneurship and management (Arias and Cruz, 2019; Hill, 2020; Igwe et al., 2018; Tregear, 2005). This growth is driven by rising global interest in artisan-made crafts are closely linked with cultural values of handmade goods, often perceived as authentic, unique, and one-of-a-kind (Ratten et al., 2019).

Therefore, there is a need for further research to fully capture the rise of these interests, both in terms of academic knowledge and practical relevance to support more nuanced, varied, and inclusive growth within the field of artisan entrepreneurship.

In general, the existing literature appears fragmented: on one hand, it maintains traditional views of artisan entrepreneurship, often shaped by long-standing stereotypes; on the other, it highlights an emerging wave of artisan entrepreneurs who actively engage with digital tools, frequently challenging those earlier portrayals.

This shift reflects a form of digital entrepreneurship and offers new perspectives on how this evolving segment of artisan entrepreneurs is understood. Gaining a deeper understanding of this evolution allows for a more comprehensive view of artisans operating in today's digital world.

This thesis seeks to enrich the growing body of literature by providing in-depth contextual and empirically informed insights into the dynamics of artisan entrepreneurship.

1.3 Defining Artisan Entrepreneurship

1.3.1 What is Artisan Entrepreneurship?

There are various scholarly definitions of artisan entrepreneurship, as it encompasses unique characteristics and a traditional business model. The concept of artisan entrepreneurship is distinguished by its emphasis on crafts production that is embedded with cultural significance (Hoyte, 2018; Marques et al., 2018; Rashid and Ratten, 2021; Ratten et al., 2019), often reflecting a deep emotional connection to personal identity (Bhattacharjya et al., 2018; Brooker and Joppe, 2014; Hill, 2020; Rashid and Ratten, 2021). Scholars such as Herrigel (1996) and Illeris (1992), for example, define artisan entrepreneurship from a more practice-based perspective, grounded in technical skills typically inherited through apprenticeship. These definitions often portray artisan entrepreneurship as embodying the slow and tactile nature of

traditional production methods, contrasting sharply with conventional, industrial entrepreneurs who operate in fast-paced, innovation-driven environments.

Artisans' distinction is often emphasised by the symbolic value of “making by hand,” where the physical presence of the artisan is embedded in the object produced, marking it as an authentic craft (Metcalf, 1997). In this conceptualisation, artisans are seen as guardians of tradition, creating handmade crafts that are authentic, produced in small quantities, and made by hand. Often, this involves resistance to industrial replication and the market-driven uniformity it produces. This binary of placing authentic, handmade crafts in opposition to mass-produced products has shaped early academic interpretations and policy perspectives. It is this framing that has positioned artisan entrepreneurs and their crafts as unique, one-of-a-kind products, setting them apart from more uniform modes of entrepreneurship. Scholars such as Shane and Venkataraman (2000) contributed to a more focused definition by emphasising the importance of originality in artisans' crafts, particularly those produced through non-mechanised methods.

In contrast, recent scholarship on the definition of artisan entrepreneurship challenges rigid boundaries that insist artisans' crafts must be made entirely by hand or rely primarily on manual techniques. Scholars such as Kapp (2017) argue for a broader view of artisan entrepreneurs, one that includes digital and creative producers who use technology in their production processes as long as they continue to uphold core artisan values, including product uniqueness, authenticity, authorship, and creative autonomy. Within this framework, the essence of being an artisan entrepreneur lies not in the specific tools or materials used, but in the approach to creation itself, one that is deliberate, emotionally invested, and rooted in a strong, original, identity-driven process. Similarly, Nagyszalanczy (2000) and Segares (2021) contend that artisan entrepreneurship is increasingly defined by artistic vision and self-expression, often conveyed through storytelling, regardless of the medium or technology employed.

These differing scholarly perspectives on how artisan entrepreneurship should be defined reflect an ongoing debate: should the term “artisan” evolve beyond its traditional “made by hand” associations and be updated to acknowledge the digital engagement increasingly present in contemporary business practices? As with many other forms of entrepreneurship, today's artisan entrepreneurs often incorporate digital tools into their work, whether in the production process, using mechanical instruments and semi-automated tools, or in the distribution and marketing of their products through e-commerce platforms such as Etsy, which specifically caters to

independent artisans. The question, then, is whether artisan entrepreneurship should embrace this broader, more inclusive definition, or remain rooted in narrow, niche traditional stereotypes that may have been applicable in the past but are no longer generalisable in today's digital world.

This thesis adopts a hybrid understanding of artisan entrepreneurship that acknowledges the enduring importance of traditional techniques and cultural meaning, as these elements are central to what defines an artisan: their uniqueness, their way of doing things, and the identity embedded in their craft. At the same time, it recognises the evolving practices of artisan entrepreneurs who engage with digital technologies, whether through the use of digital tools in the craft-making process, the adoption of digital platforms, or the shift toward digitally driven business models as noted by recent scholars (Kwiatkowski et al., 2021; Ramadani et al., 2017).

This conceptual flexibility is critical for capturing the complexities of artisan entrepreneurship in a digital world. These definitional debates matter because they shape how we frame artisan entrepreneurship not only in theory but also in research design, case selection, and policy discourse. We are in a moment of evolution, moving, adapting, and improving through digitalisation. Increasingly, artisan entrepreneurs are no longer confined to the traditional stereotypes often associated with them in past literature. They are reimagining their practices to align with contemporary markets and technologies. As such, there is an urgent need for scholars to embrace a more inclusive and updated definition that holds space for both heritage and digital involvement in understanding artisan entrepreneurship today.

1.3.2 Characteristics of Artisan Entrepreneurs

While the definition of artisan entrepreneurship continues to evolve, scholars generally agree on several distinguishing features that set artisan entrepreneurs apart from their conventional counterparts (Marques et al., 2018). Scholars highlight artisans' deep emotional entrepreneurial identity (Rashid and Ratten, 2021; Ratten et al., 2019) and their cultural connection to craft (Hoyte, 2018; Solomon and Mathias, 2020; Tregear, 2005) as prominent characteristics of artisan entrepreneurs. Artisan entrepreneurs often frame their work as a form of self-expression, heritage preservation, and community engagement, rather than as a purely commercial venture (Kuhn and Galloway, 2015; Ratten et al., 2019; Ramadani, 2017).

Unlike typical entrepreneurs who focus on profitability and growth, artisan entrepreneurs tend to value personal freedom, creativity, and work-life flexibility over scalability or profit maximisation (Cardon et al., 2012; Reijonen and Komppula, 2007). This has contributed to traditional stereotypes of artisan entrepreneurs as ‘lifestyle entrepreneurs’, often characterised as growth-averse and operating intentionally small-scale, highly personalised business models driven by altruistic rather than purely economic goals (Ratten et al., 2019; Teixeira & Ferreira, 2017). These values not only distinguish artisan entrepreneurship from conventional models but also challenge traditional assumptions about what defines success in entrepreneurial practice.

Rashid and Ratten (2021), Ramadani (2017), and Bakas et al. (2019) highlight the strong attachment of artisan entrepreneurs to specific socio-cultural contexts across both developed and emerging economies. Artisan entrepreneurs exhibit unique characteristics shaped by geographic location, cultural heritage, and place-based identity (Arias and Cruz, 2019; Hoyte, 2018; Ratten et al., 2019). Rather than representing a uniform category, artisans’ crafts can be strongly influenced by the region, shaping how the craft is made and how artisans run their businesses through local values, networks, and access to cultural heritage (Ratten et al., 2019; Salas-Vargas et al., 2021). Therefore, artisans may be making similar crafts, yet their work can differ depending on their environmental influences.

This sense of geographical and community embeddedness, which shapes the identity of artisan entrepreneurs, is also discussed by Fillis (2002) and Pret and Cogan (2019), who observe that many artisans are community-bound. They typically remain in their local regions, operating through local markets, craft fairs, boutique studios, or family-owned workshops, often relying on word-of-mouth and personal networks for promotion. This embeddedness is what gives many artisan products their distinct character and explains why we often encounter such crafts while traveling.

Scholars such as Ratten et al. (2019) refer to this as a form of cultural preservation, which becomes a central motivation behind many artisan ventures, particularly in contexts where craft knowledge is inherited and passed down through generations (Hoyte, 2019; Marques et al., 2019). As other scholars argue, this motivation stems from the deep emotional connection artisans have with their craft, whether due to familial lineage, cultural ancestry, or national pride. For many, these are not just objects of economic value, but deeply symbolic forms of self-expression, cultural identity, and historical continuity.

As Pret and Cogan (2019) argue, artisan entrepreneurship is not oriented toward market domination. As a result, artisan entrepreneurs typically remain within their communities, applying traditional business methods that cater to local customers or visitors, rather than targeting broader markets through digital technologies that could enable expansion beyond their immediate surroundings (Bakas et al., 2019). Their focus is not on growth or scaling, but rather on creating symbolic, cultural, and emotional value within the self-determined limits of their practice.

These attributes position artisan entrepreneurs as distinctive economic actors who blend creative labour with cultural meaning, promote locality, and enhance local economic value. In doing so, their businesses function not only as economic units but also as vessels of intangible cultural heritage (Mathias and Smith, 2015; Pret and Carter, 2017).

This identity orientation contributes to a common portrayal of artisans as resistant to change, particularly in adopting digital technologies aimed at scaling or diversifying business strategies. Bouette and Magee (2015) argue that this resistance is not due to a lack of enthusiasm or technological skill but is instead an intentional choice grounded in core values such as craftsmanship, independence, and authenticity (Bakas et al., 2019; Solomon and Mathias, 2020; Ferreira et al., 2019; Marques et al., 2019).

By understanding the core motivations and defining characteristics of artisan entrepreneurs, it becomes clear why they have long been viewed through a lens shaped by traditional stereotypes, closely tied to notions of heritage, manual craftsmanship, and locality. However, this image increasingly contrasts with the reality of contemporary artisan entrepreneurs who now conduct their businesses in the digital world. This growing tension highlights the need to critically reassess whether these long-held stereotypes still hold relevance in today's entrepreneurial landscape. These issues, and the limitations of such portrayals, are examined in greater depth in the literature review chapters: (1) Understanding Artisan Entrepreneurship (Chapter 2), and (2) Digital Entrepreneurship in Artisan Entrepreneurship (Chapter 3), which explores how dominant narratives often overlook the emergence of new digital practices and identities among artisan entrepreneurs.

1.4 The Problem of Traditional Stereotypes: Why This Study Matters

As discussed earlier, traditional stereotypes of artisan entrepreneurs, such as being small-scale, culturally rooted, lifestyle-driven, and resistant to innovation have shaped how artisans are understood in both academic literature and industry discourse (Fillis, 2002; Ratten and Ferreira, 2017; Bouette and Magee, 2015). While these portrayals have celebrated artisans' authenticity and uniqueness, they have also led to problematic assumptions. In some cases, these traits are admired for their creative independence (Pret and Cogan, 2019); in others, they are misinterpreted as signs of entrepreneurial passivity or lack of ambition (Getz and Petersen, 2005; Sherman, 2014).

These assumptions may partly explain why scholarly attention to artisan entrepreneurship has developed slowly, despite the sector's global presence and significant economic contributions (IBEF, 2020). Artisans represent one of the oldest forms of entrepreneurial activity, contributing to local economies, cultural heritage, and identity formation across regions and generations (Hoyte, 2018; Igwe et al., 2018). Yet they are often excluded from mainstream entrepreneurship narratives or flattened into a static archetype that fails to capture the complexity of their lived experiences (Marques et al., 2019; Ferreira et al., 2019).

What is missing from much of the literature is a deeper exploration into why artisans make the choices they do in today's digital world. If they continue to resist growth despite the seemingly endless opportunities of digital technologies, what are the constraints holding them back? Conversely, if they are evolving by adopting digital entrepreneurship, what motivates this shift? What goals and values are driving their decisions, and how are these evolving in a digitally connected environment?

Without asking these questions, the continued use of outdated stereotypes becomes not only reductive but also analytically shallow. This thesis responds to that gap. It seeks to go beyond surface-level interpretations to explore the motivations, strategies, and identities of artisan entrepreneurs who are navigating both tradition and digital entrepreneurship. In doing so, it aims to develop a more holistic and contextually grounded understanding of artisan entrepreneurship in the digital world.

1.5 The Emerging Shifts in Artisan Entrepreneurship

A growing body of research has begun to challenge the traditional stereotypes of artisan entrepreneurs (Pret and Cogan, 2019). Recent studies reveal that many artisans are responding to global market changes and adapting to meet these demands both creatively and commercially (Bislimi, 2022; Drummond et al., 2018), with some scholars framing this shift as a transformative journey that moves them beyond typical traditional stereotypes (Kwiatkowski et al., 2021; Ramadani et al., 2017; Solomon and Mathias, 2020). They are adopting digital tools, platforms, and strategies to connect with broader markets, enhance their visibility, and build more sustainable business models. This emerging reality stands in contrast to earlier portrayals that positioned artisans as static, growth-averse, and resistant to technological change.

Recent studies have begun to document the ways in which artisans leverage digital tools for marketing, storytelling, production innovation, and global engagement. Solomon and Mathias (2020) explore how artisan entrepreneurs increasingly integrate online platforms such as Etsy, YouTube, and TikTok to build visibility and forge customer relationships across borders. Rather than viewing digital adoption as a threat to authenticity, many artisans now use these platforms to reinforce narratives of craft, heritage, and individuality, reflecting what Kuhn et al. (2015) refer to as “entrepreneurial authenticity through cultural storytelling.”

This evolution reframes artisans not only as producers, but also as meaning-makers who blend creativity, identity, and modern commerce. Rashid and Ratten (2020) describe artisan products as carriers of symbolic meaning, tied to ethnicity, geography, and personal expression. In this context, digital engagement does not dilute tradition but can enhance it, allowing artisans to curate their own brand identities while remaining culturally grounded. As Curtis (2016) and Pret and Cogan (2019) note, digital adoption has enabled artisans to move beyond local markets, diversify income streams, and achieve greater autonomy in how their work is presented and monetised.

Moreover, the transformative potential of digital engagement became particularly evident in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. As physical markets closed and in-person events were cancelled, many artisan entrepreneurs turned to online platforms to sustain their livelihoods. This shift was not merely reactive; it often involved significant rethinking of business models, production methods, and customer engagement strategies. The pandemic enabled artisans to enhance their earning capacity in the post-pandemic period, as noted by Kwiatkowski et al.

(2021), confirming past studies that suggest artisan entrepreneurship has the potential to improve profitability, despite its typical association with being growth-averse and non-profit oriented (Bakas et al., 2019).

Building on this, studies on artisan entrepreneurship during and after the pandemic offer a more nuanced perspective on growth. For instance, Bislimi (2021) and Hill (2021) explore how targeted funding, loan schemes, and capital infusions have supported the commercial growth of artisan entrepreneurs. While not always directly linked to digital initiatives, such financial support can serve as a critical enabler, allowing artisans to invest in digital infrastructure, adopt e-commerce platforms, or expand their online presence. In this light, access to capital not only challenges the notion that artisans are growth-averse but also opens up new pathways for digital engagement and long-term sustainability.

These shifts are especially salient in emerging economies, where growing digital infrastructure and smartphone penetration have made online commerce increasingly accessible. While earlier research, particularly in development contexts (e.g. Fillis, 2002; Igwe et al., 2018) often portrayed artisans in these regions as digitally excluded or institutionally marginalised, current realities reveal a more complex picture. Artisans in emerging economies are increasingly visible in global online marketplaces and are experimenting with hybrid business models that combine heritage with innovation.

Despite these developments, the literature has been slow to adapt. Much of the academic discourse still privileges Western case studies or reinforces outdated stereotypes, failing to fully acknowledge the strategic, creative, and digitally literate practices of a new generation of artisans. As Solomon and Mathias (2020) argue, these entrepreneurs actively resist mass production not through isolation, but through careful curation of their brand and craft in the digital world.

While scholarship on artisan entrepreneurship is growing, much of the literature remains rooted in developed economies, often overlooking the socio-cultural and economic complexities of emerging economies. This geographic and conceptual bias has limited our understanding of how artisan entrepreneurs in rapidly transforming environments navigate digital change, cultural identity, and market engagement.

This study builds on emerging perspectives by addressing this gap, focusing on how artisan entrepreneurs in Malaysia, a highly multicultural and digitally developing context are actively redefining their practices and entrepreneurial identities through digital entrepreneurship.

By examining the intersection of craft, culture, and digital strategy, this research aims to contribute to a more contemporary, inclusive, and empirically grounded understanding of artisan entrepreneurship in the digital world.

1.6 Research Gap and Justification

While research on artisan entrepreneurship has grown in recent years, it remains relatively slow compared to other areas of entrepreneurship studies. Much of the existing literature still links artisan entrepreneurs to traditional stereotypes, portraying them as culturally embedded, resistant to innovation, and reluctant to pursue growth. Dominant narratives continue to position artisan entrepreneurs as lifestyle-driven individuals who prioritise autonomy, creative freedom, and heritage preservation over business scalability, profitability, or the adoption of digital entrepreneurship tools (Getz and Petersen, 2005; Ratten and Ferreira, 2017). While these portrayals have helped to highlight the non-economic motivations behind artisan work, they no longer fully reflect the lived realities of artisan entrepreneurs operating in today's digital world.

At the same time, a growing body of scholarship has started to challenge these conventional stereotypes by recognising that artisan entrepreneurs are shifting their practices, becoming more strategic, adaptive, and digitally engaged (Solomon and Mathias, 2020; Pret and Cogan, 2019). These studies show that many artisans are now leveraging digital platforms not just for survival, but to grow, expand their reach, and internationalise their businesses. However, the academic discussion around this shift remains scattered and conceptually underdeveloped. Engagement with the intersection of artisan and digital entrepreneurship is still emerging and often fragmented across diverse fields such as the creative industries, platform economy, and cultural entrepreneurship.

Gap 1: Conceptual Gap in Artisan Entrepreneurship

Much of the existing scholarship continues to frame artisan entrepreneurs through a static lens, often portraying them as inherently growth-averse, digitally reluctant, and driven primarily by cultural preservation or lifestyle preferences. However, such narrow portrayals fail to reflect the

lived realities of contemporary artisans who are increasingly adopting digital technologies to sustain and grow their businesses. This thesis responds to that conceptual gap by offering a deeper, more contextually grounded understanding of how artisan entrepreneurs navigate the intersection of tradition, innovation, identity, and digital engagement. Rather than assuming resistance to growth or technology, this study seeks to understand *why* artisans make certain business decisions, how they maintain cultural values while engaging in commerce, why they adopt (or resist) specific digital tools, and how these choices reflect broader motivations and constraints.

In doing so, this research contributes to the growing body of literature on artisan entrepreneurship in the digital age, particularly focusing on artisans who actively leverage digital platforms for production, marketing, commerce, and storytelling. It adds to emerging studies that challenge conventional stereotypes of artisans as digitally excluded or disinterested, showing instead that many are recognising the opportunities offered by digital entrepreneurship and engaging with them in strategic, creative ways.

This thesis also engages with ongoing conversations around artisan entrepreneurship in the post-COVID-19 context, where digital adoption became not only a necessity but also a catalyst for reimagining business models. During this period, artisans were not only compelled to sustain their craft in times of crisis, but also took on expanded roles as educators, content creators, and in many cases, primary income earners. Considering this transformation, the thesis seeks to move beyond romanticised or static representations, instead proposing a more holistic and updated conceptualisation of artisan entrepreneurship. It argues for a hybrid view on artisan entrepreneurship that recognises artisans as complex, but adaptive and strategic entrepreneurs whose motivations, challenges, and trajectories continue to evolve in response to the digital world.

Gap 2: Absence of Artisan Perspectives in Digital Entrepreneurship

While digital entrepreneurship has become a rapidly growing field within entrepreneurship studies, its dominant frameworks continue to focus on conventional models such as tech start-ups, platform-based innovation, and scalable, high-growth ventures often backed by venture capital. These portrayals typically assume entrepreneurs who are digitally fluent, profit-oriented, and embedded within formal innovation ecosystems (Davidson and Vaast, 2010; Autio et al., 2018).

This narrow framing has inadvertently marginalised a broad spectrum of entrepreneurial activity, particularly those operating in informal, small-scale, or culturally embedded sectors such as artisan entrepreneurship. As a result, the lived experiences of artisan entrepreneurs in today's digital landscape remain significantly underexplored. Their use of digital tools, the ways they engage with online platforms, and the unique challenges they face in adapting to digital systems deserve closer attention. Addressing this gap not only diversifies our understanding of digital entrepreneurship, but also opens new, grounded perspectives on how digitalisation is being experienced on the ground.

This thesis contributes to filling that gap by centring artisan entrepreneurs as legitimate and critical actors in the digital economy. It explores how they adapt to and appropriate digital tools in context-specific ways, such as building customer relationships via Instagram and TikTok, selling through e-commerce platforms, and integrating digital payments into their physical and hybrid businesses. More importantly, this study goes beyond surface-level observations to ask not just *what* artisans do with digital technologies, but *how* and *why* they make those decisions within their cultural, social, and entrepreneurial contexts.

In doing so, this research aims to expand the boundaries of digital entrepreneurship theory. It demonstrates that digital entrepreneurship is not a uniform model, nor should it be understood through a single lens. For artisan entrepreneurs, who are already shaped by distinct identities, motivations, and values, digital engagement is neither automatic nor universal, but strategic, adaptive, and deeply contextual. By bringing their voices and practices into the conversation, this study offers a more inclusive, culturally grounded, and nuanced understanding of what digital entrepreneurship can look like beyond dominant, tech-centric narratives.

Gap 3: Underrepresentation of Artisans in Emerging Economy Contexts

Empirical research on artisan entrepreneurship remains heavily concentrated in developed economies such as the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia. These regions not only have well-established artisan sectors but also benefit from strong institutional infrastructures such as guilds, certification schemes, creative hubs, and grant mechanisms that support artisans to remain viable and relevant in the digital era. These structural advantages have shaped much of the dominant theorising around artisan entrepreneurship.

In contrast, studies on artisans in emerging economies remain limited, as evidenced by the findings of Hamid et al. (2022), whose systematic literature review revealed the overwhelming

concentration of research in developed economies, despite the important cultural and economic roles artisans play, such as supporting local livelihoods, preserving heritage, and contributing to community-based economic development. This imbalance in the literature creates a major gap in our understanding of how artisan entrepreneurship is evolving in contexts where institutional support, digital access, and cultural dynamics differ significantly from the developed economies. As the digital economy expands and creative sectors continue to modernise, artisans in the emerging economies are increasingly engaging with digital technologies, leveraging online platforms, and developing hybrid business models that combine tradition with innovation. Yet, academic scholarship has not fully captured this shift, particularly from an emerging economy perspective.

This thesis situates itself within the context of Malaysia; an emerging economy where artisan entrepreneurship is undergoing visible transformation. Malaysia presents a timely and compelling case for study, with its artisan sector becoming increasingly urban, digitally connected, and shaped by a younger, more culturally hybrid generation of entrepreneurs. These artisans are not only preserving traditional crafts but are also experimenting with branding, storytelling, and digital tools to innovate and engage new markets. With the support of government initiatives, private incubators, and rising consumer demand for sustainable, high-quality, locally made products, Malaysian artisans are repositioning themselves within the broader entrepreneurial and digital landscape.

By exploring how digital entrepreneurship is unfolding in this specific Malaysian context, this study contributes to the broader project of contextualising and decolonising entrepreneurship research (Bruton et al., 2015; Ratten et al., 2022). It challenges the dominance of developed economy assumptions in the literature and highlights how artisans in emerging economies are not passive or peripheral actors, but rather dynamic and meaningful contributors to contemporary entrepreneurial practice.

This study also adds to the growing body of literature on artisan entrepreneurship in the developed economies, particularly complementing existing work on countries like Indonesia and India, while offering a much-needed focus on Malaysia. By foregrounding the voices, experiences, and strategies of Malaysian artisans, the thesis aims to build a more inclusive, nuanced, and globally relevant understanding of artisan and digital entrepreneurship.

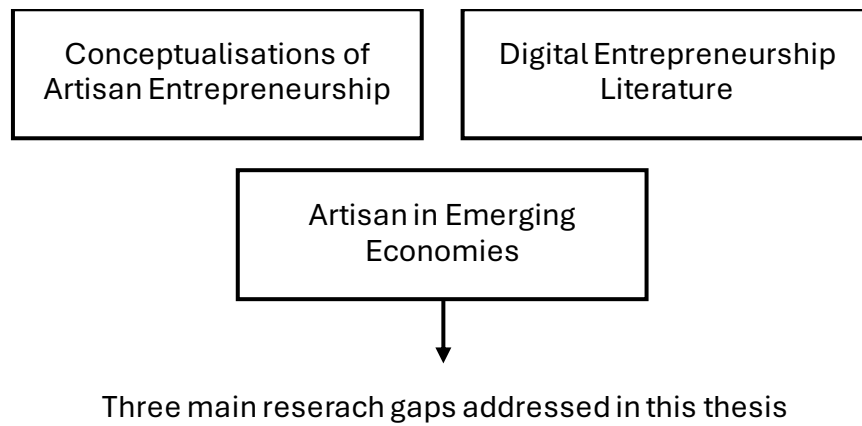


Figure 1: Three Research Gaps

In conclusion, the three research gaps outlined in this study, as summarised in **Figure 1** above, underscore the need for a more inclusive and updated understanding of artisan entrepreneurship. First, dominant stereotypes must be revisited in light of how artisans today are adopting digital tools and reconfiguring their business models. Second, the literature on digital entrepreneurship should expand to include culturally rooted, small-scale entrepreneurs like artisans, whose experiences offer fresh insights. Third, the ongoing focus on developed economies has left artisans in emerging contexts such as Malaysia are largely overlooked. By addressing these gaps, this thesis contributes a timely and grounded perspective that challenges outdated assumptions and centres the lived realities of artisan entrepreneurs in today's digital world.

1.7 Thesis Core Theoretical Lens

This thesis adopts Digital Entrepreneurship as its core theoretical lens, drawing on Nambisan's (2017) framework, which conceptualises entrepreneurship as a digitally mediated, socio-technical process. This perspective enables the study to explore how artisan entrepreneurs engage with digital platforms not merely as tools for selling their crafts, but as environments for identity-making, strategic visibility, and value creation in the digital world.

Unlike traditional entrepreneurship theories that prioritise innovation or scalability, Nambisan's (2017) framework foregrounds the platform-embedded, culturally situated, and emotionally

complex realities of entrepreneurial practice. This makes it particularly well-suited to understanding the experiences of artisan entrepreneurs navigating digital transformation.

Although alternative theories were considered and will be further detailed in Chapter 3, Nambisan's model, with its three core elements of digital artefacts, platforms, and infrastructure, was ultimately selected for its conceptual clarity and strong alignment with the aims of this study. Digital Entrepreneurship thus provides the guiding framework for both the conceptual framing and empirical analysis, offering a nuanced understanding of artisan entrepreneurship in a digitally evolving context.

A full discussion of this theoretical foundation, along with the alternatives considered, is provided in Chapter 3.

1.7.1 Research Objectives and Questions

Building on the issues raised in the introduction and the three key research gaps identified earlier from the literature; (1) conceptual gaps in artisan entrepreneurship, (2) theoretical gaps in digital entrepreneurship, and (3) geographic gaps in emerging economy contexts, this section outlines the core direction of the study. While earlier sections have established the need to update our understanding of artisan entrepreneurship in the current digital world, how artisan entrepreneurs conduct business today, how they are evolving and adapting, particularly within the under-researched context of emerging economies. The objectives and questions presented here translate that broader problem space into a focused framework that guides the rest of the thesis.

Specifically, this study investigates how artisan entrepreneurs engage with digital technologies, reshape their entrepreneurial identities, and challenge dominant assumptions and traditional stereotypes in the artisan entrepreneurship literature. By centring an emerging economy context, the research aims to contribute to a more contemporary, inclusive, and grounded understanding of artisan entrepreneurship in the digital world.

This inquiry is guided by one overarching research question, supported by a set of clearly defined objectives and sub-questions that shape the study's scope, design, and analytical direction.

1.7.2 Research Aim

To understand how artisan entrepreneurs in an emerging economy negotiate and experience digital entrepreneurship through their lived realities, selective digital strategies, opportunities, and challenges.

1.7.3 Main Research Question

How do artisan entrepreneurs in an emerging economy negotiate and experience digital entrepreneurship?

1.7.4 Research Objectives

- 1) To explore how artisan entrepreneurs in an emerging economy experience and negotiate digital entrepreneurship through their lived realities and selective digital engagement.
- 2) To understand the opportunities, challenges, and contextual tensions experienced by artisan entrepreneurs in adapting to a digital world.

1.8 Anticipated Contribution to Knowledge

This thesis aims to contribute to entrepreneurship research by addressing three key gaps in the existing literature: (1) the need to reconceptualise artisan entrepreneurship beyond traditional stereotypes, (2) the underrepresentation of small-scale, identity-based entrepreneurs within digital entrepreneurship studies, and (3) the lack of empirical research from emerging economy contexts, particularly in Southeast Asia.

First, this study seeks to challenge dominant portrayals of artisans as growth-averse or digitally resistant by exploring how Malaysian artisan entrepreneurs are engaging with digital tools in strategic, culturally embedded ways. Second, it aims to broaden digital entrepreneurship theory by applying it to the lived experiences of creative micro-entrepreneurs, illustrating how digital practices such as storytelling, branding, and selective platform use intersect with identity and resilience. Third, it intends to offer a contextual contribution by foregrounding the Malaysian artisan sector, where entrepreneurs navigate unique socio-cultural and infrastructural conditions that are often overlooked in mainstream digital entrepreneurship research.

In doing so, the thesis aims to advance a more inclusive and situated understanding of entrepreneurship that reflects the realities of creative entrepreneurs operating at the intersection of tradition, innovation, and digital entrepreneurship.

These anticipated contributions are further developed and discussed in Chapter 7 (Discussion).

1.8.1 Anticipated Practical Contributions

In addition to its academic contributions, this study is expected to offer practical insights for artisan entrepreneurs, institutional stakeholders, and creative economy policymakers, particularly in the context of Malaysia and other emerging economies. By grounding the research in the lived experiences of digitally engaged artisan entrepreneurs, the study aims to support more inclusive and context-sensitive strategies for advancing sustainable craft-based entrepreneurship.

First, the findings are anticipated to inform current and aspiring artisan entrepreneurs by highlighting both opportunities and challenges in digital engagement such as platform selection, branding strategies, and emotional sustainability. These insights may support more strategic decision-making around digital marketing, online presence, and business model development.

Second, the study aims to offer actionable recommendations for policy and institutional stakeholders, including those involved in cultural and entrepreneurial support. By addressing structural barriers faced by digitally active artisans such as access to funding, training, and recognition, it encourages a more flexible and inclusive policy framework.

Third, the research may contribute to the development of more tailored entrepreneurship education and digital literacy programmes. Rather than relying on one-size-fits-all approaches, the findings highlight the value of training models that align with artisans' creative practices, cultural values, and hybrid digital strategies.

These anticipated practical contributions are further developed and discussed in Chapter 7 (Discussion).

1.9 Research design and Approach

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining a survey with in-depth, semi-structured interviews to explore how artisan entrepreneurs navigate their businesses in the digital world. The research is grounded in a constructivist and interpretivist paradigm, enabling a deeper understanding of artisans lived experiences, values, and business practices.

The survey served as a preliminary participant selection tool, helping to identify the most suitable artisan entrepreneurs while also offering early insights into their business profiles, digital orientation, and modes of digital engagement. Building on this, the core data was gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, which enabled a rich, contextual exploration of how artisans conduct their businesses, respond to digital opportunities, and confront key challenges in a digitally evolving entrepreneurial landscape.

This approach offers both breadth and depth, capturing the diversity and complexity of artisan entrepreneurship in emerging economies. A more detailed discussion of the methodology and its justification is provided in Chapter 4 (Methodology).

1.10 Key Concepts and Operational Definitions

To ensure clarity and consistency, this section defines three key concepts that are central to this thesis: artisan entrepreneurs, artisan entrepreneurship, and digital entrepreneurship. These definitions reflect both established scholarly usage and the specific contextual focus on artisan entrepreneurship in this study.

1.10.1 Artisan Entrepreneurs

Artisan entrepreneurs are individuals engaged in the creation of handmade goods, often rooted in cultural meaning (Hoyte, 2018; Pret & Cogan, 2019), creative identity, and personal values within the creative industries (Ratten et al., 2019). Their work typically blends traditional practices with individual lifestyle choices. While historically grounded in conventional methods, many now incorporate digital technologies while maintaining their creative and original identity (Kapp, 2017). Today, artisan entrepreneurs are increasingly navigating hybrid spaces where

cultural heritage intersects with digital innovation (Pret & Cogan, 2019; Solomon & Mathias, 2020).

1.10.2 Artisan Entrepreneurship

Artisan entrepreneurship refers to entrepreneurial activity grounded in traditional craft-based practices, with selective integration of digital technologies (Kapp, 2017). It is often associated with creative autonomy and tourism competitiveness (Bakas et al., 2019; Marques et al., 2019), and typically prioritises independence, local identity, and community embeddedness over business scalability (Fillis, 2002; Getz & Petersen, 2005; Solomon & Mathias, 2020). In this study, artisan entrepreneurship is conceptualised as both an economic activity and a cultural practice, shaped by tradition, self-expression, and interactions with the digital marketplace.

1.10.3 Digital Entrepreneurship

Digital entrepreneurship refers to the process of conducting entrepreneurial activities using digital technologies such as tools, platforms, and infrastructures to create, reshape, or scale business ventures. This thesis draws on Nambisan's (2017) framework, which conceptualises digital entrepreneurship as a socio-technical process involving three key components: digital artefacts, digital platforms, and digital infrastructure. This framework serves as a bridge between traditional artisan practices and contemporary entrepreneurial strategies, helping to situate artisan entrepreneurship within the broader digital economy.

1.11 Thesis Overview and Structure

This thesis is organised into seven chapters, each building upon the previous chapter to develop a comprehensive understanding of how artisan entrepreneurs in Malaysia are navigating digital transformation. The structure reflects both the theoretical development and methodological progression of the research, beginning with the conceptual foundations and culminating in empirical findings and final contributions.

Chapter 1 – Introduction

This chapter introduces the research background, context, and significance of the study. It outlines the conceptual focus on artisan entrepreneurship in the digital world, defines the scope and positioning of the research, and presents the research problem, objectives, and questions that guide the investigation.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review: Understanding Artisan Entrepreneurship

This chapter critically reviews the literature on artisan entrepreneurship, with a particular focus on its historical evolution, defining characteristics, motivations, and stereotypical portrayals. It explores the dominant narratives that shape scholarly understanding of artisan entrepreneurs and highlights the limitations and gaps within this field, particularly in relation to emerging economies.

Chapter 3 – Literature Review: Digital Entrepreneurship in Artisan Entrepreneurship

Building on the first review chapter, this section examines how digital technologies are transforming entrepreneurial practices and identities. It draws on key debates in digital labour, platform capitalism, online branding, and creative identity work. Together with Chapter 2, it establishes the conceptual framework underpinning the study, particularly at the intersection of craft, culture, and digitalisation.

Chapter 4 – Methodology

This chapter outlines the philosophical orientation and mixed-methods research design used in the study. It details the rationale for employing an exploratory survey followed by in-depth semi-structured interviews, and it explains the sampling strategies, data collection procedures, ethical considerations, and analytic techniques used to interpret the findings.

Chapter 5 – Survey Findings and Discussion

This chapter presents the results of the preliminary survey, which profiles digitally active artisan entrepreneurs in urban Malaysia. It provides demographic insights, outlines levels of digital engagement, and identifies key business characteristics. These findings serve as contextual groundwork for the qualitative phase of the research.

Chapter 6 – Interview Findings and Discussion

Drawing on qualitative interviews, this chapter explores the lived experiences of artisan entrepreneurs, focusing on themes such as identity negotiation, digital strategy, platform dependency, craft innovation, and cultural continuity. The discussion integrates empirical data with theoretical perspectives from Chapters 2 and 3 to interpret key patterns and tensions.

Chapter 7 – Conclusion

The final chapter synthesises the main findings of the study, reflects on its theoretical and practical contributions, and considers implications for policy and practice. It also discusses the study's limitations and suggests directions for future research in the fields of artisan entrepreneurship, digital transformation, and emerging economy contexts.

References And Appendices

The thesis concludes with a comprehensive list of references and supporting documents, including survey instruments, interview guides, consent forms, and selected data outputs.

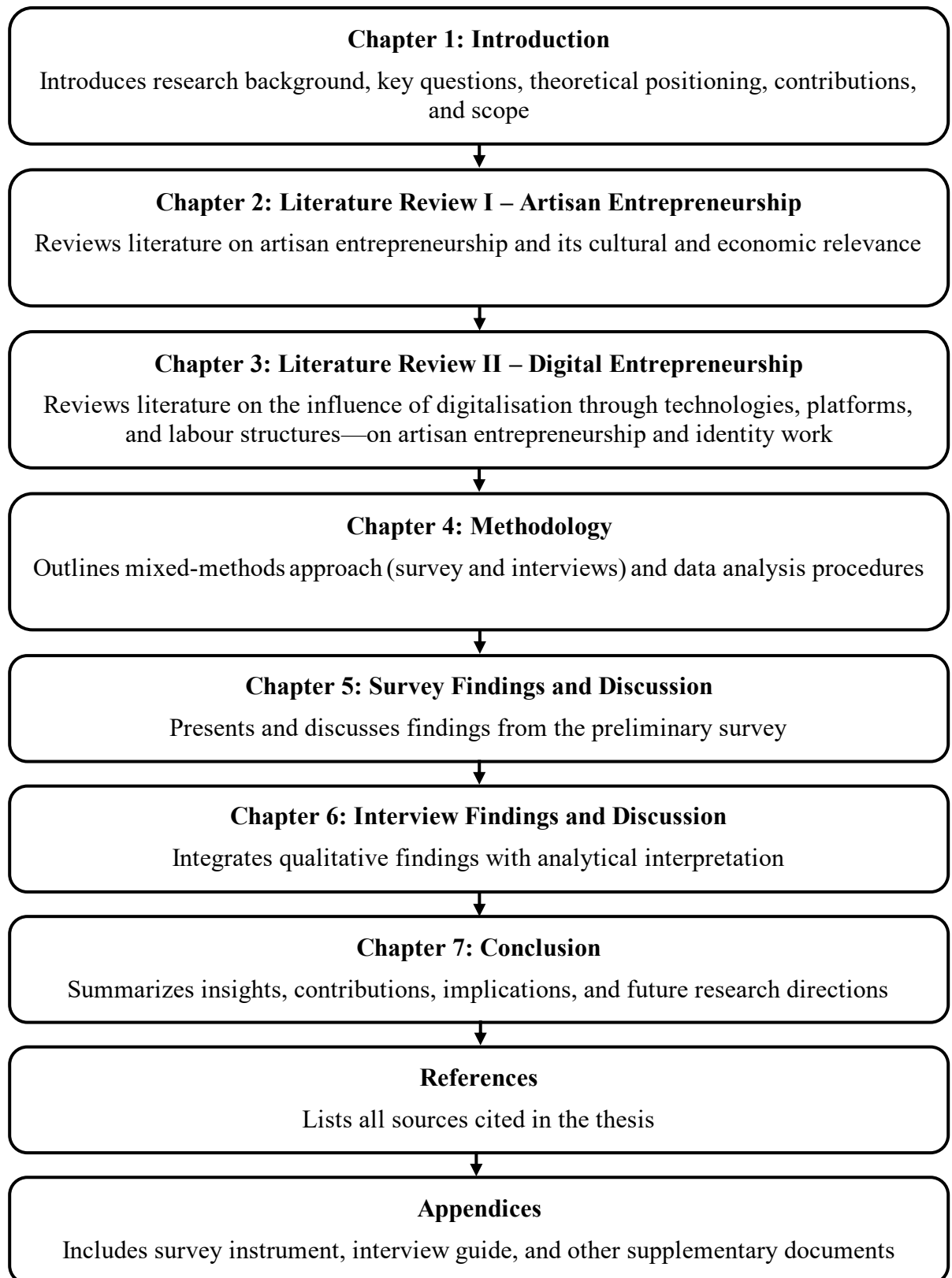


Figure 2: Thesis Structure and Roadmap

1.12 Conclusion Chapter 1

Artisan entrepreneurship has often been portrayed through dominant narratives that depict artisans as traditional, lifestyle-driven entrepreneurs who resist growth, formalisation, and digital transformation. These enduring stereotypes, rooted in early literature, often depict artisans as committed to heritage craft and personal fulfilment over business expansion. While such characteristics remain important to artisan identity, they no longer fully reflect how many artisans operate in today's digital world.

In recent years, more artisans have adopted digital tools to promote, sell, and reimagine their businesses through the lens of digital entrepreneurship. This shift has enabled new forms of artisan entrepreneurship, as noted by recent scholars, marking a clear departure from earlier assumptions. However, academic literature has yet to fully catch up, particularly in the context of emerging economies where artisans are increasingly recognised as digitally adaptive and strategic entrepreneurs. The growing visibility of artisans in countries like Malaysia, home to a vibrant artisan sector and rising digital adoption supported by institutional programmes and creative ecosystems, remains underrepresented in current scholarship. The lived realities, values, and strategies of these artisans remain underexplored, calling for a more nuanced and contextually grounded understanding of artisan entrepreneurship in the digital age.

This thesis responds directly to that gap by investigating how artisan entrepreneurs in Malaysia conduct their businesses in the digital world, guided by the main research question: How do artisan entrepreneurs in an emerging economy negotiate and experience digital entrepreneurship?

To answer this, the study explores how artisans use digital technologies, reshape their entrepreneurial identities, and challenge long-standing stereotypes in both artisan and digital entrepreneurship literature. Nambisan's (2017) digital entrepreneurship framework informs this investigation, providing a socio-technical lens through which to analyse artisan practices.

Ultimately, this study offers a more inclusive and updated understanding of artisan entrepreneurship, contributing to three main overlapping domains: artisan entrepreneurship, digital entrepreneurship, and entrepreneurship in emerging economies. It also offers practical insights for artisan entrepreneurs, policy actors, and institutions seeking to support creative microenterprises in the digital era.

The next two chapters expand on this foundation. Chapter 2 reviews scholarship on artisan entrepreneurship, examining its defining features, values, and the tensions between tradition and innovation. Chapter 3 reviews the literature on digital entrepreneurship and explores how its frameworks intersect with artisan entrepreneurship practices.

CHAPTER 2 – UNDERSTANDING ARTISAN ENTREPRENEURSHIP

2.0 Literature Review – Understanding Artisan Entrepreneurship

2.1 The Evolution of Artisan Entrepreneurship

Building on the historical context introduced in Chapter 1, this section reviews foundational definitions of artisan entrepreneurship, which are often rooted in manual labour, inherited skills, and localised economic systems. The concept has since undergone significant evolution, shifting from a narrow focus on craftsmanship and small-scale production to a more dynamic, hybrid model that blends creativity, culture, identity, and innovation with digital business strategies. Today, artisan entrepreneurs are seen as multifaceted actors who navigate the intersection of tradition and digital entrepreneurship, grounded in local cultural values while actively participating in the global digital world.

2.1.1 Artisan Entrepreneurship Definitions

As previously outlined, artisan entrepreneurship historically emerged through localised, traditional business practices, where artisans functioned as both producers and traders within tightly knit community networks (Hanna, 2011; Pret and Cogan, 2019; Toner, 1990). These examples demonstrate that artisan entrepreneurship has long been contextually adaptive, challenging the assumption that it is inherently small-scale or static.

Early scholarly work, however, tended to emphasise the embodied, inherited, and manual dimensions of artisanship. Herrigel (1996) and Illeris (1992) framed artisans as individuals working with traditional techniques to create functional goods, while Metcalf (1997) highlighted the “hand” as a marker of authenticity. These definitions helped establish a binary between the handmade and the mass-produced, positioning artisans as resisting scale, innovation, and market-driven entrepreneurial motives. While influential, such framings risk overlooking emerging expressions of artisan entrepreneurship, now shaped by digital technologies, evolving entrepreneurial ambitions, and the reinvention of cultural crafts.

Over time, this rigid framing has broadened, especially in today’s digital world, where businesses are going online, the environment has become borderless, and opportunities for growth and expansion are available to entrepreneurs of all sizes. For example, UNESCO and the International Trade Centre (1997) defined artisan crafts as those where manual contribution

is the most substantial element in the creation process. Scholars also recognise that artisans' goods may be utilitarian, artistic, culturally embedded, decorative, or even religious (Tregear, 2005; Ratten et al., 2019). This relatively inclusive framing makes room for new forms of artisan production that blend cultural meaning with commercial relevance (Bakas et al., 2019; Taxeira and Ferreira, 2017). However, this raises a critical question: to what extent can this definition still be applied to today's artisan entrepreneurs operating in hybrid, digitally mediated spaces?

Scholars such as Kapp (2017) have expanded the definition of artisan entrepreneurship by acknowledging the use of technologies in artisan practices, provided that the work remains centred on creativity and originality. His definition also recognises that artisan products can be technology-based, including forms such as video games and digital designs.

Despite this expansion and a growing body of work, such as Solomon and Mathias (2020) and Kwiatkowski et al. (2021), who explore artisans' transformative journeys in artisan's growth, there remains no unified or updated definition of artisan entrepreneurship that fully captures the identity and practices of this evolving group, particularly within digital contexts. As artisans increasingly operate across social media, e-commerce platforms, and global marketplaces, new questions emerge about the defining features of artisan entrepreneurship: Is it the method of production, the maker's intent, the cultural significance, or a combination of these? What does it mean to be an artisan entrepreneur in a digital world, and what truly distinguishes them from other creative or small business actors?

However, while this thesis calls for updated definitions of artisan entrepreneurship, definitional debates have long been a central concern in the literature. For example, scholarly discussions often revolve around how artisan entrepreneurship is culturally embedded. Rashid and Ratten (2020), for instance, describe artisan products as carriers of symbolic meaning, tied to ethnicity, geography, and identity (see also Ferreira et al., 2019). Hoyte (2019) and Bertacchini and Borrione (2013) further highlight how artisan skills are often passed down through generations, reinforcing both economic survival and cultural continuity.

In contrast, scholars like Shane and Venkataraman (2000) argue for a stricter definition, privileging originality and non-mechanised production. This reflects a broader tension within the field: should artisan entrepreneurs be seen primarily as guardians of tradition, or as adaptive innovators engaging with new markets, tools, and technologies?

This evolution reframes artisans not merely as producers, but as meaning-makers. Kuhn et al. (2015) and Ramadani et al., (2017) position artisan entrepreneurship as a fusion of production, identity, and self-expression, where business activities are shaped by both cultural values and personal aspirations.

The significant diversity in how artisan entrepreneurship is defined is further reflected in academic scholarship. Much of the existing literature originates from Europe and North America, where artisans are often institutionally supported and shaped by definitions that frame them as high-skilled, culturally valuable, and economically desirable actors. For instance, in developed economies such as the United Kingdom and the United States, artisans are frequently associated with “luxury” branding. Their businesses are often portrayed as slow-growing, quality-focused, and deliberately small-scale, an image that aligns with romanticised stereotypes of artisanal authenticity.

In contrast, artisans in emerging economies are often excluded from these dominant definitions. For instance, in a country like Malaysia, handmade goods are sometimes undervalued or perceived as inferior to imported products. These stereotypes position them outside the global image of the artisan as a luxury producer, pushing many to modernise or digitise their practices simply to remain visible and viable. Despite local government efforts such as “buy local” campaigns and preservation initiatives aimed at raising awareness of artisan crafts, the impact on public perception remains limited.

These definitional disparities point to deeper structural inequalities in how cultural labour is recognised, rewarded, and legitimised. While artisans in developed economies are celebrated under dominant, often idealised definitions, those in emerging economies must navigate alternative realities, seeking legitimacy and institutional recognition despite contributing equally to cultural and economic life through tourism, job creation, and the preservation of local crafts.

As Pret and Cogan (2019) argue, artisan entrepreneurship is not a monolithic or fixed category. It is diverse, fluid, and continuously adapting to socio-economic changes. Yet, much of the literature continues to reflect a bias toward developed economies, often overlooking emerging economies like Southeast Asia, where artisan identities are being reshaped through digital entrepreneurship, shifting markets, and evolving policy landscapes.

This study seeks to address that gap by focusing on an emerging economy through the context of artisan entrepreneurs in Malaysia, where a new generation of artisans is forging a hybrid path. Malaysian artisan entrepreneurs blend traditional craft-based skills with entrepreneurial ambition, digital engagement, and global outreach to navigate the complexities of the digital world. In doing so, this research challenges outdated stereotypes of artisans as purely traditional actors and repositions them as adaptive, strategic entrepreneurs who are actively redefining their roles within a rapidly evolving digital landscape.

2.2 Typologies and Identities of Artisan Entrepreneurs

Scholars have approached the diversity of artisan entrepreneurship typologies by focusing on artisans' varying characteristics and motivations. Bouette and Magee (2015) offer one of the most widely cited classifications, identifying three broad types of artisan entrepreneurs. The first group comprises hobbyists; individuals who pursue craft primarily for personal enjoyment or creative expression, with little or no interest in formalising a business. For them, the process matters more than the outcome.

The second group includes artisans, full-time makers who treat their craft as their main source of income. While they may experience inner tensions around business growth, many actively participate in community markets and may receive institutional support. The third group, entrepreneurs, are more commercially driven. They are growth-oriented, often develop branding strategies, build teams, and expand into broader markets.

This typology helped challenge outdated assumptions that artisans are inherently uninterested in business development, highlighting instead the diverse ways artisan identities and ambitions are expressed.

However, several scholars have expanded on Bouette and Magee's framework. Fillis (2004) identified additional subtypes, such as the artistic purist, who values creative expression over commerce; the cultural preservationist, who sees the enterprise as a means of protecting tradition; and the strategist, who embraces market logics while staying rooted in craft values. These distinctions underscore the internal diversity within artisan motivations. Similarly, Hoyte (2019) introduced a gendered lens, showing that many women artisan entrepreneurs follow

“non-growth” trajectories not due to a lack of ambition, but because of caregiving roles, limited time, or cultural expectations.

However, these categories are not fixed. Later research shows that artisans often move between types depending on life events, market opportunities, or crises. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, many hobbyists turned their craft into a full-time income stream after losing jobs or being confined at home (Segares, 2022). Others who were already artisans had to adopt digital strategies to survive. This highlights the fluidity of artisan identity which are dynamic, not static, and shaped by changing personal and external circumstances.

Meanwhile, Pret and Cogan (2019) argued that many artisans reject binary categories altogether. They describe a hybrid identity that values creative autonomy, cultural alignment, and strategic decision-making, all within a model that resists traditional growth imperatives.

Additional contributions have strengthened to these insights. Getz and Petersen (2005) highlight how artisan entrepreneurs often resist conventional growth not due to capacity constraints but because of deliberate value choices. Ratten et al. (2022) emphasise that artisan entrepreneurs are not merely producers of cultural goods, but meaning-makers navigating fluid boundaries between heritage and innovation, localism and globalism.

Rather than fitting neatly into categories, most artisans today blend multiple orientations. They might value creative autonomy but still make strategic decisions about pricing or marketing. They may avoid scaling up but invest heavily in product development or branding. Many choose to remain small, not because they lack capacity, but because they prioritise control, wellbeing, and cultural integrity over commercial growth.

In this context, the term artisan entrepreneur should be understood as dynamic, someone who moves between roles and strategies over time. Artisan identity is shaped not only by the kind of work artisans do, but also by how they see themselves, their values, and the environments in which they operate. Understanding these shifting typologies helps move beyond narrow definitions and supports the development of more inclusive models of entrepreneurship that reflect lived realities.

Based on the growing complexity and the varying definitions offered by scholars, **Table 1** below presents a selection of key scholarly interpretations and typologies of artisan entrepreneurship. This comparative overview highlights how understandings of artisan entrepreneurs have

evolved over time and reflects the diverse perspectives that continue to shape how they are positioned within entrepreneurship research.

Scholar(s)	Typology / Lens	Key Features
Fillis (2004)	Cultural Artisan Entrepreneurship	Protect and preserve cultural heritage
Reijonen and Komppula (2007)	Lifestyle Entrepreneurship	Prioritise personal fulfilment, low growth and low profitability
Bouette and Magee (2015)	Hobbyists Artisans Entrepreneurs	Hobbyists focusing on passion, growth-resistant
Kapp (2017)	Digital Artisan Entrepreneurship	Includes digital makers involvement in creative autonomy
Ariaz and Cruz (2019)	Lifestyle Entrepreneurs	Starts artisan business to fit their lifestyle choices
Bakas et al., 2019	Creative tourism	Offer creative tourism
Hoyte (2019)	Gendered Entrepreneurial Pathways	Women pursuing non-growth orientation, with flexible models due to socio-cultural expectations
Marquest et al., 2019	Creative tourism	Shaped based on tourism competitiveness
Pret and Cogan (2019)	Lifestyle Artisan Entrepreneurship	Lifestyle and commercial oriented, non-linear
Ramadani et al. (2019)	Identity and Heritage Logic	Emerges from deep emotional or cultural motivations
Ratten, Costa and Bogers (2019)	Value-Driven Artisan Entrepreneurship	Motivated by cultural embeddedness, sustainability concerns, and social impact, beyond profitability
Solomon and Mathias (2020)	Traditional entrepreneurship	Manual production, freedom, community, crafts value

Table 1: Typologies and Conceptual Lenses in Artisan Entrepreneurship Literature

2.2.1 Interpreting Artisan Typologies

The definitions and typologies presented in **Table 1** reveal a rich and varied landscape of how artisan entrepreneurs have been conceptualised in the literature. Scholars have approached artisan identity through multiple lenses, some emphasising motivations such as lifestyle choices,

necessity, or heritage preservation; others focusing on economic orientation or the artisan's role in cultural and tourism development. This diversity reflects the unique and often deeply personal nature of artisan entrepreneurship. No single definition fully captures the breadth of the artisan experience. Instead, identity appears shaped by a complex interplay of social, cultural, economic, and even temporal factors as seen in typologies shaped by the COVID-19 crisis. While this variety might seem fragmented, it is precisely this fluidity that makes the artisan category distinctive: their practices are not fixed, and their pathways often evolve in response to context.

Despite these differences, several shared elements run through the literature. Many scholars agree that artisans are driven by strong personal and cultural values, often tied to identity, meaning-making, and creative autonomy. These values frequently translate into deliberate decisions, such as staying small, preserving heritage, or resisting mainstream growth models. Among the various perspectives, Pret and Cogan's (2019) notion of a hybrid, non-linear identity resonates most closely with this study. Their view acknowledges the possibility for artisans to hold both lifestyle and commercial goals, shifting fluidly over time. Similarly, Kapp's (2017) inclusion of digitally engaged artisans' challenges narrow definitions that exclude those who embrace digital tools. These definitions are particularly relevant in a digitalising world and align closely with the lived realities of the artisan entrepreneurs explored in this research.

2.3 Characteristics, Motivations, and Business Practices of Artisan Entrepreneurs

Understanding artisan entrepreneurship requires unpacking what sets it apart from conventional business activity, not only in terms of scale and operation, but also in terms of values, motivations, and embeddedness in culture and identity. Most artisan entrepreneurs operate as microenterprises, often home-based, with limited staff and funding, and businesses that emerge from a personal passion or creative hobby (Segares, 2021; Reuschke and Houston, 2016; Kalinina, 2016). These ventures are usually small by design, not by default.

What differentiates artisans from other entrepreneurs is not just the size of their operations, but the logic that governs them. Rather than being driven by scalability or profit-maximisation, artisan entrepreneurs often prioritise personal fulfilment, creative control, and cultural continuity. Scholars argue that their resistance to growth should not be mistaken for failure or

lack of ambition but understood as a conscious decision to protect the integrity of their work and way of life (Bouette and Magee, 2015; Pret and Cogan, 2019). Their businesses reflect a different kind of entrepreneurship that are centred on lifestyle, autonomy, and emotional value.

This alternative logic is deeply rooted in identity and heritage. Artisan entrepreneurs often view their craft as an extension of themselves, shaped by cultural knowledge, family traditions, and community roles. For many, business becomes a means of cultural preservation. Reijonen and Komppula (2007) and Marques et al. (2019) describe artisan entrepreneurship as being driven by emotional connections whether to place, history, or intergenerational memory. Solomon and Mathias (2020) argue that artisans are motivated by value creation over profit, where products carry symbolic as well as economic worth. García-Rosell and Mäkinen (2013) further suggest that for some artisans, the business exists as a responsibility to keep cultural practices alive, not simply as a commercial venture.

This strong cultural embeddedness often influences how artisans conduct their business. Historically, their practices centred around face-to-face interactions, selling through weekend bazaars, craft fairs, and small studio spaces (Ratten et al. 2019; Kapp, 2017). These environments supported trust, community engagement, and authenticity. Many artisans deliberately avoid expansion in order to maintain this relational vicinity and creative freedom (Curtis, 2016; Ferreira et al. 2019)

Granovetter's (1985) concept of social embeddedness helps explain this pattern. Artisan entrepreneurs are shaped not only by economic imperatives, but by their relationships with customers, peers, and communities. As Pret et al. (2016) argue, success in artisan entrepreneurship is often measured through non-financial metrics such as artistic satisfaction, cultural contribution, or lifestyle alignment rather than revenue or scalability.

However, this embedded model has been increasingly challenged, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic. The global shift toward digitalisation has impacted all forms of entrepreneurship and artisans are no exception. Although often seen as resistant to change, many artisan entrepreneurs have adopted digital tools out of necessity and opportunity. Studies show that artisans began hosting online workshops, using platforms like Instagram and Etsy, and engaging with global audiences in new ways (Kuhn and Galloway, 2015; von Holm, 2017; Segares, 2021). This transformation has raised new questions about authenticity, identity, and the meaning of craft in digital spaces.

Digitalisation, for many artisans, is more than just a survival tactic. Platforms like YouTube and Instagram are used not only for marketing, but also for storytelling, teaching, and building digital communities (Segares, 2021). These tools allow artisans to extend their practices creatively, often blending traditional techniques with new forms of audience engagement. Rather than being passive adopters of technology, artisans are reshaping their practices on their own terms.

Still, tensions remain. Digital platforms demand a new kind of visibility that requires artisans to package their identity, communicate authenticity, and respond to algorithmic pressures. For some, this creates friction between heritage and branding, or between craft values and platform norms. Despite these challenges, many artisans continue to operate as microenterprises, often choosing to remain small to retain control, reduce stress, and protect the meaning of their work (Ratten and Ferreira, 2017; Brawley and Pury, 2017).

Artisan entrepreneurs' motivations are far from uniform. Some see their work as a full-time livelihood; others use it to supplement income, pursue a passion, or advocate for cultural causes (García-Rosell and Mäkinen, 2013; Getz and Petersen, 2005). Financial goals often co-exist with lifestyle and cultural aspirations. Keh et al. (2007) and Fillis (2004) observe that artisans often face a strategic dilemma on how to remain true to their values while ensuring sustainability. This does not mean they are not strategic; in fact, many artisans demonstrate quiet innovation by experimenting with new product lines, selective scaling, or digital exports (Tregear, 2005; Danson et al., 2015).

Overall, the motivations and business logics of artisan entrepreneurs challenge traditional entrepreneurial models. They reveal a form of entrepreneurship that is hybrid, values-driven, and deeply contextual. Understanding this diversity, especially as artisans navigate digital transitions is critical to building more inclusive and accurate theories of entrepreneurship in the 21st century.

2.4 Situated Entrepreneurship: Gender, Locality, and Everyday Constraints

Artisan entrepreneurship is not a universal or neutral process; it is deeply shaped by the entrepreneur's social position and lived reality. Things like gender, their locations; where

someone lives, and their social class all influence not just how artisan businesses start, but also how success is imagined and achieved.

A defining feature of artisan entrepreneurship is its lifestyle orientation, which is artisans' tendency to align business activities with personal values, family roles, and rhythms of everyday life. Unlike conventional entrepreneurs, artisan entrepreneurs often reject growth-maximisation and formal business models, opting instead for flexibility, autonomy, and meaningful work (Pret and Cogan, 2019; Rae, 2012). This “counter-urban” ethos reflects not only personal choice but often necessity, especially for those balancing multiple roles at home or operating outside major urban economies (Siemens, 2014).

Gender plays a critical role in shaping these entrepreneurial trajectories. Hoyte (2019) highlights how women artisans often pursue “non-growth” business models, not due to a lack of ambition, but as strategic responses to caregiving responsibilities and household dynamics. These alternative pathways are often misinterpreted in policy or economic terms as underperformance, when in fact they reflect informed, rational choices made within gendered constraints. In Malaysia, female artisans dominate many home-based craft sectors particularly in textiles and food yet remain largely marginalised from formal entrepreneurship ecosystems (MIDA, 2022).

Similar constraints are observed in relation to class and access to capital. For many working-class artisans, entrepreneurship is not a proactive choice but a fallback option, often pursued after redundancy or informal training (Segares, 2021). These artisans rely heavily on self-financing, improvisation, and peer learning, building their businesses through resourcefulness rather than strategic planning. Their “nonlinear” growth patterns challenge dominant entrepreneurial logics and highlight the need to situate entrepreneurship within broader socio-economic realities.

Geographical context further complicates these dynamics. Artisans based in rural or indigenous areas often face limited access to infrastructure, digital tools, and market linkages (Pret and Carter, 2017). Yet paradoxically, these constraints can foster deep cultural embeddedness, which becomes a competitive strength. For example, crafts produced by *Orang Asli* (indigenous) communities in Malaysia carry environmental, symbolic, and ritual meaning that are attracting interest from ethical consumers and cultural tourists. Here, the entrepreneur is not only a business actor, but a custodian of heritage.

Importantly, artisan learning pathways rarely follow formalised routes. Instead, craft knowledge is often passed down through family traditions, local mentorship, or self-teaching. Scholars like Crossick (2016) and Kennedy (2010) emphasise the value of experiential learning “learning by doing” as a core feature of artisanal skill development. Today, digital platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok are reconfiguring these learning spaces, enabling artisans to teach, learn, and share knowledge across borders (Segares, 2021). While the mode of transmission has changed, the relational ethos of co-creation, reciprocity, and community, remains central.

Taken together, these insights demand an intersectional lens (Crenshaw, 2021). Gender, class, and locality are not contextual background variables as they are active forces that shape the entrepreneurial journey. Any serious engagement with artisan entrepreneurship must recognise how structural conditions, cultural histories, and everyday negotiations define not only what artisans do, but what is possible for them to do.

2.5 Value-Driven Logics

Artisan entrepreneurs frequently diverge from dominant business logics by prioritising value creation over profit generation. This does not mean they are anti-commercial, but rather that their business goals often reflect a broader set of aspirations, including cultural preservation, creative autonomy, and social contribution.

Artisan products are not merely commodities; they often carry cultural memory, symbolic meaning, and community relevance (Klamer, 2011; Cominelli and Greffe, 2012). In sectors such as cultural tourism, ethical fashion, and slow design, this distinctiveness becomes a market advantage (Chhabra, 2005; Ratten and Ferreira, 2017). Yet for many artisans, the real value lies not in market differentiation, but in the act of making, the ability to sustain traditions, craft stories, and engage in meaningful labour.

This value orientation challenges assumptions about entrepreneurial success. Fauchart and Gruber (2011) note that many artisan entrepreneurs define achievement in non-financial terms: the integrity of the work, its social impact, or its contribution to cultural continuity. Rae (2012) similarly argues that artisans often function as cultural intermediaries, bridging the past and

present, the local and global, the personal and political. Their work often includes teaching, mentorship, or cultural advocacy, extending far beyond conventional business roles.

In this sense, artisan entrepreneurship blurs the boundaries between economic and cultural work. It aligns closely with what scholars call symbolic entrepreneurship, where entrepreneurs trade in meaning, identity, and values as much as in goods or services. This hybrid logic is not a weakness but a strength, offering models of business that are sustainable, relational, and responsive to both community and personal needs.

2.6 Heritage and Identity as Cultural Capital in Artisan Entrepreneurship

Artisan entrepreneurs are not just producers, but they are also cultural custodians. Their work is deeply symbolic, rooted in place-based traditions, aesthetic knowledge, and identity performance. Unlike mass production, where meaning is often abstracted, artisanal work carries embedded narratives, personal histories, and intangible cultural values (Baldacchino and Cutajar, 2011; Ferreira et al., 2019).

A growing body of literature recognises artisan entrepreneurship as a form of cultural authorship, artisan preserves, reinterprets, and sometimes reinvents local traditions under contemporary conditions (Cominelli and Greffe, 2012; Tregear, 2005). These products do more than circulate as commodities; they become what Sims (2009) calls “authentic value objects,” grounded in method, material, and meaning. Scholars like Hoyte (2018) and Ratten and Ferreira (2017) argue that artisans perform vital roles in protecting disappearing artistic forms, whether through handmade textiles, rituals, or regional culinary practices.

This cultural turn in entrepreneurship studies is increasingly tied to regional development. Many governments and international bodies now view artisanal craft as an economic asset that can boost tourism, enhancing local Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and strengthening soft power (Kapp, 2017; WIPO, 2003). Regions where artisanal production is strongly embedded in cultural identity are seen to possess a strategic advantage (Alberti and Giusti, 2012). However, much of the literature remains instrumental, often treating heritage as a resource to be leveraged rather than as a dynamic, lived system shaped by social, political, and ethical complexities.

One such complexity is the politics of cultural appropriation. Cant (2015) highlights how mass-market copies of traditional crafts not only undercut artisan livelihoods but also strip products

of their symbolic meanings. For example, when large corporations reproduce local handmade the result is not innovation, but cultural extraction. This concern extends to intellectual property, traditional knowledge, and the unauthorised commercialisation of Indigenous aesthetics (Scafidi, 2005). Scholars warn of simplification and stereotyping where entire cultures are reduced to motifs, repackaged for global markets (Lee, 2019).

However, the discourse is not one-dimensional. Buckley and Peters (2019) argue for a more nuanced view of cultural borrowing, one that distinguishes between exploitation and respectful collaboration. Artisans themselves reimagining traditional designs in modern formats engaging with innovation while protecting integrity. In this framing, artisans become active agents, managing heritage on their own terms.

This is especially evident in contexts where artisans belong to Indigenous communities. Scholars define Indigenous entrepreneurship as enterprise activity led by Indigenous peoples primarily for the benefit of their own communities (Hindle and Lansdowne, 2005). Like other artisans, these entrepreneurs draw on local materials, ancestral knowledge, and sustainable practices but with an added layer of cultural and ecological significance (Foley, 2003; Padilla-Meléndez and Ciruela-Lorenzo, 2018).

In Malaysia, for example, *Penan* weavers from Borneo have re-emerged as visible cultural actors, thanks in part to digital platforms that enable them to market directly, tell their own stories, and resist exploitative intermediaries. Still, structural barriers persist. Government programs have offered training and small grants (Bernama, 2019), but long-term income security and self-sufficient business models remain fragile without ecosystem-level support (Zainol and Daud, 2011; Shafi et al., 2020).

The tension between tradition and adaptation is particularly pronounced when it comes to cultural transmission. Artisan knowledge is rarely formalised. Instead, it passed through families, communities, or apprenticeship. As Kennedy (2010) and Crossick (2016) note, artisans “learn by doing,” and often carry tacit forms of expertise. With the rise of digital platforms Instagram and TikTok, these forms of transmission are evolving, making artisanal knowledge more visible, shareable, and scalable (Segares, 2021). Yet, this comes with risks as this knowledge can be extracted, decontextualised, or monetised by others.

In all of this, place-based identity emerges as a central theme. Where something is made and who makes it matters. For example, the “Made in Borneo” or “Made by Local Artisans” label is

not just geographical; it is cultural, political, and emotional. Drawing from Bourdieu's (1986) idea of cultural capital, artisans convert their embedded skills into symbolic value, gaining legitimacy in both local and global markets. Their work becomes a narrative act, one that asserts belonging, tells stories, and negotiates how heritage should be understood today.

Thus, artisan entrepreneurship is more than a niche economic activity it is a site of cultural negotiation, identity work, and political agency. To understand it only as a microenterprise model is to miss its role in shaping how traditions are performed, protected, and transformed in the face of modern pressures.

2.7 Global Artisan Entrepreneurship

Artisan entrepreneurship is not a uniform phenomenon. It takes different forms across different parts of the world, shaped by local cultures, histories, and institutions. While many studies focus on specific regions or traditions, a comparative lens helps to identify both shared patterns and context-specific challenges. This section explores how artisan enterprises are framed and supported across diverse geographies, particularly in the developed and developing economies before turning to Malaysia, where artisan entrepreneurship is evolving rapidly under changing economic, cultural, and digital conditions.

2.7.1 Developed Economies: Lifestyle Positioning and Ethical Consumption

In many developed economy contexts, artisan entrepreneurship is commonly understood as a lifestyle or creative choice rather than a survival strategy. Studies in Europe often highlight artisanal production in niche markets such as craft beer (Gatrell et al., 2018), bespoke fashion, and high-end ceramics. These products are frequently marketed through narratives of authenticity, sustainability, and localism, resonating with middle-class consumers who seek meaningful alternatives to mass production (Sherman, 2014).

In these settings, artisan entrepreneurship is often romanticised as a form of “slow” or ethical consumption. Many consumers associate handcrafted products with environmental care, creative autonomy, and community support, making artisan goods both morally and aesthetically appealing.

Government infrastructure plays an important role in supporting this positioning. Institutional frameworks such as Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) and national craft councils provide legal and symbolic protections. In the United Kingdom, for example, the Crafts Council supports artisans through training, grants, and national visibility (Luckman, 2015). This shows that artisans in these economies are well supported and protected, as their talent and crafts are both valued and institutionally recognised.

2.7.2 Emerging Economies: Cultural Embeddedness and Structural Constraints

In contrast, artisan entrepreneurship in many emerging economies is more tightly linked to cultural identity, rural livelihoods, and informal economies. Crafts are often rooted in generational knowledge, regional materials, and community-based production. Yet despite their cultural significance, such artisanship is frequently undervalued, perceived as outdated, cheap, or lacking innovation.

In India, the artisan sector is vast and diverse, employing over 7 million people in textiles, woodwork, pottery, and metal crafts (IBEF, 2020). Institutions like the Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC) aim to sustain traditional livelihoods and promote national identity. Events like the Surajkund Mela showcase the country's craft diversity and foster local economies. However, scholars note that artisans often face exploitation by middlemen, low price expectations, and disinterest among younger generations (Sharma, 2021; Dalal et al., 2023). Despite state support, the sector remains fragile and highly vulnerable to market shocks.

In Indonesia, crafts such as “*batik*”, wood carving, and “*rattan*” weaving are vital both economically and culturally. The national agenda on “*Ekonomi Kreatif*” (Creative Economy) has formally included crafts within Indonesia's development strategy. However, research by Spielmann (2017) and Siebert (2012) shows how artisans face tensions between staying true to cultural traditions and responding to shifting consumer tastes. While some successfully innovate through hybrid styles or digital branding, others risk diluting their heritage in pursuit of profitability.

Similarly, in Thailand, traditional crafts like silk weaving and celadon pottery have become part of the national tourism strategy. The government supports “creative clusters” to link artisans with tourists and design professionals. But as Teh (2017) argues, this often pressures artisans to

perform stereotypical versions of “authentic Thainess,” limiting experimentation or innovation. Even within empowerment frameworks, artisans remain constrained by the expectations of outsiders, whether funders, tourists, or policymakers.

Across these cases, artisan entrepreneurship is culturally celebrated but structurally constrained. Artisans are positioned as tradition-bearers, yet their creative autonomy and economic power are often limited. National development strategies may valorise heritage crafts but fail to provide strong intellectual property (IP) protections, market training, or digital tools, especially compared to the infrastructures available in developed economies.

This results in a persistent paradox: artisans are essential to cultural identity and rural economies but remain economically insecure and institutionally under-supported. Despite their differences, artisans across developed and emerging economies face shared pressures: digital disruption, intergenerational skill loss, and the challenge of balancing crafts knowledge with market relevance. The specific materials, markets, and meanings may differ, but the core tension is the same; how to remain culturally rooted while surviving in a fast-changing digital world.

However, the support ecosystems remain uneven. Artisans in developed economies often benefit from legal protections, national branding, and high consumer valuation. In contrast, artisans in emerging economies frequently operate within fragmented systems, informal markets, and weaker institutional backing. Their survival often depends on family networks, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) partnerships, or small-scale tourism. This uneven playing field shapes not only business outcomes, but also how artisans are imagined in policy and scholarship.

2.7.3 Artisan Entrepreneurship in Malaysia

Malaysia offers a dynamic and under-explored site for studying contemporary artisan entrepreneurship. Artisan's crafts in Malaysia, such as “*labu sayong*”, “*songket*”, “*batik*”, and “*wau*” has high associated local traditional crafts, local heritage, ethnic tradition, and informal rural markets. These artisans were rarely recognised as entrepreneurs in the conventional sense. Their work was seen as static, small-scale, and largely disconnected from innovation or growth.

However, this perception is changing. In recent years, Malaysia has witnessed a resurgence of interest in craft-based enterprise, driven by shifting consumer values, digital visibility, and

growing institutional support. Agencies such as *Kraftangan* Malaysia (a government agency under the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture) and TERAJU (a strategic unit under the Prime Minister's Department) have played a significant role in supporting artisan entrepreneurs through training, exhibitions, and funding initiatives aimed at revitalising local crafts. It offers funding schemes, entrepreneurial training, and market access initiatives, including those targeting artisan and creative industries. These efforts are further complemented by local financial institutions such as Maybank, CIMB, and Bank Negara Malaysia, which have supported micro-enterprises through targeted loans, grants, and SME development programmes (Landau, 2021; Zainol and Daud, 2011).

Perhaps most significantly, creative platforms like RIUH, a curated creative platform for local artisans by MyCreative Ventures (under Malaysia's Ministry of Finance and Ministry of Communications and Digital) have helped reposition Malaysian artisans within a modern, urban, and aspirational frame. These platforms promote curated bazaars, digital storytelling, and social media branding, making artisanal work not only visible, but desirable to a new generation of consumers. The aesthetic of "contemporary heritage" now defines many emerging Malaysian craft brands, which blend traditional techniques with minimalist packaging, exclusive drops, and lifestyle positioning.

There is also increasing recognition of Indigenous artisans, especially from *Orang Asli* (indigenous) communities in East Malaysia (Borneo). Through ethical consumer networks, craft cooperatives, and cultural tourism programs, their work is gaining new visibility, though questions of representation, ownership, and cultural appropriation remain critical.

These developments suggest that Malaysia is not merely preserving its artisanal past but actively redefining its future. Artisan entrepreneurship here is becoming a hybrid field, combining tradition and modernity, rural roots and urban branding, community craft and commercial aspiration.

In summary, this comparative overview reveals the complexity of global artisan entrepreneurship. While all artisans negotiate tensions between heritage and innovation, their capacities to adapt depend on the support structures, consumer cultures, and policy frameworks around them.

Nevertheless, much of the academic literature remains skewed towards developing economies artisan entrepreneurship businesses. Southeast Asia, particularly Malaysia is still

underrepresented in scholarship, despite being home to vibrant artisan ecosystems and active government involvement. This study addresses that gap by using Malaysia as a case study to examine how artisan entrepreneurs are navigating contemporary challenges particularly in relation to digital transformation.

By focusing on a rapidly evolving context, this research aims to generate deeper insight into how artisans conduct their businesses in the digital world and what that tells us about entrepreneurship, identity, and innovation in the emerging economies.

2.8 Economic and Institutional Significance of Artisan Entrepreneurship

Artisan entrepreneurship is often dismissed as niche or informal, yet growing evidence suggests it is a critical and under-recognised driver of inclusive economic growth, cultural regeneration, and regional renewal. Far from being peripheral, artisans are increasingly positioned at the intersection of economic, cultural, and developmental agendas.

Globally, the handicraft sector, largely sustained by artisan entrepreneurs was valued at USD 647.57 billion in 2020, with robust projected growth through 2026 (Expert Market Research, 2020). It is estimated to be the world's second-largest source of employment, particularly in rural and marginalised regions where formal jobs are scarce (Polites, 2020). In India alone, over seven million artisans generate income through this sector, contributing to poverty reduction and community resilience (IBEF, 2020). These figures disrupt outdated assumptions that artisan work is economically insignificant. Rather, they indicate that artisan entrepreneurship plays a vital role in sustainable livelihoods, especially within vulnerable or underdeveloped areas.

Scholars increasingly argue that artisan entrepreneurship is not merely a cultural phenomenon, but a potent economic strategy. Ratten, Costa, and Bogers (2019) highlight how artisan ventures can revitalise local economies by reinforcing cultural identity and deepening tourism appeal. Their use of local materials and embedded “made-in” narratives is more than branding, it actively constructs a sense of place, attracting tourists, building destination competitiveness, and stimulating ancillary industries. However, while cultural tourism is widely studied, the specific contributions of artisan entrepreneurship to tourism-driven economic resilience remain underexplored and warrant deeper investigation.

Importantly, artisan entrepreneurs are not static actors trapped in tradition. Contemporary research reframes them as adaptive and innovative; they are selectively integrating new technologies and business models to stay relevant. Marcati et al. (2008) call this “openness to newness,” while Palmer et al. (2019) and Steenberg (2019) document artisans' strategic use of digital platforms, e-commerce, and design innovation. These findings challenge persistent stereotypes of artisans as reluctant to grow or change. Instead, they reveal a form of dynamic embeddedness, where artisans remain rooted in tradition while responding agilely to shifting market, technological, and environmental conditions.

This capacity for adaptability positions artisan entrepreneurship as a form of economic resilience. Unlike standard growth models that emphasise scale, artisan ventures often pursue continuity, diversification, and creative autonomy, qualities that proved crucial during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The concept of resilience, often defined as the ability to absorb shocks and reorganise without losing core identity (Folke et al., 2010), is especially relevant here. Artisan entrepreneurs navigate uncertainty not by scaling up, but by staying flexible, leveraging community ties, and maintaining low-overhead structures. This resilience is not a by-product, but a built-in feature of the artisan model.

Recognising this potential, many governments have begun to support artisan sectors as part of national economic and cultural strategies. In Vietnam, the Free Trade Agreement Portal (FTAP) helps small enterprises that includes artisan entrepreneurs to access the global markets. Malaysia's Handicraft Development Corporation, under the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture, has provided grants, capacity-building programmes, and promotional platforms for local artisans. In 2019, RM500 million was allocated to strengthen the sector, alongside a 2% loan interest subsidy (Bernama, 2019). Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, Malaysia's handicraft market still reached RM200 million in 2020 (Landau, 2021). These figures signal growing policy recognition of artisan entrepreneurship as a contributor not only to cultural preservation, but to economic diversification and export potential.

This view of artisan entrepreneurship contributes not only to cultural preservation but also to economic diversification and export potential is reinforced by localised studies. For instance, Arias and Cruz (2019) studying the island of Roatán in Honduras, found that artisan entrepreneurs were able to anchor their businesses within tourism flows, despite infrastructural challenges. Their findings suggest that even small-scale, context-sensitive artisan businesses can

generate ripple effects that extend far beyond the business itself, supporting local employment, strengthening cultural identity, and contributing to tourism and community development. These impacts become even more powerful when artisans are embedded in local ecosystems and supported by targeted policy.

However, like all forms of business and entrepreneurship, challenges remain in the entrepreneurial development of artisan businesses. Despite growing visibility and institutional interest, many artisan entrepreneurs continue to face systemic barriers such as lack of formal recognition, weak intellectual property protections, limited access to credit, and uneven integration into development strategies. If artisan entrepreneurship is to realise its full economic and social potential, multi-level interventions are needed, including fair trade networks, inclusive policy frameworks, and ecosystem infrastructure that balances growth with cultural integrity.

In short, artisan entrepreneurship should no longer be viewed as marginal. It is a model of inclusive, culturally embedded, and resilient businesses capable of supporting livelihoods, renewing regions, and offering alternative visions of economic development that are both sustainable and locally meaningful.

2.9 Rethinking What Growth Means for Artisan Entrepreneurs

The question of growth remains one of the most contested and misunderstood aspects of artisan entrepreneurship. For years, scholars characterised artisan entrepreneurs as growth-averse, which is individuals who favour autonomy, creative control, and lifestyle alignment over traditional expansion models (Getz and Petersen, 2005; Keh et al., 2007). They are often seen as resistant to growth, unlike other types of entrepreneurs, prioritising lifestyle choices and pursuing their work out of passion rather than profitability. From this perspective, artisans appear reluctant to scale because growth is perceived as a threat: to authenticity, to creative freedom, or to the intimate connection with craft and community.

However, these views can lead to unfair stereotypes and negative perceptions of artisan entrepreneurship and have sparked debate among scholars. As Mathias and Smith (2015) argue, resistance to growth should not be confused with a lack of ambition. Rather, it reflects a value-led logic, which is a conscious prioritisation of control, meaning, and integrity over standard

growth metrics. Growth, in this context, is not rejected, but it is reframed according to their artisans' goals and visions for their businesses. Building on that, Pret and Cogan (2019) offer an important corrective to this view, showing that many artisans are in fact strategic actors, who selectively expand, innovate, or reposition when it aligns with personal values, market shifts, or changing life circumstances.

In many cases, artisans experience organic growth such as expanding their teams, diversifying product lines, or building new customer segments in response to demand, not as part of a master plan (Reijonen and Komppula, 2007; Getz and Petersen, 2005). Other artisans pursue intentional scaling, such as responding to emerging opportunities such as global niche markets, design trends, or e-commerce platforms (Blundel, 2002; Tregear, 2005). Here, growth in artisan entrepreneurship is not rejected, but recalibrated to fit the artisan's identity and goals.

Cater et al. (2016) argue that the symbolic, aesthetic, and cultural value embedded in artisan products make them especially suited for niche differentiation and adaptive scaling. These entrepreneurs leverage cultural meaning as a market advantage, whether through sustainable branding, place-based identity, or ethical production. In this framing, the artisan entrepreneur is not merely a producer of goods, but a curator of values, capable of navigating commercial spaces while protecting the integrity of their work.

This shift in orientation also mirrors broader changes in consumer behaviour. Polites (2020) frames artisan entrepreneurship as “the future of the new economy” driven by consumer demand for ethical, handmade, and locally grounded alternatives to mass-produced goods. These consumers are not just purchasing products; they are participating in an ideology that supports slower economies, sustainability, and authenticity. Foote (2015) refer to this as the “handmade effect”, which is the idea that cultural richness, artisanal technique, and uniqueness actively influence purchasing decisions. In this sense, growth is not only about scaling craft production, but about cultivating relationships, narratives, and values that resonate with evolving market sensibilities.

These reconfigurations are supported by a growing ecosystem of cultural and technological movements in artisan entrepreneurship, most notably, the Maker Movement. Originating in the Global North, particularly in urban innovation spaces, the Maker Movement champions Do-It-Yourself (DIY) ethos, creative autonomy, community-based production, and open innovation (Browder et al., 2017). It celebrates the fusion of craft, technology, and entrepreneurship,

enabling individuals to build small-scale enterprises around personal passion and public participation. In many ways, it mirrors artisan entrepreneurship by rejecting rigid hierarchies and embracing alternative growth trajectories, yet also introducing new tools, networks, and legitimacies to artisan businesses.

Artisan entrepreneurs should no longer be left sitting outside the main conversations in entrepreneurship scholarship. Instead, they should challenge and expand how we understand growth, shifting the focus from scale to significance, from expansion to alignment, and from volume to value. This emerging view reframes artisan entrepreneurship not as a deviation from the entrepreneurial norm, but as an alternative way of doing business that brings together identity, sustainability, and creative autonomy into a coherent, even if non-conventional business model.

2.10 Crisis and Reinvention in Artisan Entrepreneurship

The COVID-19 pandemic acted as both a rupture and a catalyst in the artisan entrepreneurship landscape. It disrupted established business routines, severed access to physical markets, and deeply threatened the viability of small-scale, face-to-face commercial practices. Yet for many artisan entrepreneurs, this disruption also became a moment of reinvention, triggering what Muro (2020) and Seraphin (2021) described as forced innovation or crisis entrepreneurship.

As lockdowns shuttered traditional retail channels, artisans rapidly turned to digital tools, not just to survive, but to reimagine how they engage with audiences. Online marketplaces, Instagram branding, and virtual storytelling emerged as critical strategies (Curtis, 2016). In some cases, this shift enabled artisans to bypass intermediaries and directly connect with global consumers, extending visibility far beyond their immediate locale. These transformative shifts suggest that artisan entrepreneurship is not fixed or fragile, but it is adaptive, aggressive when needed, as well as strategically resilient in time of crisis and act on it to remain visible.

Segares (2021) highlights how many artisans responded not with retreat, but with agility, learning new skills, redesigning products, and leveraging digital intimacy to sustain customer relationships. In this sense, the pandemic revealed not only the vulnerabilities but also the latent resilience embedded in artisan enterprise models. Seraphin (2021) interprets this reinvention as

a form of creative resilience, where disruption becomes a driver of innovation and narrative renewal.

However, this adaptive capacity was not evenly distributed. While some artisans successfully pivoted online, others especially in rural or structurally marginalised regions were excluded from digital transition pathways. In India, for instance, thousands of weavers and craftworkers struggled to access income during lockdowns, as their work was classified as “non-essential” and they lacked internet connectivity or e-commerce literacy (Pati, 2020). This exposes deep structural asymmetries in artisan ecosystems, where digital opportunity is often gated by geography, class, and infrastructure.

Still, the pandemic also spurred a wave of artisan entrepreneurship from outside traditional craft communities. Barlian et al. (2021) document how rising unemployment led many individuals to establish craft-based microbusinesses using existing domestic skills. In this way, the pandemic blurred boundaries between necessity entrepreneurship and creative enterprise, broadening the demographic and motivational base of the artisan sector.

In response, new digital platforms emerged to support this shift. Startups like Yeebo (India) and Craft-on-the-Go (Malaysia) offered e-commerce services tailored for small-scale artisans, combining marketplace functionality with cultural storytelling. These platforms reflect a broader recalibration in the artisan economy that centres visibility, accessibility, and bypassing intermediaries.

Taken together, the pandemic's impact on artisan entrepreneurship cannot be understood solely as disruption. It was also a structural accelerant, exposing inequalities but also amplifying innovation and opening new entrepreneurial pathways. This moment marks a transition from artisan entrepreneurship as a “pre-modern” form to one increasingly embedded in digitally mediated, globally networked, and resilience-oriented systems.

2.11 Community Embeddedness in Artisan Entrepreneurship

Artisan entrepreneurs are deeply rooted in community. Unlike conventional entrepreneurs who often prioritise individual growth and scalability, artisans operate within collective frameworks, shaped by community ties, local traditions, shared values, and social interdependence. They are commonly referred to as community entrepreneurs (Audretsch et al., 2021), not just because

they serve local markets, but because their identities and practices are forged in community settings. Whether through intergenerational skill transmission, family-run workshops, or networks of fellow makers, artisan entrepreneurs thrive on social embeddedness (Bhattacharjya et al., 2018; Brooker et al., 2014; Hill, 2020). Their craft is not only cultural, but close relational, a co-created practice sustained by trust, reciprocity, and informal learning within ecosystems.

This perspective aligns with Granovetter's (1985) foundational concept of embeddedness, which posits that economic actions are always entangled within social relationships. For artisan entrepreneurs, business decisions are shaped by who they know, where they belong, and how they interact with others in their local and cultural environments. These entrepreneurs are embedded in complex social networks that influence everything from material sourcing and production methods to pricing, market access, and risk mitigation.

Embeddedness also resonates with the concept of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Putnam et al., 1993), where relational bonds foster trust, cooperation, and shared norms. Artisan enterprises are rarely stand-alone ventures, as they are entangled in webs of community memory, regional identity, and inherited knowledge. As Hoyte (2019) and Ratten (2019) note, the values artisans bring to their work often reflect the cultures and communities that raised them. Their businesses emerge not just from market opportunity, but from a sense of place, history, and communal responsibility. As such, artisan entrepreneurs are not only economic actors but cultural custodians, maintaining continuity across generations while adapting to new realities.

Artisans' community embeddedness also enhances resilience. In the absence of formal institutional support, artisans frequently rely on community networks to navigate uncertainty and precarity. Peer support, informal knowledge-sharing, and collaborative problem-solving are core features of artisan communities (Pret et al., 2016; Danson et al., 2015). These forms of relational infrastructure enable artisans to reduce operational costs, overcome isolation, and cope with the emotional and financial challenges of small-scale entrepreneurship (Al-Dajani et al., 2015; Drakopoulou Dodd et al., 2007).

While collaboration is a big part of artisan communities, there's also a kind of friendly competition, where artisans learn from each other while still trying to stand out. As Bengtsson and Kock (2000) explain, competition occurs when competitors collaborate strategically while maintaining individual distinctiveness. For example, artisans often share market spaces, raw material suppliers, or promotional platforms while continuing to protect their unique designs

and identities (Palmer et al., 2019). This delicate balance reflects a culture of mutual respect and highlights the entrepreneurial nuance required to navigate overlapping roles of peer, competitor, and collaborator.

However, these social ecosystems are not without their limits. Strong community ties can also give rise to informal gatekeeping and unspoken boundaries. Pret and Carter (2017) caution that artisans who breach communal norms by replicating others' designs, breaking confidentiality, or misrepresenting their work, may face exclusion or reputational harm. In this way, community embeddedness can simultaneously support and constrain fostering shared aims but also reinforcing conformity and limiting aesthetic or strategic experimentation. However, this dynamic raise important questions for future research such as:

- 1) How do artisan communities negotiate originality and imitation in the digital world?
- 2) How do relationships in artisan communities help encourage new ideas, or hold people back from taking risks?
- 3) Where's the line between working together based on trust, and holding back to protect your own ideas or techniques?

In summary, community embeddedness is not merely a backdrop to artisan entrepreneurship, it is a defining feature. These entrepreneurs operate as part of social ecologies that shape not only what they produce, but how they produce it, why they do it, and for whom. The artisan's embeddedness is cultural, economic, and social, simultaneously enabling and restricting. Recognising this duality is key to understanding how artisan entrepreneurs' function, adapt, and evolve within their communities in the face of a changing world.

2.12 Research Tensions and Positioning

2.12.1 Main Tension: Evolving Beyond the Traditional Stereotypes

As discussed, artisan entrepreneurs have historically been portrayed in academic literature as lifestyle-driven, place-embedded actors who prioritise cultural preservation, autonomy, and craftsmanship over profit, scalability, or digital integration (Getz and Petersen, 2005; Ratten and Ferreira, 2017; Solomon and Mathias, 2020). These portrayals, often rooted in romanticised notions of the maker, reinforce a binary between traditional artisans and modern artisan entrepreneurs. While this image may have once reflected certain realities, it now falls short of

capturing the diverse, adaptive strategies emerging within the artisan sector, especially in response to digital transformation.

This thesis argues that the dominant stereotype is no longer adequate. In an era of platform economies, globalised markets, and shifting consumer expectations, artisan entrepreneurs are redefining their practices, goals, and identities. This redefinition gives rise to a central tension: artisans are moving away from static representations of heritage-bound, lifestyle-first actors, toward becoming hybrid entrepreneurs who blend tradition with innovation, meaning with market strategy. This evolution unfolds through four interrelated tensions as shown in **Figure 3**.

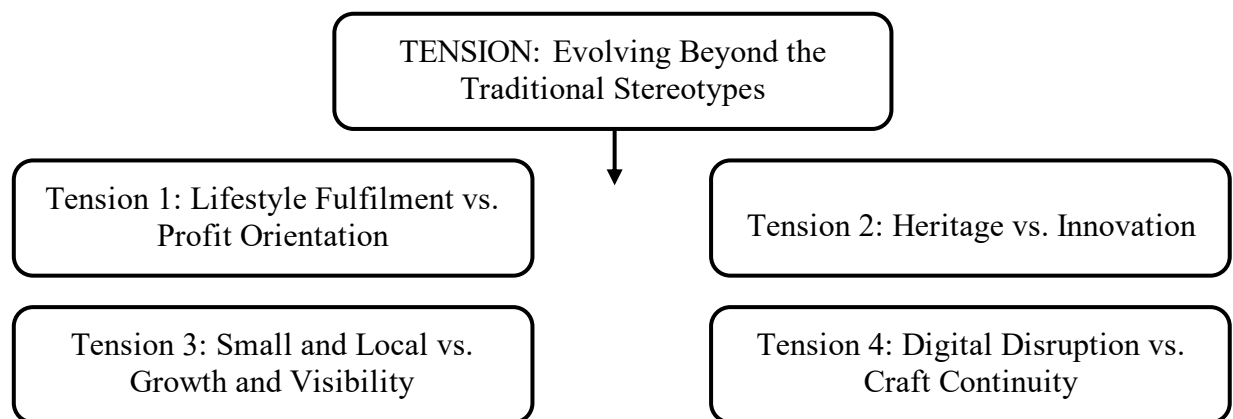


Figure 3: Tension: Evolving Beyond the Traditional Stereotypes

2.12.1.1 Tension 1: Lifestyle Fulfilment vs. Profit Orientation

Traditionally, artisan entrepreneurship has been seen as a lifestyle entrepreneur, offering autonomy, creative expression, and flexible work-life balance, often at the expense of scalability or profitability (Mathias and Smith, 2015). This lifestyle-logic has been central to the identity of artisans and widely echoed in literature as a form of resistance to capitalist rationality or market conformity (Fillis, 2004).

However, digital technologies are disrupting this long-standing stereotype. With the advancement of digital technologies, artisans can scale up and create new social pressures to remain visible, competitive, and responsive in the digital world. This introduces a new layer of artisan entrepreneurial complexity: artisans must now balance personal fulfilment with strategic

monetisation. Some are motivated by survival, others by ambition and passion, but the result is a recalibration of what success looks like in artisan entrepreneurship.

This tension raises concerns about authenticity dilution and emotional labour. As artisans curate their brands for online audiences, the line between genuine self-expression and market performance becomes blurred. This makes lifestyle-versus-profit not just a binary, but a spectrum of strategic positioning that warrants deeper empirical investigation.

2.12.1.2 Tension 2: Heritage vs. Innovation

The artisan identity is often constructed through narratives of cultural continuity, preserving ancestral techniques, local symbolism, and place-based knowledge. Such heritage-based value is central to how artisan goods gain meaning and legitimacy in global markets (Chhabra, 2005). However, digital tools, consumer demands, and entrepreneurial ecosystems are increasingly pushing artisans toward design innovation, branding experimentation, and production flexibility.

This creates a profound dilemma: how to innovate without eroding heritage. Some artisans creatively reinterpret traditional motifs; others decentre heritage entirely in favour of contemporary aesthetics or market trends. These choices challenge the assumption that “authenticity” is a fixed, heritage-bound concept (Bakas et al., 2019). Instead, authenticity may be performed, negotiated, or reinvented through digital engagement.

This tension also raises critical issues of cultural appropriation, commodification, and performativity, especially as global audiences expect artisan goods to “look” authentic, even when production processes or materials change. Exploring this dynamic helps position artisans not as passive preservers of culture, but as active cultural entrepreneurs navigating complex ethical and commercial terrains.

2.12.1.3 Tension 3: Small and Local vs. Growth and Visibility

Historically, artisans have been associated with localised production, small batch productions, and intimate artisan-consumer relationships. These characteristics are often viewed as oppositional to industrialised, impersonal mass production. However, digital visibility and platform capitalism are

reconfiguring these boundaries. Many artisans are now intentionally scaling, not necessarily in size, but in reach, brand influence, and revenue models (Pret and Cogan, 2019).

This tension isn't just about artisan businesses expanding. It's about how artisans manage visibility in algorithm-driven environments, where reach can matter as much as craft quality. The desire to stay rooted in community while engaging global audiences creates a dilemma on how to grow without losing what makes the work special. In some ways, the more visible an artisan becomes in the digital world, the more they risk losing the intimacy and authenticity that once defined their appeal.

This question becomes especially important in emerging economies, where artisans often face a deep tension: the desire to grow and stay visible in the digital world, weighed against the fear of losing their identity, values, and sense of uniqueness. For many, scaling up risks becoming what they never wanted to be: mass producers, rather than makers of something personal, cultural, and one-of-a-kind (Ramadani et al., 2017).

2.12.1.4 Tension 4: Digital Disruption vs. Craft Continuity

The COVID-19 pandemic marked a critical turning point for artisan entrepreneurship, either to stay with traditional business practices and risk becoming irrelevant or even facing business closure or adapt to the crisis and embrace digital entrepreneurship. With physical markets closed and supply chains disrupted, many artisans faced existential threats. For some, this meant abandoning their work; for others, it sparked experimentation with digital tools, direct-to-consumer models, and online storytelling (Segares, 2022; Seraphin, 2021). The pandemic revealed both the fragility and resilience of artisan sectors.

However, the digital shift wasn't experienced equally. Like many things, access to digital entrepreneurship, whether in terms of knowledge, tools, or even reliable internet, isn't the same for everyone. Rural artisans, women, and Indigenous craft communities were often left out of this transition due to limited infrastructure, lack of training, or low market literacy (Pati, 2020). At the same time, new entrants such as laid-off workers during the pandemic or hobbyists, began using social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok to monetise craft-based ventures. Their presence further blurs the boundaries of who counts as an artisan entrepreneur, adding new layers to an already shifting landscape.

The question now is not just whether artisans will remain digital, but what kind of digital presence they will maintain. Will hybrid models emerge? Will platform dependence create new vulnerabilities? These post-pandemic dynamics underscore that craft continuity is not guaranteed, it is being actively reinvented under new technological and social conditions.

2.13 Conclusion Chapter 2

This chapter has critically reviewed how artisan entrepreneurship has traditionally been understood, and why many of those assumptions no longer reflect current realities. Past studies often described artisans as small-scale, culturally bound, and lifestyle-focused, choosing personal fulfilment and heritage over profit or growth. While these ideas once helped distinguish artisans from mainstream entrepreneurs, they now risk limiting how we understand the real and changing nature of artisan practice, especially in emerging economy like Malaysia.

The review showed that artisan entrepreneurship is not a single or fixed identity. Many artisans today move between different roles and motivations from hobbyist to full-time entrepreneur, depending on life changes, market conditions, or social factors. Typologies from scholars such as Bouette and Magee (2015), Solomon and Mathias (2020) and Pret and Cogan (2019) illustrate how artisans may value cultural expression, personal meaning, or business growth differently, and how these goals often overlap. This flexibility is important for recognising that artisans are not passive or stuck in the past but are actively shaping their own paths. The chapter also explored four key tensions that define the modern artisan experiences such as the balance between lifestyle and profit, heritage and innovation, staying local versus growing and becoming visible online, and whether digital adoption especially after COVID-19 pandemic marks a lasting change or it was used just as a temporary shift to survive the crisis.

These aren't problems to be solved, but ongoing realities that artisans must navigate. They help us see artisans not just as makers, but as strategic decision-makers responding to both opportunities and pressures. One key issue that emerges in this chapter is the lack of research focused on Malaysia. While countries like India and Indonesia are often featured in artisan studies within emerging economy contexts, Malaysian artisans remain largely understudied. Yet they face unique challenges and possibilities shaped by cultural diversity, government policy, and uneven access to digital tools and strategies. This study aims to fill that gap and contribute new insights from emerging economies context that is often overlooked in global debates.

Overall, this chapter has argued that artisan entrepreneurship should be understood as a hybrid and adaptive practice; shaped by culture, community, technology, and economic realities. Instead of framing artisanship in binaries like tradition versus modernity, or creativity versus business, we need to understand how artisans actively blend these forces in their everyday work.

This conclusion sets the stage for the next chapter, which continues the literature review by focusing on digital entrepreneurship. It explores how artisans are using digital tools, platforms, and technologies to run their businesses in today's digital world, not just to sell products, but to build identity, reach new audiences, and tell their stories. This framing is essential for answering the study's central research question:

How do artisan entrepreneurs in an emerging economy negotiate and experience digital entrepreneurship?

CHAPTER 3 – DIGITAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN ARTISAN ENTREPRENEURSHIP

3.0 Literature Review – Digital Entrepreneurship in Artisan Entrepreneurship

3.1 Digital Entrepreneurship as a Theoretical Lens

Artisan entrepreneurs are increasingly navigating digitally mediated ecosystems that reshape how they produce, promote, and sell their work. Drawing on Nambisan's (2017) framework of digital entrepreneurship, this thesis explores how digital platforms not only facilitate commerce but also actively influence how artisans construct their brand identities, engage with audiences, and manage the tension between cultural authenticity and market visibility in the digital world.

To understand artisan entrepreneurs' transformative shift from traditional business practices, digital entrepreneurship offers a compelling theoretical lens to help this thesis address its main research question. Unlike traditional entrepreneurship, which emphasises physical, linear business models such as in-person selling and face-to-face customer engagement, digital entrepreneurship foregrounds a contrasting mode of practice that leverages technological infrastructures to enable new forms of value creation, capture, and exchange (Nambisan, 2017; Von Briel et al., 2021). It focuses on how entrepreneurs act within digital environments shaped by algorithms, online platforms, and data-driven tools in contexts that are especially relevant for artisans adjusting to digital ways of doing business.

This perspective is especially pertinent for artisans in emerging economies like Malaysia, where digital access is uneven, cultural production is deeply embedded in tradition, and platform participation introduces both opportunity and constraint. While much of the digital entrepreneurship literature is anchored in Western contexts and high-growth tech ventures, this study applies the framework to small-scale creative workers in emerging economies, thereby broadening its analytical reach. It illuminates how artisans creatively navigate digital infrastructures that were not designed with their needs in mind, balancing visibility with voice, commerce with culture, and algorithmic relevance with artisanal autonomy.

This study approaches digital entrepreneurship through a social constructivist perspective, recognising that artisan entrepreneurs do not engage with digital technologies in uniform or technologically deterministic ways. Instead, their experiences are shaped by lived realities, cultural meanings, identity, emotional labour, and the institutional contexts within which their entrepreneurial practices are embedded. From this perspective, digital entrepreneurship is understood as a

negotiated, relational, and socially situated process rather than a purely technological or growth-driven phenomenon.

Accordingly, this chapter frames digital entrepreneurship not as a neutral or purely enabling process, but as a site of ongoing negotiation in which artisans adapt, resist, and reconfigure their practices in response to digital platforms and broader entrepreneurial pressures. The sections that follow explore these negotiations by examining how digitalisation reshapes artisan practice, entrepreneurial identity, platform dynamics, and the key tensions surrounding digital entrepreneurship. The chapter then outlines the study's social constructivist positioning, presents the conceptual framework developed for this research, and concludes with a summary of the chapter.

3.1.1 Core Principles of Digital Entrepreneurship

Digital entrepreneurship refers to the process of creating and growing business practices by using digital technologies not just as tools, but as the foundation of business strategy (Hull et al., 2007; Sussan and Acs, 2017). Unlike conventional entrepreneurship, which often relies on fixed assets and stable market structures, digital entrepreneurship is shaped by rapid technological change and fluid, high-engagement environments. These environments enhance how businesses interact with customers and introduce more decentralised dynamics within digital spaces. As a result, entrepreneurial activity becomes more iterative, collaborative, and heavily dependent on visibility within digital platforms and ecosystems.

To conceptualise this shift, Nambisan (2017) identifies three core elements that define digital entrepreneurship:

3.1.1.1 Digital Artefacts

Digital artefacts refer to digital representations that convey or enhance value in support of entrepreneurial activities. These may include product photos, videos, templates, downloadable guides, or branded online content. For artisan entrepreneurs, this can take the form of Instagram reels showcasing production processes, detailed craft shots, or behind-the-scenes stories, all of which contribute to how their value is communicated, perceived, and experienced by audiences.

3.1.1.2 Digital Platforms

Digital platforms are online tools that businesses use to interact, transact, and co-create value with customers in digital spaces. Examples include e-commerce sites such as Etsy or Shopee, social media platforms like Facebook and TikTok, and communication channels such as WhatsApp or email. These platforms shape user behaviour through design features, algorithms, and platform norms. For artisan entrepreneurs, digital platforms influence how they reach customers, tell their stories, perform authenticity, and sell their crafts.

3.1.1.3 Digital Infrastructures

Digital infrastructure refers to the technical and institutional systems that support digital entrepreneurship, such as mobile internet, digital payment systems, logistics networks, and digital literacy. These systems shape ‘who’ can participate and ‘how’. For artisans in emerging economies, limited infrastructure can restrict platform access, while mobile-first cultures influence how content is created and shared.

Taken together, digital artefacts, platforms, and infrastructure reshape entrepreneurship. It is no longer just about product and profit but also about visibility, storytelling, and engagement, within algorithmically governed environments.

This is especially important for artisan entrepreneurs. Their success today depends not only on craft and heritage, but also on their ability to adapt to digital systems that reward aesthetics, audience interaction, and consistent content creation. Artisans must now act as producers, storytellers, and digital strategists, navigating emotional labour and strategic visibility.

Digital entrepreneurship, then, is not simply traditional entrepreneurship with digital tools. It is a new mode of entrepreneurial being that are embedded in, and shaped by, digital systems. The sections that follow explore how artisans negotiate these demands in their everyday practice.

3.1.2 Why not Micro Digital Entrepreneurship?

While Nambisan et al. (2019) introduce the concept of micro digital entrepreneurship, particularly relevant for understanding gig workers, freelancers, and task-based digital actors, this framework is not adopted in the present study. Although prior scholars such as Igwe et al. (2018) has described

artisans as micro-entrepreneurs, typically defined as businesses with fewer than ten employees, this classification is too narrow to capture the complexity, creativity, and aspirations of the artisan entrepreneurs in this research.

Kapp (2017), for example, argues that digital creatives such as game developers can fall under broader definitions of artisan entrepreneurship, pointing to the need for frameworks that prioritise originality, autonomy, and cultural production regardless of business size. In this study, while the artisans may operate at a small scale, they demonstrate strategic agency, long-term vision, and deeply embedded values that extend beyond the scope of a micro-enterprise lens.

Crucially, the 2019 framework tends to prioritise ‘scale’ as its analytic entry point. Applying it here risks reinforcing limiting assumptions, portraying artisans as subsistence actors or marginal digital users when in fact they are actively building ecosystems, brands, and global identities. Moreover, since this study does not formally classify participants by enterprise size, adopting a micro-centric lens would introduce unnecessary assumptions and constrain interpretive flexibility.

Instead, this thesis draws on Nambisan’s (2017) earlier and broader framework, centred on digital artifacts, platforms, and infrastructure, which better reflects the hybrid, emotionally complex, and culturally grounded digital practices evident in the data. It enables a more expansive understanding of how artisan entrepreneurs engage with digital technologies not just for commercial gain, but to express identity, preserve culture, and shape their entrepreneurial worlds.

3.1.3 Digital Entrepreneurial Ecosystems: Expanding the Framework

While Nambisan’s (2017) digital entrepreneurship theory provides a strong foundation for understanding individual entrepreneurial agency, it is also important to consider the broader environment in which artisan entrepreneurs operate. The Digital Entrepreneurial Ecosystem (DEE) framework by Sussan and Acs (2017) shifts the focus from isolated entrepreneurial behaviour to the interaction between digital infrastructure, institutions, culture, and entrepreneurial action, complementing Nambisan’s framework effectively.

Although the DEE framework is often applied to fast-paced tech start-ups and innovation-driven economies, this study extends its application to the artisan entrepreneurship context. In doing so, it offers a fresh perspective on how the framework can be used to understand different types of entrepreneurial activity. This approach not only contributes conceptually but also reframes the

framework contextually for emerging economies like Malaysia, offering a more nuanced and diversified interpretation.

This framework was introduced later in the research process, prompted by emergent insights from the field that highlighted the need for more nuanced, ecosystem-level thinking. As such, the DEE framework is integrated retroactively but purposefully to help interpret findings related to platform navigation, policy disconnects, and gaps in support systems that emerged during interview analysis.

Chapters 6 (Interview Findings and Discussion) and 7 (Conclusion) return to this framework, showing how digitally active artisans not only respond to their ecosystems but also shape them through culturally grounded, emotionally resilient, and strategically adaptive practices.

3.1.4 The Relevance of Digital Entrepreneurship Framework to Artisan Entrepreneurship

The digital entrepreneurship framework developed by Nambisan (2017) offers a strong foundation for analysing the evolving business practices of artisan entrepreneurs in the digital world. Unlike other frameworks that focus narrowly on either personal identity (such as identity theory) or platform infrastructure (such as platform studies), digital entrepreneurship provides an integrated, ecosystemic view of entrepreneurship. It helps explain not only how digital tools are used, but also how they reshape artisan entrepreneurs' logic, culture, and value systems.

This is particularly relevant in artisan entrepreneurship contexts, where entrepreneurial practice is deeply intertwined with personal values, cultural heritage, and close-knit community ties. In Malaysia, a setting marked by infrastructural unevenness, a mix of formal and informal markets, and strong socio-cultural expectations, artisans are not simply adopting digital tools. They are operating within platform environments that mediate their visibility, legitimacy, and creative autonomy in the digital world.

Nambisan's digital entrepreneurship framework is therefore well suited to this complexity. It treats artisan entrepreneurs as embedded actors within digital ecosystems; it foregrounds platform dynamics and their influence on both opportunity and identity formation; and it recognises that artisan entrepreneurship today includes non-economic forms of labour, such as digital storytelling, aesthetic presentation, and emotional engagement. These elements closely reflect the lived realities

of artisan entrepreneurs in Malaysia, who are navigating both traditional practices and digital entrepreneurship to maximise their presence across multiple business terrains.

To illustrate this alignment more concretely, **Table 2** maps out Nambisan's three core components; digital artefacts, platforms, and infrastructures to specific practices observed among artisan entrepreneurs in this study.

Framework Element	Definition (Nambisan, 2017)	Application To Thesis
Digital Artifacts	Creation of digital tools available that used to modified entrepreneurial activity. Varies from digital outputs, components, or digital business tools such as online catalogues, digital contents	Artisan entrepreneurs use digital artifacts such as digital catalogue for email marketing, story-telling videos; used for Instagram contents. Beyond just tools, it complements their business practices, became part of the digital brand identity.
Digital Platforms	Application to digital environments where business value is created, exchanged, and scaled through platform such as Etsy for artisans	Artisans' reliance on digital platforms to reach bigger audience, to sell crafts and connects with customers through feedback. The digital platform is central to the business.
Digital Infrastructure	Broader technical foundation enhances entrepreneurial activities such as digital payment systems, logistics digital applications	Artisans' dependant on digital payment systems when participating at artisan bazaars, and reliance on their smartphones to run their business.

Table 2: Nambisan's Three Core Components

3.1.5 Evaluating Alternative Frameworks

Before selecting digital entrepreneurship as the central theoretical lens for this study, other frameworks were thoroughly considered, notably entrepreneurial identity theory and platform studies. While each theories offers valuable insights into creativity, cultural production, and digital mediation, they tend to focus on specific aspects of entrepreneurial practice. In contrast, digital entrepreneurship, as conceptualised by Nambisan (2017), provides a more integrated and dynamic perspective. This thesis sought a framework that, like the argument for artisan entrepreneurship in

this study, is both fluid and grounded that can guide the thesis in answering its core research questions while reflecting the lived complexity of artisan work in emerging economies.

The decision to adopt the digital entrepreneurship framework rests on its ability to synthesise both structural and agentic dimensions, offering a more comprehensive understanding of how artisans operate within digital environments shaped by algorithmic visibility, cultural aesthetics, and commercial demands.

The following section offers a more detailed review of entrepreneurial identity theory and platform studies, outlining how each was considered and why they were ultimately not selected as the central framework for this study.

3.1.5.1 Entrepreneurial Identity Theory

Entrepreneurial identity theory was initially considered for this study, particularly its strands of narrative identity and identity work as it offers valuable insight into how individuals construct and perform their entrepreneurial selves. This is highly applicable to artisan entrepreneurs. The theory has been especially influential in cultural and creative contexts, where business activity is deeply intertwined with personal values, heritage, and emotional meaning, much like what is seen in artisan entrepreneurship. These ideas help explain how artisans often see themselves not just as business owners, but also as artists, cultural preservers, and community members.

This body of work includes concepts like narrative identity (Down and Warren, 2008), which looks at how entrepreneurs use storytelling, like how artisans differentiate themselves through personal or cultural narratives to make sense of their journeys to their audiences. It also includes identity work (Watson, 2009), which focuses on how entrepreneurs continuously shape and reshape their identity in response to social or professional expectations. This resonates with how artisans adapt and negotiate their identity in the digital world to meet certain market or platform criteria. These perspectives are highly relevant in understanding the meaning artisans attach to their work.

However, while this theory offers strong insights into the symbolic and emotional dimensions of entrepreneurship, which is indeed relevant given artisans' personal goals and deep emotional connection to their craft, it places less emphasis on the digital infrastructures such as platform algorithms, Search-Engine-Optimisation (SEO) systems, and content visibility mechanisms that increasingly shape how entrepreneurial identity is mediated and made visible online

More specifically, this research aims to look in detail at artisans' digital strategies; what platforms they use, how, and then exploring the reasoning behind this. Entrepreneurial identity theory doesn't fully account for how algorithmic systems to strengthen some identities while rendering others unseen.

Therefore, although entrepreneurial identity theory was seriously considered, it was ultimately set aside in favour of digital entrepreneurship theory. The latter better captures the hybrid realities on how artisan entrepreneurs conduct their business in the digital world, where self-expression must coexist with platform demands, visibility strategies, and data-driven engagement.

3.1.5.2 Platform Studies

Platform Studies was also considered as a potential theoretical lens for this thesis. Unlike Entrepreneurial Identity Theory, this framework focuses on how digital platforms such as Instagram or Facebook that act as regulatory systems that shape entrepreneurs' behaviour, visibility, and economic outcomes. Scholars like Gillespie (2010) and Srnicek (2017) have demonstrated that platforms are not neutral spaces but powerful infrastructures that influence what content is seen, how creative labour is valued, and how data is extracted. This is highly relevant to today's digital world, especially for a study that seeks to rethink the conditions under which artisan entrepreneurs in emerging economies conduct their businesses online.

Platform Studies can help explain why artisans may feel pressure to stay visible online, how dominant content formats (such as "behind-the-scenes" craft-making videos) shape their engagement, and how algorithmic systems reward some users while obscuring others. This lens is useful for understanding the structural power of digital platforms and the challenges they pose for small-scale creative workers like artisans.

However, Platform Studies often emphasises constraint over agency. It tends to frame users as passive actors within platform logic, underplaying how entrepreneurs actively adapt, resist, or creatively work around digital limitations. This is a limitation for a study like this, which aims to foreground the strategic choices, cultural negotiations, and hybrid digital practices of artisan entrepreneurs, particularly in an emerging economy like Malaysia.

While Platform Studies informed aspects of this research, it was ultimately set aside in favour of Digital Entrepreneurship, which offers a more balanced perspective. This framework allows the thesis to explore not only the influence of digital systems, but also how artisans actively navigate, use, and reshape them in line with their values, capacities, and business goals. It provides a more holistic lens to understand artisan entrepreneurs in the digital world.

The table below summarises the key analytical focus, strengths, and limitations of the three frameworks considered, highlighting why Digital Entrepreneurship was ultimately chosen as the most appropriate lens for this study.

Framework	Analytical Focus	Strengths	Limitations
Entrepreneurial Identity Theories	Constructing individual identity through meaning making and narrative practices	Thorough insights into cultural meaning, with high self-perception that builds strong identity	Limited views on structural, technological and digital infrastructures
Platform Studies	Focuses on infrastructure dominance through digital platforms	Prioritising on platform logics, algorithmic dominance, and digital visibility	Limited critique of entrepreneurial business practices
Digital Entrepreneurship	Complementing entrepreneurial ecosystems through digital tools and value creation	Integrative lens on entrepreneurial business practices while considering digital tools, networks	Limited on cultural embeddedness and emotional dimensions of entrepreneurial identity

Table 3 - Comparing Theoretical Frameworks for Studying Artisan Entrepreneurship

3.1.6 Conclusion: Why Digital Entrepreneurship is the Strongest Theoretical Lens

Having evaluated the strengths and limitations of alternative frameworks, it is clear that digital entrepreneurship offers the most appropriate and flexible lens for this study. Digital entrepreneurship allows for a holistic understanding of how artisan entrepreneurs in emerging economies conduct

business in digitally mediated spaces, not just by using technology, but by negotiating its meanings, constraints, and opportunities in culturally grounded ways.

Digital entrepreneurship captures both sides of the equation: the platform structures that shape what is visible and valuable, and the entrepreneurial agency through which artisans assert identity, build community, and experiment with strategy. It provides the conceptual depth required to explore emotional labour, narrative crafting, and algorithmic adaptation, all central to artisan participation in today's digital economies.

Equally important, this framework has informed the design and methodology of this thesis. It shaped the survey instruments such as assessing levels of platform use and digital strategy, guided the semi-structured interviews (e.g., probing tensions around visibility, control, and authenticity), and provides the analytical lens through which findings will be interpreted. The research question: How do artisan entrepreneurs in an emerging economy negotiate and experience digital entrepreneurship? is approached through a framework that not only recognises the platform-mediated nature of that world but also foregrounds the resilience and inventiveness of its participants.

By focusing on artisan entrepreneurs in Malaysia, actors often excluded from high-growth, tech-centric models of entrepreneurship, this study challenges prevailing assumptions about speed, scale, and success in the digital economy. It broadens the definition of digital entrepreneurship to include forms that are slower, emotionally rich, community-driven, and culturally specific. These are not marginal exceptions but critical redefinitions. This thesis positions itself at the heart of that shift.

3.2 Digital Entrepreneurship in Artisan Business Practices

Artisan entrepreneurship has long been framed through the lens of tradition, typically associated with slow production, localised exchange, and cultural continuity. This framing, while historically grounded, risks romanticising artisans as static figures such as resistant to technological change and locked in pre-digital modes of work. Such representations, dominant in earlier scholarship, often fail to account for the adaptive capacities and strategic agency of artisans operating under contemporary pressures (Solomon and Mathias, 2020).

Recent shifts, especially from the rapid rise of platform economies during the COVID-19 pandemic, have made those old assumptions harder to hold onto. Today, digital engagement isn't just a nice-to-have for artisans; it's part of the backbone of how they survive and stay visible. As Nambisan (2017)

argues, digital entrepreneurship is not merely about technological adoption but about participating in socio-technical ecosystems shaped by platforms, data, and distributed value creation. For artisan entrepreneurs, this signals a profound shift: from being peripheral or reluctant actors in the digital economy to becoming strategic participants navigating visibility, legitimacy, and cultural expression through platform-mediated practices.

This transformation isn't the same for everyone, with each artisan experiences it differently, and it brings its own set of challenges. Still, it marks a major shift from old assumptions that saw artisans as hesitant or slow to adopt technology. Today, artisan entrepreneurs are showing up as creators, curators, and storytellers in digital spaces. They're actively shaping new ways of expressing identity, creating value, and passing on knowledge in an online world.

3.2.1 From Hesitance to Necessity

Prior to the pandemic, artisan entrepreneurs were often positioned at the periphery of digital economies. Their hesitance was not merely a matter of resistance or technophobia, but reflected legitimate constraints: limited broadband access, financial insecurity, and cultural concerns about the dilution of craft authenticity in fast-paced, image-driven digital spaces (Segares, 2022; Solomon and Mathias, 2020). The slow, tactile, and relational character of artisanal work seemed ill-suited to the algorithmic logics and aesthetic economies of platforms like Instagram or TikTok.

The COVID-19 pandemic, however, marked a turning point. With physical markets, studios, and exhibitions shuttered, digital engagement shifted from optional to existential. Artisans turned to WhatsApp ordering, Instagram flash sales, TikTok tutorials, and Zoom-based workshops, not as innovations, but as survival strategies. These adaptations extended beyond mere technical change. As Nambisan (2017) argues, digital entrepreneurship is shaped by participation in digital ecosystems, socio-technical environments composed of platforms, digital artefacts, and infrastructures that structure how value is created, circulated, and legitimised. Artisan entrepreneurs, through this lens, were not simply adopting tools; they were entering a new set of rules, a space where opportunity, visibility, and identity are algorithmically mediated.

Digital peer networks and online communities became critical to this transformation. As shown by Kuhn and Galloway (2015) and Bhattacharyya et al. (2020), these networks provided more than technical guidance as they became sources of emotional resilience, knowledge exchange, and market

access. Through platform-specific artefacts such as video tutorials, curated shopfronts, or livestreamed process content, artisans began performing new entrepreneurial identities: content creators, brand storytellers, and cultural narrators navigating digital legitimacy.

What makes this shift particularly significant is its ongoing embeddedness in the entrepreneurial ecosystem. The digital environment now offers diverse entry points for artisans, many of which are low-cost or peer-enabled including global marketplaces for artisans such as Etsy, Amazon Handmade, digital upskilling tutorials, online suppliers, and community-based knowledge sharing. These tools and infrastructures have made digital engagement not just possible, but strategically necessary for sustaining craft-based entrepreneurship in a platform economy.

Seen through the Digital Entrepreneurship framework, this shift is not merely a transition in marketing channel or sales technique. It is a reconfiguration of entrepreneurial logic itself. Artisans who once operated in hyperlocal circuits are now compelled to navigate algorithmic visibility, perform platform literacy, and compete in attention economies. What began as reluctant experimentation has evolved into a critical, ongoing negotiation of how to survive, adapt, and grow in a digitally mediated craft economy.

3.2.2 Artisans' Uneven Digital Journeys

Despite its transformative potential, the benefits of digital entrepreneurship have not been evenly distributed across artisan communities. While some artisans have leveraged digital tools to enhance their visibility, reach new markets, and diversify income streams, many others remain on the margins of this transformation. A significant body of research highlights material constraints as persistent barriers: limited broadband infrastructure, high data costs, and low digital literacy (Bhattacharjya et al., 2020) which continues to inhibit meaningful participation, particularly for rural and older artisans (Shrivastava, 2020). These infrastructural limitations are well-documented, yet they only scratch the surface of the deeper inequalities at play.

For artisans, the barriers to digital entrepreneurship are not solely about access, they are also ontological. Artisan production is typically small-scale, non-standardised, and deeply tied to place, tradition, and identity. Craft is not merely a product but an expression of cultural and emotional labour. This artisans' logic often clashes with the algorithmic imperatives of digital platforms, which privilege speed, visual appeal, and data legibility. As Cutolo and Kenney (2021) argue, platform

capitalism rewards content that is consistent, optimised, and easily parsed by automated systems. For many artisans, this means adapting their creative process to fit platform expectations, altering colours for better engagement, compressing complex heritage stories into a few seconds videos, or constantly producing content to remain visible. These shifts are not simply strategic choices; they represent a form of epistemic tension between artisans' values and digital norms.

Furthermore, the structural unevenness extends into emotional and cognitive labour. Many artisans are sole operators, already juggling production, sales, and logistics. The expectation to now become content strategists, community managers, and platform performers adds substantial burdens, not just in time and resources, but in identity and emotional energy. These layered demands raise critical questions about the sustainability of digital entrepreneurship for artisans: Who can afford to perform visibility? Who gets to succeed on platform terms? And whose voices are left out when artisanal work doesn't fit algorithmic rhythms?

This complexity is precisely where Nambisan's (2017) digital entrepreneurship framework proves analytically powerful. He conceptualises digital entrepreneurship not as a set of tools, but as an ecosystem comprising digital artefacts, platform infrastructures, and entrepreneurial agency. Within this system, he argues, the logic of entrepreneurship itself is transformed: opportunities are no longer discovered but emerge and are co-created through interactions between actors and digital systems; entrepreneurial agency is constrained and shaped by platform design, algorithmic visibility, and user feedback loops; and value is no longer static but must be constantly negotiated within shifting norms of legitimacy and engagement. For artisan entrepreneurs, this means that digital participation is not simply a matter of accessing technology. In fact, it is about learning how to function and survive within a dynamic, often asymmetrical, digital environment.

Thus, unevenness in artisan digital entrepreneurship is not just about inequality in access; it reflects deeper tensions between cultural production and platform logic. While digital ecosystems offer new avenues for growth, connection, and creativity, they also demand that artisans reconcile their identity and values with the structures and expectations of algorithmic capitalism. This tension is central to the analysis that follows in this thesis.

3.2.3 Transformation of Knowledge and Cultural Value

The unevenness of digital participation, as discussed earlier, is not limited to infrastructure or access. It extends deeply into how knowledge is produced, shared, and valued across different artisans' traditions. Artisan knowledge is not monolithic, but it is plural, culturally embedded, and transmitted through situated practices. Because craft is often learned through doing, in apprenticeships, family workshops, or community rituals as it carries forms of knowledge that resist standardisation (Igwe et al., 2018). The digital shift disrupts this, not uniformly, but in highly uneven ways depending on the craft, its cultural roots, and the artisan's digital capacity.

Digital platforms have transformed how artisans learn, teach, and share knowledge. For instance, platforms like YouTube provide unprecedented access to techniques, ideas, and global networks. Artisans can learn from fellow makers around the world through YouTube, not just about production methods, but also about spotting global trends within their craft industries. This openness supports new forms of peer learning and inspiration, particularly for younger or urban artisans. In this sense, the shift has democratised access to certain knowledge, enabling artisans to bypass traditional gatekeepers or geographic limits.

That said, this transformation also has its own set of risks. As Hracs (2015) notes, once craft knowledge becomes widely digitalised and algorithmically sorted, it can lose its cultural specificity. Viral content often prioritises visuals over context, simplifying centuries-old practices into trends. The digital transmission of craft knowledge can thus result in what Hracs (2015) terms "de-traditionalisation", a process in which cultural meaning is at risk of being diluted or erased.

These dynamics reflect what Nambisan (2017) describes as the reconfiguration of entrepreneurial ecosystems. In his framework, entrepreneurial opportunity is not simply discovered but co-created through interactions within digital environments. For artisans, this means that sharing knowledge online is not a neutral act, but it is a form of digital entrepreneurship that shapes visibility, trust, and value. Platforms not only mediate what is seen, but also what is understood as legitimate knowledge, influencing how artisans position themselves as experts, teachers, or cultural custodians (Rashid and Ratten, 2021).

However, many strategically use digital tools to document their processes, explain their cultural lineage, and teach others in ways that honour tradition. They are, in Nambisan's terms, exercising agency within the constraints of digital infrastructures, shaping how knowledge is framed and

circulated. This repositions artisans not merely as content creators, but as hybrid actors navigating between tradition and innovation.

Nevertheless, bringing craft knowledge into the digital world comes with both risks and possibilities. It can flatten complexity, but it can also archive disappearing practices, expand learning, and strengthen cultural relevance in a changing world. For artisan entrepreneurs, the key challenge is to manage this tension: deciding how much to share, how to protect their legacy, and how to frame their identity in a space that often values speed, novelty, and simplification. These are not just creative or moral decisions as they are entrepreneurial ones, made within ecosystems where value, legitimacy, and visibility are increasingly platform dependent.

3.3 The Emergence of New Artisan Identities

This section builds on the earlier discussion of digital entrepreneurship to explore how it is reshaping not only what artisans do, but who they are becoming. As digital entrepreneurship increasingly influences both economic and cultural life, artisan entrepreneurs, often perceived as tradition-bound or resistant to change, are beginning to take on new, hybrid roles. These evolving identities challenge long-held assumptions about what artisanship looks like in the digital world. This section examines three key sub-themes that illustrate this transformation: (1) the artisan entrepreneur as a hybrid entrepreneur, (2) the artisan entrepreneur as a digital entrepreneur, and (3) the artisan entrepreneur as a digital storyteller.

3.3.1 Artisan Entrepreneur as Hybrid Entrepreneur

In the past, artisan entrepreneurship has been shaped by traditional stereotypes that positioned artisans within heritage-based practices, selling face-to-face, participating in local bazaars, operating from physical studios, and relying on community networks for business visibility (Bakas et al., 2019; Ratten et al., 2019). These practices, often passed down through generations, reflect a strong connection between cultural continuity and economic livelihood. As noted in the literature, artisans have typically been portrayed as custodians of tradition, rather than as agents of innovation or technological change (Fillis, 2002; Hoyte, 2019).

However, recent studies challenge this narrative. Scholars such as Ratten (2022) and Mazur-Włodarczyk (2024) highlight a new generation of artisan entrepreneurs who straddle both traditional and digital modes, a hybrid entrepreneur who embed digital tools and platforms into their craft-based businesses. While they may not fully align with the language of “digital transformation,” many actively engage with digital ecosystems, regardless of the extent of their digital use. This includes managing e-commerce storefronts, producing platform-friendly content, and reaching wider audiences through social media and online storytelling.

This hybrid approach signals more than just a shift in business strategy; it reflects a broader redefinition of artisan identity. Instead of choosing between tradition and innovation, these entrepreneurs combine both developing models that honour cultural values while adapting to digital market realities. This represents a new form of entrepreneurial identity, where artisans engage with digital tools on their own terms to increase visibility, extend their reach, and build resilience, without losing the essence of their craft.

This challenges earlier concerns in the literature that suggested digitalisation and growth might lead to a loss of authenticity or cultural dilution (Ramadani et al., 2017; Solomon and Mathias, 2020). Instead, what emerges is a more nuanced view of artisan growth that is diversified, grounded, adaptive, and interactive. Hybrid artisan entrepreneurs are not abandoning their identities but rather reshaping them in ways that reflect both their heritage and the demands in the digital world.

3.3.2 Artisan Entrepreneur as Digital Entrepreneur

As artisans engage with digital platforms, their roles are evolving beyond that of craft makers who produce handmade goods rooted in cultural value, originality, and authenticity. No longer limited to traditional methods of selling, such as local bazaars or in-person networks, artisan entrepreneurs are now also involved in digital curation. This includes creating content for platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and personal websites. Through these spaces, they communicate not face-to-face but via captions, videos, and platform narratives that are strategically crafted to increase digital engagement and expand reach.

This is not simply a technical shift. It marks a deeper transformation in how entrepreneurial identity is shaped that is increasingly influenced by algorithms, branding, and data-driven logics, as discussed in recent literature (Kwiatkowski et al., 2021; Ramadani et al., 2017; Solomon and Mathias, 2020).

Artisan entrepreneurs are no longer only producers; they are digital actors navigating systems that reward visibility, aesthetics, and consistency.

This shift aligns with Nambisan's (2017) concept of digital entrepreneurship as a fluid, ecosystem-embedded process. Using his three key elements of digital artefacts, platforms, and infrastructures, entrepreneurial activity is understood as shaped by the constant interaction between the entrepreneur and the digital environment. Within this framework, the artisan is not only adapting to digital tools but actively participating in digital ecosystems. Their entrepreneurial identity is being co-constructed by their own creative efforts, platform structures, and changing audience expectations.

This directly challenges previous portrayals of artisans as static or community-bound, comfortable within the familiar settings of local economies and reluctant to scale (Bakas et al., 2019; Pret and Cogan, 2019). In contrast, the artisans in this study show strategic agency in using digital platforms to expand their businesses, connect with global audiences, and reframe their identities as digitally savvy entrepreneurs.

Therefore, this section interrogates whether artisans are simply adopting digital tools, or whether they are becoming digital entrepreneurs. If the latter, this reframes our understanding of artisan entrepreneurship, particularly within cultural, informal, and creative economies in emerging markets like Malaysia. Engaging with this question is central to understanding how artisans are navigating and reshaping digital entrepreneurship on their own terms. Although recent literature has begun to recognise the transformative shifts in artisan entrepreneurship, there remains limited exploration of how these changes influence the entrepreneurial identity within emerging economies. This thesis seeks to address that gap.

3.3.3 Artisan Entrepreneur as Digital Storyteller

Storytelling has always been a big part of what it means to be an artisan entrepreneur. It's storytelling that sets them apart from other forms of entrepreneurship, as it's deeply rooted in the artisan's passion for their craft (Hoyte, 2019; Kuhn and Galloway, 2015; Rashid and Ratten, 2021). A craft object is rarely just a product for an artisan entrepreneur, but it carries with it narratives of origin, technique, materiality, and the maker's personal journey. These stories, often shared face-to-face in community markets, studios, or bazaars, serve to humanise the craft, establish trust, and distinguish artisan work from mass-produced goods. As Fillis (2002) and Pret and Cogan (2019) note, this relational and

narrative style is central to artisan practice, positioning the artisan not merely as a producer, but as a cultural narrator.

However, in today's digital world, the way artisans tell their stories is changing. They're now expected to share their narratives through platforms like Instagram, TikTok, or even YouTube, where short, eye-catching, and engaging content is key. In this digital space, artisans aren't just makers anymore, they're also digital creators, producing content to stay visible and relevant in a fast-moving, platform-driven environment.

3.3.3.1 Navigating Algorithmic Storytelling

As Bylund and Packard (2021) argue, storytelling in digital spaces is a powerful tool for market differentiation and building emotional connections. However, unlike traditional artisan storytelling, digital storytelling operates within algorithmic environments that reward consistency, trend alignment, and engagement metrics, often at the expense of nuance, depth, or cultural context. This poses a fundamental tension: digital platforms expand artisan reach yet simultaneously distort or dilute the very narratives that give artisan work its meaning.

This tension is especially significant when viewed through the lens of Nambisan's (2017) conceptualisation of digital entrepreneurship. Here, entrepreneurship is framed not as a linear act of business creation, but as a distributed and evolving process shaped by digital artefacts, platforms, and infrastructures. Agency, in this model, is exercised within the rules and constraints set by digital ecosystems, and entrepreneurial roles must adapt accordingly. For artisans, this means engaging not only in craft production, but also in content creation, platform navigation, and brand curation, all under conditions they do not fully control.

3.3.3.2 Vulnerabilities of the Digital Creator Role

This evolving identity as a digital creator is not evenly distributed. While some artisans may find empowerment in new forms of storytelling, others face barriers: limited digital literacy, resource constraints, or discomfort with public visibility. Producing engaging digital content requires time, tools, skills, and emotional labour, assets that many small-scale or rural artisans may lack. Moreover,

the expectation to constantly perform and narrate one's work for online audiences can be alienating, especially when it feels dislocated from the maker's cultural or personal values.

Further risks arise in the form of cultural misappropriation and intellectual property theft. As Miller and Le Breton-Miller (2018) caution, putting artisan knowledge online, which often stripped of its deeper meanings, increases the risk of designs being copied, decontextualised, or commercialised by others. For artisans working with heritage-based craft, the stakes of digital visibility are thus not just economic, but cultural and ethical.

Therefore, while the role of the artisan as a digital creator offers significant opportunities, it also introduces new vulnerabilities. The platform logic that underpins digital entrepreneurship with its emphasis on visibility, performance, and content optimisation may be poorly aligned with the values, rhythms, and capacities of many artisan entrepreneurs. Rather than assuming artisans can seamlessly adopt these roles, it is crucial to interrogate whether the entrepreneurial logic embedded in platform infrastructures supports or undermines their goals.

This section highlights a broader concern: that digital entrepreneurship, as currently theorised, often reflects assumptions drawn from startup and tech-centred models. To make it more inclusive, particularly for cultural and place-based entrepreneurs, the field must attend to alternative narratives that centre care, sustainability, and meaning as legitimate entrepreneurial outcomes. Here, artisans challenge and expand influential understandings of what it means to be an entrepreneur in the digital world.

3.3.4 Artisan as Narrator of Cultural Identity

One of the most profound impacts of digitalisation on artisan entrepreneurship is the shift from making to meaning making. As artisans engage digital tools, they increasingly operate not just as producers of craft, but as narrators of cultural identity, articulating stories of heritage, ritual, and community to global audiences. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube are no longer just sales channels; they have become performative spaces where artisans publicly express cultural values, symbolisms, and personal histories.

Scholars like Comaroff and Comaroff (2009) warns that when cultural traditions enter global digital spaces, there's a real risk that they get turned into spectacle. It stripped of context, reduced to aesthetics, and consumed without understanding their deeper meaning. For artisans, whose work is

often tied to family, heritage, and place, this can feel not only disorienting but also emotionally and ethically heavy.

In Nambisan's (2017) terms, this reflects the reconfiguration of entrepreneurial logic in digital ecosystems: artisans do not merely create value but must co-create and defend it within environments shaped by algorithmic visibility, shifting legitimacy norms, and audience expectations. This means constantly negotiating how much to share, simplify, or stylise to remain visible, while also trying to safeguard the cultural integrity of their craft.

For many artisans, especially those in emerging economies, this balancing act is intensified by infrastructural and sociocultural barriers. As Segares (2021) and Shrivastava (2020) highlight, fears of cultural theft, unease with self-promotion, and the burden of "explaining" one's identity to global audiences are not incidental, but they are core frictions in digital entrepreneurship. Visibility becomes both a source of empowerment and a form of exposure, requiring emotional labour that is rarely acknowledged in mainstream entrepreneurship discourse.

Theoretical insights help clarify these dynamics. Entrepreneurial bricolage (Baker and Nelson, 2005) captures how artisans creatively adapt digital tools on their own terms, not to scale or disrupt, but to sustain, express, and preserve. These micro-innovations challenge the dominant Silicon Valley paradigm by showing that cultural entrepreneurship is grounded in improvisation and care. Similarly, platform capitalism (Srnicsek, 2017) frames the extractive logic of digital infrastructures: artisans are visible only to the extent that they align with platform algorithms and aesthetics, which rarely prioritise cultural nuance or heritage-based depth.

Seen through the lens of sociotechnical transitions (Geels, 2004), artisan entrepreneurship isn't just reacting to digital change, it's helping to reshape what entrepreneurship means today. Geels argues that shifts in society and technology don't happen overnight, but through the interaction of different levels: small experiments (niches), existing systems (regimes), and broader social or cultural changes (landscapes). In this context, artisans can be seen as niche entrepreneurs that are experimenting with new tools, platforms, and ways of doing business, while also challenging and influencing broader ideas about identity, creativity, and value. In fact, they're not just adapting to change, but becoming part of a larger transformation in how we think about business, culture, and technology.

Ultimately, the role of the artisan as a cultural narrator is neither entirely empowering nor purely extractive. It's a space of constant negotiation, where cultural integrity is balanced against systems that reward speed, virality, and simplicity. This doesn't mean artisans are passive; many actively find

ways to protect meaning, tell deeper stories, or engage on their own terms. But it does mean that digital entrepreneurship demands not just digital skill, but also cultural sensitivity and thoughtful decision-making.

These dynamics sit at the heart of this thesis, showing that artisan entrepreneurship is not just about economic participation in digital markets, but about navigating an ongoing process of cultural negotiation. Often, it is shaped by uneven power, fragile visibility, and a deep emotional connection to identity and place.

3.3.5 Reframing Artisan Identity through Digital Ecosystems

Building on the discussions of hybrid identity earlier, this section explores how artisan entrepreneurs in Malaysia are reconfiguring their roles within digital ecosystems. Drawing on Nambisan's (2017) framework, it considers how platforms, artefacts, and infrastructures co-shape entrepreneurial practices and identities.

Most mainstream ideas about digital entrepreneurship are built around speed, disruption, and scaling up business models that focus on fast-growing, tech-heavy startups (Nambisan, 2017; Von Briel et al., 2021). These paradigms assume that entrepreneurs pursue rapid expansion, lean operations, and algorithmic optimisation. However, artisan entrepreneurs, conduct their business on a very different logic than conventional entrepreneurs. For artisan entrepreneurs, going digital isn't always a smooth process and it's rarely just a business strategy to grow their business. It's a constant balancing act of trying to make the most of new digital opportunities while staying true to their craft, cultural roots, and their lifestyle autonomy.

Nambisan's (2017) framework is particularly useful here because it reframes digital entrepreneurship not as a fixed identity or practice, but as an evolving, ecosystemic process. He argues that digital artefacts, digital platforms, and digital infrastructures reshape how entrepreneurial opportunities emerge, how agency is exercised, and how legitimacy is established. In the context of artisan entrepreneurship, each of these dimensions plays out differently.

First, artisan entrepreneurs often engage with digital artefacts such as Instagram posts or TikTok videos, not as mere sales content, but as extensions of their craft. It is a way of expressing identity, sharing heritage, and connecting with their digital audiences. However, this expressive potential is constrained by platform logics that favour speed, trend alignment, and visual uniformity. Artisans

are constantly figuring out how to present themselves online in a way that feels authentic yet still works within the expectations of digital platforms.

Second, platforms like Etsy or Shopee aren't neutral spaces. As Caplan and Gillespie (2020) point out, these platforms are built on certain values and assumptions about what counts as success, where things like likes, reach, and customer reviews come to define visibility and credibility in the digital world. For artisans, these measures often conflict with traditional notions of value that prioritise craftsmanship, story, and trust. Participating in these spaces demands a shift in entrepreneurial identity, from traditional craft maker to digital marketer, as well as from producer to a digital performer.

Third, Nambisan's idea of digital infrastructures as context-setting environments is especially relevant here. Many artisans in Malaysia and across the emerging economies, face real everyday challenges like limited broadband, digital illiteracy, and a lack of formal training, all of which directly affect their ability to participate in the digital world as entrepreneurs. But it's not just about access to technology, it's also about confidence, caution, and care. There's often a reluctance to self-promote themselves digitally, a fear of cultural misappropriation, and a deep desire to protect the meaning behind their work. After all, once something is shared online, it's out there permanently. That makes even small digital steps feel risky. Therefore, for many artisans, going digital isn't just a business move, but it is a personal, cultural, and strategic decision that carries real weight.

Within this ecosystemic view, artisan entrepreneurs are not simply late adopters or passive digital subjects. They are actively experimenting, adapting, and resisting. They use digital tools not necessarily to scale, but to sustain. For many, success is not defined by viral reach or platform monetisation, but by the ability to maintain creative integrity, cultural continuity, and meaningful connection with audiences. This reflects what Nambisan (2017) describes as a shift in entrepreneurial logic, where (1) Opportunities are co-constructed - not discovered, (2) Agency is distributed - shaped by platforms, peers, and users, and (3) Value and legitimacy are dynamic, contingent upon visibility, affect, and algorithmic performance.

This reconceptualisation is vital for understanding the emerging figure of artisan entrepreneur in the digital world. These are not traditional artisans reluctantly dragged online, nor are they tech entrepreneurs in disguise. They represent a hybrid identity that bridges craft-based sensibilities with platform-based demands. Their motivations may still be rooted in lifestyle, community, and expression, but the means through which they sustain those values have evolved.

For some, digital engagement is now part of their business model from the very beginning what we might call born-digital artisans. This term, adapted from digital entrepreneurship and media studies, usually refers to individuals or ventures that are created specifically for the digital environment, rather than adapting to it later (Nambisan, 2017; Prensky, 2001). These artisans often launch their businesses entirely online, using platforms like Instagram, TikTok, or Shopee not just as sales channels, but as spaces for brand-building, storytelling, and community engagement. They differ from more traditional artisans who had to transition into the digital world; born-digital artisans are native to it. For others, it remains a reluctant adaptation, shaped by necessity rather than intent.

In both cases, the shift goes beyond technology, it changes how artisans understand their identity, purpose, and place in the digital world. It reshapes how artisans define their work, measure success, and imagine their future. As such, digital entrepreneurship when filtered through the artisan lens becomes a space of possibility and paradox, where growth does not always mean scaling, and visibility does not always mean compromise. Understanding these nuances is essential for both theory and practice, especially in designing digital ecosystems that respect and support diverse entrepreneurial logics.

The next two sections examine how this reconceptualised artisan identity plays out across two key digital infrastructures: online marketplaces and social media platforms. These domains offer opportunity, but also introduce new tensions and trade-offs, especially in culturally embedded contexts like Malaysia.

3.3.5.1 Online Marketplaces: Exposure vs. Exploitation

Online marketplaces have emerged as a dominant infrastructure in the digital economy, offering artisan entrepreneurs a pathway to commercialise their craft beyond geographic boundaries. From global platforms such as Etsy, Amazon Handmade, and eBay, to regional marketplaces like Shopee (Southeast Asia) and Flipkart (India), these systems claim to democratise commerce by providing ready-made infrastructures for logistics, payments, and international exposure (Laudien and Pesch, 2019). Such platforms seem to align with the aspirations of small-scale artisans, minimising barriers to entry and enabling access to broader consumer bases without requiring substantial investment in brick-and-mortar stores.

Digital marketplaces seem to offer visibility and opportunity, but a closer look reveals contradictions, as these platforms operate on the logic of platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2017), where digital infrastructure owners control the data, shape the algorithms, and ultimately profit from how artisans participate. These platforms are far from neutral; they encode specific norms about what constitutes desirable products, successful sellers, and marketable content. However, visibility on these platforms is not always guaranteed, but it is shaped by algorithms that often favour those who can pay for promotion, understand performance metrics, or know how to optimise their digital content. This gives an edge to artisans who are digitally fluent, have a polished aesthetic, and can afford to invest in digital marketing.

This poses a critical challenge for artisan entrepreneurs, whose practices are typically grounded in values such as cultural preservation, creative autonomy, and slow, relational production (Fillis, 2002; Pret and Cogan, 2019). Their motivations may diverge from conventional entrepreneurial logics of growth or disruption. However, platform infrastructures often reward standardisation, volume, and trend-responsiveness with logics that may push artisans to compromise authenticity in order to stay visible and competitive. At first, it started to gain access, and visibility online can quickly turn into a space where artisans feel pressured to present their identity in ways that fit the algorithm, even if it means losing some of the deeper meaning behind their craft.

1) Reconfiguring Authenticity and Trust

In this environment, the notion of authenticity itself is being reconfigured. Whereas traditional artisan authenticity emerged through face-to-face interactions and community validation, digital marketplaces now construct trust through ratings, reviews, badges, and curated aesthetics (Bishop, 2019; Caplan and Gillespie, 2020). This transition moves the axis of legitimacy from embodied experience to quantified performance. Artisans may find themselves judged not by the symbolic depth or cultural significance of their work, but by their responsiveness to platform demands and their ability to conform to prevailing digital tastes.

2) Cultural Complexity in the Malaysian Context

In emerging economies like Malaysia, the intersection of digital entrepreneurship with infrastructural limitations and rich cultural diversity adds another layer of complexity. While global platforms provide exposure, they may fail to recognise the specificity of local heritage. Artisans' participation in urban context, often operate as independent micro-entrepreneurs with limited resources, navigating digital systems that were not designed for their values, rhythms, or

stories. In response, local initiatives such as **The Artisans Haven**, **Tangankraf**, and **CraftNGo** have sought to provide more culturally responsive alternatives. However, their effectiveness remains empirically underexplored.

For instance, Spielmann (2017) highlights how many Indonesian artisans especially those based outside major cities like Jakarta, Bandung, or Makassar struggled to adopt digital platforms fully. Issues such as limited knowledge on embracing digital skills, poor internet access, and a general lack of trust in online transactions made it difficult for them to sell their work confidently. Many rural artisans were hesitant to fully embrace e-commerce, often worried about fraud, unreliable payments, or simply not knowing how to navigate these new digital tools. Therefore, this suggests that digital infrastructure alone isn't enough to guarantee impact. True success depends on how well platform design aligns with users' capabilities, digital confidence, and the broader socio-cultural values of the communities they serve.

This complexity reinforces Nambisan's (2017) view of digital entrepreneurship as a distributed, dynamic, and context-sensitive process. Entrepreneurs do not simply adopt digital tools; they co-create opportunities within digital ecosystems that are often marked by asymmetry and constraint. For artisans, participation in online marketplaces is therefore not just a technical choice, but a strategic and cultural negotiation. Some may engage creatively and selectively; others may feel excluded or coerced into conforming to norms that conflict with their motivations.

In Malaysia's urban artisan sector, these tensions are particularly pronounced. Government-led digitalisation schemes may offer platforms or support, but if they fail to address the deeper cultural, infrastructural, and emotional realities of artisan work, they risk becoming performative or ineffective. Whether artisans are mirroring broader entrepreneurial behaviours out of necessity or adapting them to fit their values remains an open question that this thesis seeks to examine critically.

Ultimately, what appears as a neutral technological infrastructure for economic inclusion is in fact a site of cultural contestation. Online marketplaces are not just about selling products, they shape who is seen, how value is constructed, and what kinds of artisan identities are validated or marginalised. For artisan entrepreneurs operating at the intersection of heritage and digitalisation, these platforms represent both a promise of global reach and a risk of cultural erasure. As such, they demand not only entrepreneurial adaptation but also critical scrutiny both in scholarship and in policy.

While platforms focus on speed, visibility, and standardisation, artisans often care more about meaning, cultural identity, and creative freedom. These aren't just different business choices, they reflect different ways of thinking about value. As Nambisan (2017) reminds us, digital entrepreneurship is shaped by the ecosystems it sits within, and for artisans, these systems don't always fit.

3.3.5.2 Social Media Platforms: Community, Knowledge, and Quiet Presence

Social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook have become critical infrastructure in today's digital economy. As Van Dijck et al. (2018) argue, these platforms are no longer merely communication tools as they are sociotechnical systems that shape visibility, participation, and value generation across industries. For entrepreneurs, they offer real-time access to global audiences, tools for brand building, and channels for direct consumer engagement. This is particularly significant for micro-entrepreneurs, for whom such platforms often replace traditional advertising, storefronts, or media presence (Nambisan et al., 2019).

1) Artisan Motivations: Beyond Visibility and Growth

For artisan entrepreneurs, however, the story is more nuanced. While these platforms do extend reach and offer visual storytelling capabilities (Curtis, 2016), artisans rarely fit neatly into the dominant entrepreneurial narrative of speed, growth, and scale. Their motivations often differ from typical startup founders or SMEs. Artisan entrepreneurship tends to be deeply tied to identity, autonomy, purpose, and cultural continuity rather than purely sales or expansion (Pret and Cogan, 2019; Fillis, 2002).

This raises critical questions: Do artisans use social media primarily for marketing, for visibility, or simply to signal a presence? Is digital engagement about conversion turning followers into customers or about sustaining community, showcasing heritage, or gaining validation? Unlike algorithm-focused influencers or high-performing digital entrepreneurs, many artisans approach these platforms with different rhythms and goals. Some may invest in advertising or sales funnels, but others may see social media as a low-cost display window or a digital diary of their creative process.

Empirical studies also show that artisans don't always engage with digital platforms in the ways we might expect. For instance, Segares (2021) found that artisans often used Instagram not so much to drive sales, but to stay connected with peers, share their creative journeys, and find

emotional support, all of which carry value, even if they're not easily captured by traditional business metrics. Similarly, Hracs and Leslie (2014) observed that many creatives use digital platforms for things like learning, exchanging ideas, or building a sense of identity, rather than purely for monetisation. These quieter, more relational uses challenge dominant assumptions in digital entrepreneurship literature, which often links success to visibility, scale, or measurable performance.

2) Choosing the Right Platform: Instagram, TikTok, or WhatsApp?

The choice of platform also matters. Studies show that Facebook and Instagram remain among the most widely used platforms for micro and small enterprises, particularly due to their usability, wide reach, and familiarity (Fraccastoro et al., 2021; Alalwan, 2018). TikTok, on the other hand, is rapidly gaining ground as a powerful tool for creative visibility, particularly among younger entrepreneurs and audiences (Zhao et al., 2023). Its short-form, video-first interface offers opportunities to showcase making processes and engage with global trends. However, TikTok's algorithmic speed and emphasis on virality may pose tensions for entrepreneurs whose brand identity is rooted in cultural depth, authenticity, and slow production cycles as often observed in craft-based businesses (Laurell and Sandström, 2017).

Notably, other studies have found that small-scale entrepreneurs including artisans, often complement these public-facing platforms with more intimate, direct communication tools, such as WhatsApp Business, Telegram, and email newsletters (Maritz et al., 2023). These channels allow for personalised interaction, community nurturing, and customer retention as qualities especially valued in businesses where storytelling and emotional connection play a central role. For example, Maritz et al. (2023) found that microentrepreneurs in Southeast Asia frequently use WhatsApp to follow up with loyal customers, coordinate bespoke orders, and circulate digital catalogues, often bypassing public social media entirely for more trusted, direct interactions.

3) Grounded Use vs. Maximisation

Social media use among artisans should not be viewed solely through the lens of marketing or sales conversion. Instead, platforms may be strategically selected based on affordances that align with artisan values, including relationship-building, cultural expression, and emotional labour. Rather than maximising visibility at all costs, artisans may engage in selective and grounded platform use, shaped by their goals, capacities, and the meanings they attach to their practice. This further support calls in the literature to avoid one-size-fits-all assumptions in digital

entrepreneurship, particularly in culturally embedded sectors like artisan enterprise (Pret and Cogan, 2018; Nambisan, 2017).

Still, this approach raises further questions. Is modest visibility sufficient for business viability in algorithmic economies? Can artisans sustain their practice without constantly feeding platform demands for content and engagement? As Caplan and Gillespie (2020) and Bishop (2019) remind us, platform infrastructures are not neutral, they reward specific forms of visibility and often penalise others. In such systems, those who do not perform according to the algorithm's logic may be rendered invisible, regardless of craft quality or cultural depth.

4) Reframing Digital Participation

Rather than framing artisans as “behind” or digitally inadequate, this study proposes a more expansive understanding of digital entrepreneurship. It considers whether modesty, community-building, and knowledge exchange might themselves represent valid forms of digital participation especially in emerging economies contexts, where resource constraints and cultural priorities may shape different digital trajectories. In short, visibility should not be the only measure of digital success. For artisan entrepreneurs, social media is not just a platform to sell or perform. It is also a space to belong, learn, and stay connected on their own terms.

Taken together, these two digital arenas; online marketplaces and social media, reveal the double-edged nature of digital participation for artisan entrepreneurs. While they offer unprecedented visibility, they also reshape the conditions under which cultural meaning, identity, and value are produced and perceived. This complexity is especially pronounced in emerging economies, where platform logics intersect with infrastructural constraints, socio-cultural norms, and economic precarity. The next section explores these contradictions more directly by turning to the tensions and trade-offs faced by artisans in navigating the digital world not just as entrepreneurs, but as custodians of culture and identity.

3.4 Main tension: Negotiating Digital Entrepreneurial Pathways

Using digital entrepreneurship as a guiding lens that highlights how people spot opportunities, mobilise resources, and creatively use technology in uncertain conditions (Nambisan, 2017; Von Briel et al., 2021), this section looks at how artisans are reimagining their practices and adapting to what the digital world now makes possible. However, unlike tech start-ups or growth-driven

ventures, artisan entrepreneurship remains anchored in a different value system: one centred on cultural continuity, identity, craftsmanship, and self-expression (Pret and Cogan, 2019; Fillis, 2002). This gives rise to the central tension of the digital artisan economy: How can artisans engage with digital entrepreneurship as a tool for growth, visibility, and innovation while maintaining the cultural integrity, creative autonomy, and depth of craft that define their work?

Digital transformation marks a pivotal evolution in the landscape of artisan entrepreneurship, one that redefines how artisans create, share, and sustain value. No longer confined to traditional markets or dependent on intermediaries, artisans are increasingly embracing the tools and logics of digital entrepreneurship: engaging with e-commerce platforms, leveraging storytelling for branding, and navigating algorithmic attention economies. As discussed in Chapter 1, this shift signals a departure from longstanding stereotypes of artisans as static, rural, or technologically excluded (Luckman, 2015; Bhattacharyya et al., 2020). Instead, artisans are emerging as digital entrepreneurs with dynamic cultural producers capable of strategic adaptation, global outreach, and creative experimentation in an increasingly digitalised business environment.

Still, it's not simply about rejecting or fully embracing the digital, but it is about how artisans make strategic choices in navigating the demands and logic of the digital world. For artisan entrepreneurs, the goal is not disruption for its own sake, but resilience, visibility with care, and innovation without erasure. In doing so, artisans demonstrate a distinctive form of digital entrepreneurship; one that is hybrid, value-driven, and grounded in cultural identity.

To unpack this broader dilemma, the next three subsections examine three interrelated tensions that shape how artisan entrepreneurs navigate their commitment to digital entrepreneurship.

- 1) **Strategic Adaptation vs. Cultural Dilution** — How do artisans engage platform tools without compromising the authenticity and depth of their practice?
- 2) **Growth and Sales vs. Craft Sustainability** — Can artisans expand reach and income while preserving the slow, labour-intensive nature of their work?
- 3) **Visibility vs. Craft Practice** — What are the implications of digital presence for artisan identity, energy, and long-term commitment to making?

Each of these tensions reveals a different layer in how artisans balance platform demands with their own values, and these aren't just practical challenges. They shape how artisans see themselves: as entrepreneurs, as craft makers, and as cultural storytellers in today's digital world.

3.4.1 Tension 1 - Strategic Adaptation vs. Cultural Dilution

One of the most notable shifts in artisan entrepreneurship is the strategic use of digital platforms not merely as sales channels but as arenas for storytelling, self-representation, and emotional engagement (Curtis, 2016; Kuppaswamy and Bayus, 2017). Artisans are not passive adopters of technology but increasingly digital actors, cultivating online identities, experimenting with content forms, and building affective ties with audiences. This aligns with broader shifts in digital entrepreneurship, where success depends as much on narrative coherence and emotional connection as on product quality (Nambisan, 2017).

However, adapting to digital spaces comes with its own creative and cultural compromises. These platforms run on visibility as they tend to reward what fits the algorithm: catchy visuals, short and engaging stories, and whatever's trending now. These norms can pressure artisans to simplify, stylise, or commercialise their cultural expressions in ways that flatten complexity and nuance (Caplan and Gillespie, 2020; Comaroff and Comaroff, 2009). As Srnicek (2017) argues, platform capitalism tends to favour legibility over authenticity, driving producers to become performers within constrained algorithmic spaces.

This creates a tension between adaptation and integrity. Artisans whose practices are grounded in what Pret and Cogan (2019) describe as a "lifestyle logic" which emphasising process, autonomy, and personal meaning may find that platform participation distorts these values. Craft becomes content; heritage becomes spectacle. What is at stake is not simply cultural erosion, but epistemic compression: a reshaping of meaning to fit the narrow optics of digital platforms.

Therefore, the critical issue is not whether artisans should go digital many already have, but how they can do so without compromising the symbolic depth and relational richness that define their work. This demands more than technical skills; it requires a reflexive negotiation of platform norms, entrepreneurial strategy, and cultural self-definition.

3.4.2 Tension 2 - Growth and Sales vs. Craft Sustainability

A second core tension in digital artisan entrepreneurship arises from the conflicting imperatives of growth and sustainability. While digital entrepreneurship literature often enhances on scale, agility, and responsiveness to market opportunities (Nambisan, 2017; Von Briel et al., 2021), such frameworks may clash with the artisanal ethos of slow production, cultural depth, and meaningful labour. Unlike start-ups aiming for rapid scaling, artisans often prioritise creative control and social connection over market share (Fillis, 2002; Berglund et al., 2020).

This conflict is especially acute in the digital world, where platforms encourage expansion through algorithms that reward volume, speed, and responsiveness. As Rae (2012), these pressures can reconfigure entrepreneurial identity, shifting attention from process to performance. For artisans, the risk is that growth-oriented strategies may compromise the very qualities that distinguish their work leading to what Bendell and Doyle (2017) term “craft dilution,” a phenomenon where the depth of artisanal practice is thinned for the sake of scalability.

Moreover, scholars such as Luckman (2015) have shown that attempts to meet growing digital demand often require outsourcing or mechanising elements of production potentially eroding authenticity and the embodied knowledge central to craft. This creates a structural bind: expand to survive, but risk undermining the very integrity that defines artisanal value.

Some artisan entrepreneurs respond with what Pappalepore and Duignan (2016) describe as “selective professionalisation,” in which they maintain limited production but use digital tools to access premium markets. Rather than chasing growth at all costs, these artisans aim for depth over breadth using visibility not to scale, but to signal uniqueness and charge for value-added authenticity. This approach aligns with Laurell and Sandström’s (2017) notion of “slow entrepreneurship,” where success is rooted in sustainability, identity, and lifestyle goals.

Still, this tension doesn’t go away easily. It lingers beneath the surface of many decisions artisans make, prompting deeper questions: Can artisan entrepreneurs grow their businesses in ways that still honour their cultural roots and emotional connection to their craft? Or does the pursuit of growth inevitably come with trade-offs? As Pret and Carter (2017) point out, artisan entrepreneurs often find themselves navigating the push and pull between market pressures and personal values, choosing slower, more meaningful paths that resist mainstream definitions of entrepreneurial success."

3.4.3 Tension 3 - Visibility vs. Craft Practice: The Burden of Digital Performance

While digital platforms offer artisan entrepreneurs unprecedented visibility, they also impose a continuous demand for content, interaction, and alignment with shifting platform aesthetics. As Bishop (2019) and Duffy (2017) highlight, digital visibility is not passive, but it is a form of labour, requiring time, emotional energy, and self-performance. For artisans, this often creates a tension between the vocation of making and the expectation of constant online presence.

This dynamic has been described as “aspirational labour” (Duffy, 2017), where creators work under the hope of future recognition, monetisation, or legitimacy, but without guarantees. Artisans, who may be motivated by cultural expression or lifestyle integration rather than profit, are increasingly required to become digital strategists, photographers, marketers, and content creators in addition to their core identity as makers. This shift reflects what Gandini (2016) terms the “platformisation of labour,” where workers are expected to be always-on, responsive, and performative within data-driven economies.

These pressures introduce what some scholars have called “visibility labour” (Cotter, 2019), where the need to remain algorithmically relevant creates a cycle of burnout, distraction, and vocational drift. In creative sectors, continuous self-presentation can erode the boundaries between work and life, especially for entrepreneurs who operate without institutional support or stable income (Duffy and Wissinger, 2017).

For artisan entrepreneurs in Southeast Asia, such as those in Malaysia or Indonesia, these platform pressures often intersect with infrastructural gaps, low digital literacy, and inconsistent support systems. Spielmann (2017) notes that many artisans outside major urban centres struggle not only to adopt digital tools but also to sustain their presence online due to uneven access and a lack of training. Similarly, Teh (2017) highlights how the need to continually perform “authenticity” for funders or digital audiences can lead to creative fatigue. These examples suggest that without meaningful support, the emotional and logistical demands of digital visibility may lead some artisans to disengage from online platforms entirely.

However, not all responses are reactive as some artisans are actively redefining what visibility means, opting for slower, quieter, and more intentional modes of engagement. This includes curated social media grids, limited posting cycles, or using platforms for storytelling rather than real-time selling. These “slow presence” strategies align with Laurell and Sandström’s (2017) notion of slow

entrepreneurship, where purpose and sustainability outweigh speed and virality. Such practices resist algorithmic imperatives and prioritise meaningful connections over mass reach.

Ultimately, the pressure to be constantly visible risks transforming artisan entrepreneurship into a performative routine, rewarding those who can manage platform dynamics, rather than those who produce the most meaningful or culturally rich work. As platforms continue to mediate entrepreneurial success, critical attention is needed to understand how these infrastructures not only enable but reshape the experience of work itself.

3.5 Social Constructivist Positioning and Conceptual Framing

This thesis approaches digital entrepreneurship from a social constructivist perspective. This means that digital entrepreneurship is not treated as a fixed, universal, or purely technology-driven process. Rather, it is understood as something that artisan entrepreneurs interpret, negotiate, and enact through their lived experiences, values, identities, and contexts. While Nambisan's (2017) framework provides an important theoretical basis through its focus on digital artefacts, digital platforms, and digital infrastructures, this study extends its use by examining how these elements are experienced by artisan entrepreneurs whose practices are shaped by craft, culture, authenticity, and everyday business realities. In this sense, digital entrepreneurship is not simply about adopting platforms or using digital tools, but about how artisans make meaning from digital participation and decide what forms of engagement are appropriate for their work.

This positioning is important because artisan entrepreneurs do not engage with digital entrepreneurship in a linear or uniform way. As discussed earlier in this chapter, digital platforms may create opportunities for visibility, customer engagement, storytelling, and market access, but they also introduce pressures related to algorithms, constant content creation, cultural simplification, and digital performance. Nambisan's (2017) framework is useful here because it recognises entrepreneurship as shaped by digital ecosystems rather than by individual action alone. However, when applied to artisan entrepreneurship, this framework needs to be read through the social and cultural meanings attached to craft. Artisan entrepreneurs are not only responding to digital infrastructures; they are also deciding how far to adapt, what to reveal, what to protect, and how to remain authentic while becoming visible in digital spaces.

The study therefore frames digital entrepreneurship within an institutional and contextual perspective. Sussan and Acs' (2017) digital entrepreneurial ecosystem framework is useful because it draws attention to the wider conditions that shape entrepreneurial action, including infrastructure, institutions, culture, and support systems. This is particularly relevant in Malaysia, where artisan entrepreneurs operate within uneven digital access, different levels of institutional support, local consumer expectations, cultural diversity, and changing market opportunities. These conditions influence what digital entrepreneurship looks like in practice. For example, artisans may use social media, WhatsApp, online marketplaces, or digital payment systems, but their engagement is shaped by available resources, digital confidence, customer behaviour, cultural expectations, and the perceived risks of visibility. Digital entrepreneurship is therefore not only a matter of individual strategy, but also a response to the institutional and cultural environment in which artisans operate.

A social constructivist approach also makes it possible to foreground lived experience. Artisan entrepreneurs often learn through practice, experimentation, observation, peer learning, mistakes, and adaptation. Their digital strategies are shaped by what they have experienced in their own businesses, what they observe from other artisans or small businesses, and what they learn from digital success and failure stories around them. This is especially important because many artisans perform multiple roles at once: maker, seller, marketer, storyteller, administrator, content creator, and customer service provider. Their engagement with digital entrepreneurship is therefore not only strategic, but also emotional, relational, and experiential. It involves ongoing sense-making about what works, what feels authentic, what customers respond to, and what can be sustained alongside the demands of craft production.

Authenticity and identity are central to this framing. As the artisan entrepreneurship literature discussed in Chapter 2 shows, artisan businesses are often grounded in personal values, heritage, cultural meaning, community, and lifestyle motivations. Digital engagement therefore carries symbolic consequences. Decisions about platforms, content, storytelling, product presentation, and customer interaction are not merely marketing decisions; they are also identity decisions. For artisan entrepreneurs, digital participation may require them to translate tactile, slow, and culturally embedded craft practices into visual, fast-moving, and algorithmically shaped spaces. This creates a tension between visibility and authenticity. Following this logic, the thesis understands artisan digital entrepreneurship as a negotiated process in which entrepreneurs attempt to balance commercial opportunity with cultural integrity, creative autonomy, and personal meaning.

This framing also allows the thesis to move beyond simple binaries such as traditional versus digital, offline versus online, or resistant versus adaptive. The literature reviewed in this chapter suggests that artisan entrepreneurs may engage with digital entrepreneurship selectively rather than fully. Some may use Instagram primarily for storytelling, WhatsApp for customer relationships, online marketplaces for exposure, or digital content for cultural education rather than direct sales. Such practices challenge assumptions that digital entrepreneurship should always be measured by scale, speed, or platform maximisation. Instead, selective digital engagement may itself represent a meaningful entrepreneurial strategy, particularly for artisans whose goals include sustainability, independence, cultural preservation, and meaningful customer connection.

Taken together, this social constructivist positioning connects digital entrepreneurship theory, digital entrepreneurial ecosystems, and artisan entrepreneurship literature. It frames artisan digital entrepreneurship as socially situated, institutionally shaped, and meaningfully negotiated. This conceptual framing supports the later thematic analysis by providing a lens through which the findings can be interpreted: not simply as evidence of digital adoption, but as evidence of how artisan entrepreneurs construct, negotiate, and sustain their entrepreneurial identities within digital environments. The thematic analysis that follows therefore examines how artisans challenge traditional stereotypes, maintain independence, engage selectively with digital strategies, and experience the opportunities and challenges of digital entrepreneurship in an emerging economy context.

3.6 Conceptual Framework

This thesis develops a conceptual framework to understand how artisan entrepreneurs in emerging economies negotiate digital entrepreneurship within culturally embedded and institutionally shaped environments. The framework integrates Nambisan's (2017) digital entrepreneurship theory with Sussan and Acs' (2017) digital entrepreneurial ecosystem perspective, interpreted through a social constructivist lens. Rather than treating digital entrepreneurship as a purely technological or growth-oriented process, the framework positions artisan entrepreneurs as socially situated actors whose entrepreneurial practices are shaped by lived experience, cultural identity, authenticity, institutional realities, and contextual negotiations.

The framework recognises that artisan entrepreneurship differs from dominant models of digital entrepreneurship commonly associated with technology start-ups, rapid scalability, and platform

optimisation. Artisan entrepreneurs often operate within value systems shaped by heritage, creative autonomy, emotional attachment to craft, lifestyle motivations, and community-oriented forms of exchange (Fillis, 2002; Pret and Cogan, 2019). As discussed throughout this chapter, the transition into digital entrepreneurship therefore involves more than digital adoption. It requires artisans to negotiate how digital participation aligns with their identities, values, and understandings of meaningful entrepreneurial practice.

Drawing on Nambisan's (2017) framework, the study conceptualises digital entrepreneurship through the interaction between digital artefacts, digital platforms, and digital infrastructures. However, rather than viewing these dimensions as neutral technological systems, this thesis argues that they are experienced differently depending on institutional context, access to support systems, digital confidence, platform expectations, and cultural realities. Sussan and Acs' (2017) digital entrepreneurial ecosystem perspective further strengthens this understanding by highlighting how entrepreneurial activity is shaped by wider ecosystem conditions, including infrastructure, institutions, policy environments, cultural expectations, and market structures. In the Malaysian artisan context, these conditions influence how entrepreneurs engage with digital tools, what forms of visibility are possible, and how entrepreneurial success is interpreted.

Building on the social constructivist positioning outlined in Section 3.5, this framework conceptualises artisan digital entrepreneurship as an ongoing and contextually situated process shaped through the interaction between digital entrepreneurial systems, artisan value systems, and the lived realities of artisan entrepreneurs within emerging economy contexts. Their digital engagement is shaped not only by platform affordances or technological capability, but also by personal experiences, peer learning, emotional labour, observations of other businesses, experimentation, and reflections on success and failure. From this perspective, digital entrepreneurship is understood as interpretive, relational, and socially constructed rather than fixed or universally experienced. The framework also foregrounds authenticity and identity as central dimensions of artisan digital entrepreneurship. Unlike conventional entrepreneurial models that prioritise scale, efficiency, or disruption, artisan entrepreneurs often balance commercial goals alongside cultural preservation, creative integrity, and relational forms of value creation. Decisions surrounding storytelling, platform selection, online visibility, customer interaction, and digital branding are therefore not merely strategic business choices but also identity negotiations. This reflects broader tensions between platform visibility and cultural authenticity, particularly within

algorithmically shaped digital environments that often reward speed, performance, and simplified forms of engagement.

As illustrated in **Figure 4**, artisan digital entrepreneurship is conceptualised as an ongoing negotiation between digital entrepreneurial systems and artisan value systems. Rather than presenting digital participation as linear progression, the framework highlights how artisans selectively engage with digital entrepreneurship according to their capacities, motivations, and contextual realities. This process gives rise to a series of interconnected tensions surrounding strategic adaptation, cultural dilution, sustainability, visibility, and entrepreneurial identity.

These tensions form the analytical foundation for the later thematic analysis chapters. The framework supports the interpretation of findings not simply as evidence of digital adoption, but as evidence of how artisan entrepreneurs negotiate, resist, adapt, and redefine digital entrepreneurship within emerging economy contexts. In doing so, the framework contributes to a more culturally grounded and socially situated understanding of digital entrepreneurship that moves beyond dominant assumptions centred on scalability, technological determinism, and platform maximisation.

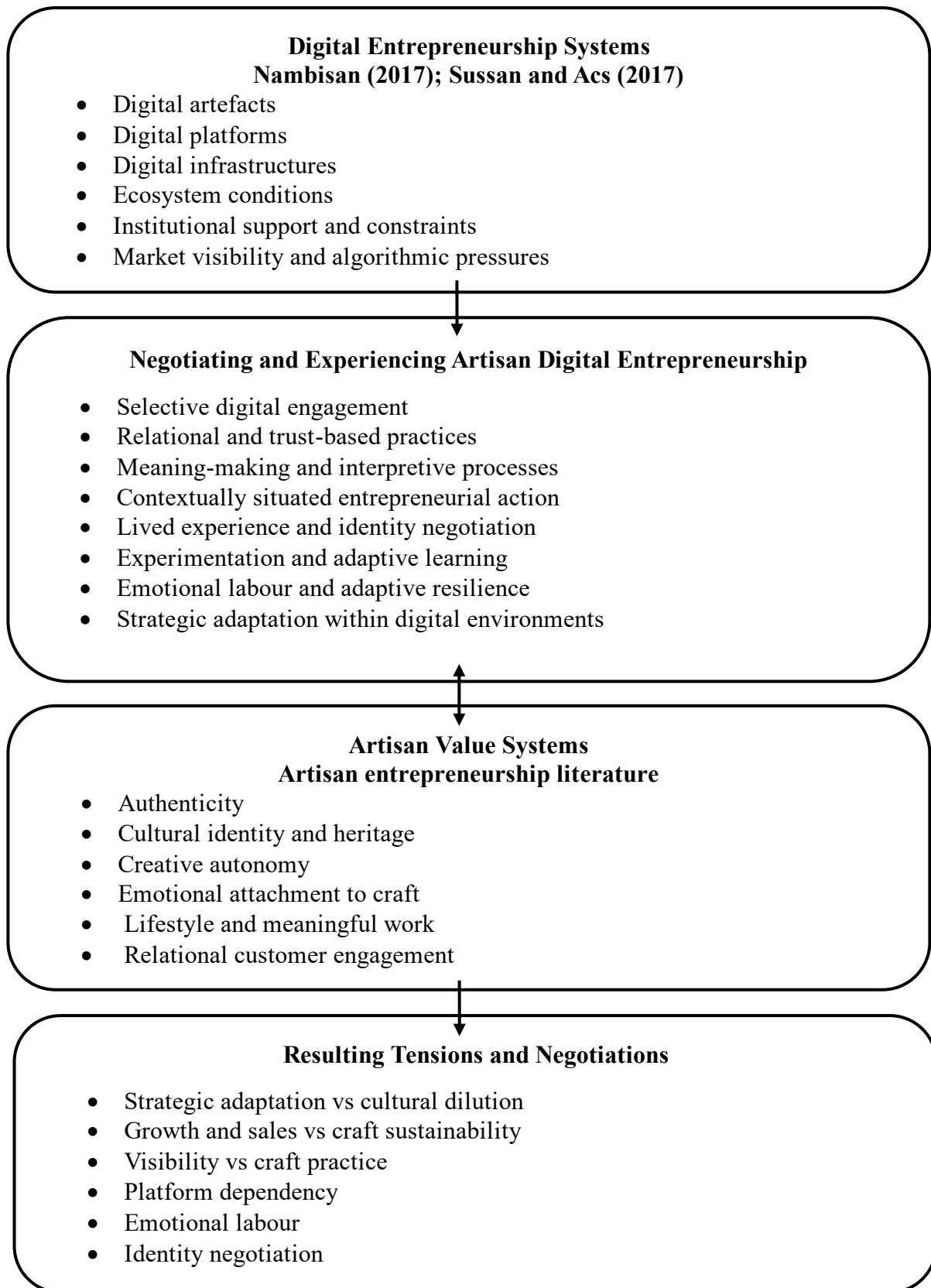


Figure 4: Conceptual Framework of Artisan Digital Entrepreneurship in Emerging Economy Contexts

Figure 4 illustrates the conceptual framework developed for this study. The framework positions artisan digital entrepreneurship as an ongoing negotiation between digital entrepreneurial systems and artisan value systems within culturally embedded and institutionally shaped environments. Drawing on Nambisan's (2017) digital entrepreneurship framework, Sussan and Acs' (2017) Digital Entrepreneurial Ecosystem perspective, and artisan entrepreneurship literature, the model demonstrates how artisan entrepreneurs engage with digital entrepreneurship through selective, relational, interpretive, and contextually situated practices. Rather than presenting digital engagement as a linear process of technological adoption, the framework highlights the tensions that shape artisan digital entrepreneurship, particularly surrounding authenticity, visibility, sustainability, emotional labour, platform dependency, and identity negotiation.

3.7 Conclusion Chapter 3

This chapter has justified the use of Nambisan's (2017) digital entrepreneurship framework as a key theoretical lens for understanding the evolving practices of artisan entrepreneurs in digital contexts. Rather than merely describing digital tools or mapping platform use, the chapter has used this framework to unpack how artisan entrepreneurship is being reshaped within digital ecosystems. The framework's three core elements: (1) digital artefacts, (2) digital platforms, and (3) digital infrastructures, have enabled a deeper, more critical engagement with the literature. This approach has revealed how artisans do not simply adopt digital technologies but actively negotiate their use in ways that reflect their values, identities, and constraints.

Through this lens, the chapter shows that artisan engagement with digital entrepreneurship is not linear or uniform. Instead, it is shaped by tensions that arise at the intersection of technology, culture, and craft. The three key tensions identified; (1) Strategic Adaptation vs. Cultural Dilution, (2) Growth and Sales vs. Craft Sustainability, and (3) Visibility vs. Craft Practice, highlight the complex realities artisans face in navigating platform logics while preserving the depth, meaning, and autonomy of their work. These are not merely operational dilemmas, but they raise fundamental questions about identity, purpose, and value in how artisan entrepreneurs engage with digital entrepreneurship.

The literature discussed here positions artisans not behind mainstream entrepreneurial trends, but as active agents who reinterpret digital entrepreneurship on their own terms. Drawing on Nambisan's (2017) conception of entrepreneurship as an ecosystemic and evolving process, this chapter has

argued that artisans are co-constructing opportunities, reshaping their roles, and redefining what success means within digital spaces, often resisting dominant narratives of scaling, speed, and visibility.

By foregrounding these conceptual tensions, the chapter lays a critical foundation for the rest of the thesis. These insights not only inform the research design, including the development of interview and survey tools, but also serve as analytical sensitising concepts in the chapters to come. Without this framing, there is a risk of reducing artisan digital engagement to a binary of success or failure, overlooking the layered decisions, struggles, and strategies that shape their entrepreneurial journeys.

Overall, this chapter has shown that digital entrepreneurship, particularly in the context of artisan enterprise, is not a one-size-fits-all model. It is a situated, negotiated, and deeply contextual process. The following chapters will build on this foundation to explore how these ideas play out in practice, offering an empirically grounded and culturally nuanced understanding of artisan entrepreneurship in the digital world.

CHAPTER 4 – METHODOLOGY

4.0 Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the research methodology employed to address the research question: How do artisan entrepreneurs in an emerging economy negotiate and experience digital entrepreneurship? To explore artisan entrepreneurship within the digital world, a sequential exploratory mixed-methods design was adopted, integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches to ensure a comprehensive investigation. The chapter begins with the philosophical stance underpinning the research, then details the sequential design involving a quantitative survey for initial insights and participant selection, followed by semi-structured interviews for in-depth exploration of personal experiences. It discusses data analysis techniques and the role of methodological triangulation in enhancing validity and depth. Additionally, the chapter covers measures for ensuring research rigor, including validity, reliability, and ethical adherence, and concludes with an acknowledgment of methodological limitations and their impact on the study.

4.2 Philosophical Stance

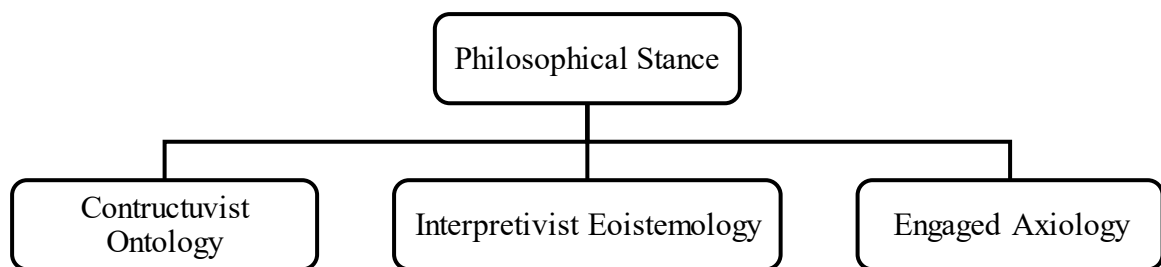


Figure 5: Philosophical Stance

As captured in **Figure 5**, this study is grounded in a constructivist ontology, interpretivist epistemology, and engaged axiology. This philosophical stance lays the foundation for the thesis's mixed-methods approach. Together, these perspectives support a deep exploration of artisan entrepreneurship within the context of digital entrepreneurship, by emphasising subjectivity, context, and social value. This stance shapes how the phenomenon of artisan entrepreneurs navigating digital transformation is understood, particularly their shift from traditional artisan roles to becoming digital artisan entrepreneurs in a rapidly changing digital world.

4.2.1 Constructivist Ontology

Constructivist ontology holds that reality is socially constructed through individual and collective experiences (Charmaz, 2014). This view is particularly relevant to studying artisan entrepreneurship, where the use of digital technologies reflects each artisan's unique cultural, personal, and contextual background. The study assumes multiple co-existing realities across both traditional and digital realms and aims to explore how artisan entrepreneurs construct their identities and business practices within these evolving digital spaces. This ontological stance informs both the interview and survey phases, supporting the study's commitment to representing diverse realities and perspectives (Bryman, 2016).

4.2.2 Interpretivist Epistemology

Interpretivism emphasises understanding how individuals interpret and give meaning to their lived experiences (Goldkuhl, 2012). This epistemological stance underpins the qualitative phase and guides the use of in-depth interviews to capture artisans' perspectives on their evolving engagement with digital entrepreneurship. Even in the quantitative phase, this stance informs how the survey data is interpreted not merely as objective facts such as profiles or digital practices, but as context-bound reflections of lived experience (Creswell and Poth, 2016). This interpretive lens ensures that the research moves beyond numbers and into the everyday realities behind them, with interviews offering deeper insight into what the patterns mean.

4.2.3 Engaged Axiology

An engaged axiology recognises that research is inherently shaped by values, and it prioritises ethical and socially responsible inquiry (Mertens, 2020). This thesis is committed to amplifying the voices of underrepresented artisan entrepreneurs particularly those in emerging economies like Malaysia by producing findings that are both academically robust and socially meaningful. This commitment underpins the aim of developing a thorough and grounded understanding of how artisans adapt their businesses to the digital world. High ethical considerations and cultural sensitivity were integrated throughout the research process, reinforcing the idea that value-driven research must respect and reflect the lived realities of participants (Biddle, 2024) and in this case, the artisans who generously shared their stories for this study.

In summary, the philosophical foundation of this study anchored in constructivism, interpretivism, and engaged axiology is interwoven throughout the research design. These stances enable a context-rich, exploratory inquiry into the digital entrepreneurial journeys of artisan entrepreneurs in emerging economies. They directly inform the methodological decisions in the following chapters, ensuring that the study remains academically rigorous while grounded in real-world relevance.

4.3 Research Approach and Design

This study adopts a sequential exploratory mixed methods design to investigate artisan entrepreneurship in the digital world. The complexity of the phenomenon, encompassing both broad patterns and deeply personal narratives, requires an approach that combines the generalisability of quantitative data with the contextual depth of qualitative insights (Creswell and Creswell, 2017; Plano Clark and Creswell, 2015).

The research process unfolded in three interconnected phases. In Phase 1, a survey was deployed to collect quantitative data on artisan demographics, business practices, and digital engagement. This phase not only revealed broad trends but also served a strategic sampling function, identifying information-rich participants for the qualitative phase. In Phase 2, semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected artisans to explore the subjective, nuanced experiences behind the survey patterns. Phase 3 involved the integration of quantitative and qualitative findings, allowing for a deeper, more comprehensive understanding of how artisan entrepreneurs navigate digital entrepreneurship.

Rather than treating each phase in isolation, this iterative design ensured that emerging themes from the survey were further explored and contextualised during interviews. The integration of statistical patterns with rich personal narratives bridged macro-level trends with micro-level realities, offering a well-rounded view of the research problem (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2010; Fetter and Molina-Azorin, 2020). For instance, while survey results highlighted widespread digital tool adoption, interviews illuminated the motivations, challenges, and emotional dimensions of that adoption are elements not fully captured in the quantitative phase.

The flexibility of in-depth interviews allowed artisans to articulate their lived experiences, providing depth beyond numerical representation. This enabled the research to uncover variations in digital engagement shaped by cultural context, resource access, and entrepreneurial identity. In doing so,

the study maintains alignment with its constructivist and interpretivist foundations, recognising that data are not merely collected but co-constructed in context.

4.4 Survey and Interview Phases

The study began with a survey aimed at collecting broad data on artisan entrepreneurship, including demographics, business practices, and digital engagement. The survey was developed through pilot testing with a small group of artisans to ensure clarity, reliability, and relevance (Bryman, 2016). Data collection was conducted manually at artisan bazaars in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor, chosen to engage directly with artisans operating in traditional marketplaces. While many participants also used digital tools, their active presence in physical market settings ensured contextual diversity.

Survey results were used not only to reveal general patterns in digital entrepreneurship but also to inform purposeful sampling for the second phase. In this qualitative phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected participants to explore their motivations, entrepreneurial strategies, and lived experiences in greater depth. The flexibility of the interview format allowed artisans to narrate their own digital transitions while ensuring comparability across cases (Kofler and Walder, 2024).

Interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), which enabled the identification of key themes related to digital tool adoption, strategic adaptation, and identity maintenance. This qualitative insight enriched the earlier survey findings, revealing the reasoning behind statistical trends and offering a more holistic understanding of artisan entrepreneurship in the digital world.

4.5 Survey Method Section

4.5.1 Survey Method and Sampling Strategy

This study employed a quantitative survey to establish a foundational understanding of artisan entrepreneurship within the digital economy. The aim was to identify broad trends in digital tool usage, operational characteristics, and business practices, as well as to inform the selection of participants for the qualitative phase (Creswell and Creswell, 2017; Babbie, 2020).

A structured questionnaire was designed and piloted with a small group of artisans to ensure clarity and validity (Bryman, 2016). The survey captured data on business demographics, duration of operations, employee numbers, sales channels (e.g., online, social media, face-to-face), and motivations for using specific digital tools. These variables were chosen to provide insights into how digitalisation intersects with traditional craft-based entrepreneurship.

4.6 Sampling Strategy

To ensure data relevance and richness, a purposive sampling strategy was used. This approach enabled the deliberate selection of artisans engaged in both traditional craft production and digital business activities, aligning directly with the study's research focus (Palinkas et al., 2015). Targeting artisans who actively market, sell, or engage customers digitally allowed the survey to reflect hybrid entrepreneurial realities.

Alternative strategies such as random, stratified, and convenience sampling were considered but deemed less suitable. Random sampling risked including participants not engaged in digital activity, while stratified sampling required a population frame that was unavailable. Convenience sampling, although efficient, lacked the depth and focus needed for a digitally specific inquiry (Dillman et al., 2014).

Purposive sampling thus offered the best fit for capturing nuanced experiences at the intersection of tradition and digital innovation. To mitigate bias and enhance representativeness, a diverse group of artisans was approached, considering product types, years of experience, and levels of digital engagement.

This sampling logic also informed the survey design itself, ensuring questions were relevant to participants lived realities and increasing both response quality and analytical depth.

4.7 Survey Instrument Development

4.7.1 Survey Design and Structure

The survey was developed based on insights from the literature on digital engagement, small business practices, and artisan entrepreneurship (Bryman, 2016; Mason, 2018). Its structure aimed to capture relevant data on artisans' digital tool usage, business operations, and perceived challenges in a clear, accessible format.

The instrument consisted of four sections, designed to align with the study's objectives:

- 1) **Demographic Details:** Collected data on age, gender, education, and years of experience. These variables helped explore how background characteristics relate to digital engagement patterns.
- 2) **Business Operations:** Focused on product types, sales channels, and production scale. This section explored how digital tools are embedded in day-to-day business activities such as marketing and customer interaction.
- 3) **Digital Engagement:** Used closed-ended and multiple-choice items to assess artisans' experiences with and perceptions of digital tools. Topics included the effectiveness of online platforms and the role of social media in business growth.
- 4) **Perceived Challenges:** Captured common barriers to digital adoption, such as limited digital literacy, marketing costs, and difficulties in strategic planning. This section provided a clearer view of the pain points artisans face in navigating digital transitions.

The survey excluded open-ended questions intentionally to maintain conciseness and ease of analysis. Structured question formats allowed for systematic comparison across participants while setting the stage for deeper qualitative exploration in the next research phase. This design ensured that the data collected would be statistically reliable, while remaining aligned with the contextual focus of the study.

4.7.2 Survey Instrument Design

The survey instrument for this study was developed based on key literature in the fields of artisan entrepreneurship and digital entrepreneurship. Its design was primarily informed by Nambisan's (2017) Digital Entrepreneurship Framework, which guided the identification of three core themes central to the study: (1) artisan profiles, (2) target markets and business orientation, and (3) digital

tool utilisation. These themes formed the basis for the survey's structure, enabling both participant ease and analytical clarity.

Each section was constructed to gather robust data by addressing specific dimensions of artisan entrepreneurship. Questions covered both objective aspects such as demographics, sales channels, and production practices and subjective dimensions, including strategic choices, platform preferences, and future digital plans. A mix of response formats was used, including dichotomous questions, nominal multiple-choice questions, and check-all-that-apply (CAA) formats, to ensure response consistency while accommodating the diversity of participant experiences (Fink, 2013; Dillman et al., 2014). Each question was mapped to the overarching research objectives, ensuring alignment between data collection and analytical goals. The structure also supported the eventual selection of qualitative interview participants based on relevant digital engagement patterns.

Survey Theme	Sample Survey Question	Response Format	Objective / Focus
Artisan Profiles	What is your gender?	Dichotomous (Male / Female)	To understand demographic profile of artisan
	How many years has your business been established?	Nominal Multiple-Choice	To identify business maturity levels among artisans
	What motivated you to start this business?	Check-All-That-Apply (CAA)	Explore artisans' motivations in this study
Business Orientation and Markets	Are you targeting international markets?	Dichotomous (Yes / No)	Identify engagement with global customers
	Why are you interested in venturing into international markets?	Check-All-That-Apply (CAA)	To identify artisans' target markets and business orientation
Digital Tool Utilisation	What is your main sales channel?	Nominal Multiple-Choice	To identify artisans' current sales strategies
	Why does your business have a website?	Check-All-That-Apply (CAA)	To identify how artisans' utilise digital platforms
	What are your future digital plans for the next 2–5 years?	Check-All-That-Apply (CAA)	To explore strategic direction and digital transformation trajectory among artisans

Table 4: Alignment of Survey Questions

Table 4 maps a selection of real survey questions to the study's core themes and research objectives. These items were drawn directly from the actual survey instrument administered to artisan participants. The questions were structured around Nambisan's (2017) Digital Entrepreneurship Framework and the broader goals of this study, covering artisans' backgrounds, business orientations, and digital practices. This mapping demonstrates how each question contributed to the study's analytical focus. The full survey instrument is provided in **Appendix E**.

4.7.3 Pilot Testing and Refinement

A pilot test was conducted with three artisans from diverse backgrounds to assess the clarity, relevance, and usability of the survey instrument. Feedback revealed that the initial version was too long and cognitively demanding, which risked reducing participant engagement. In response, the survey was streamlined by reducing the number of items, simplifying language, and improving the logical flow of sections (Fink, 2017).

To further ensure content validity, the revised instrument was reviewed by academic supervisors. Their input focused on refining item wording, aligning constructs with research objectives, and confirming the scope of questions related to digital tool usage (DeVellis and Thrope, 2021).

Key refinements included:

- 1) Clarifying simple wording to ensure questions are interpreted consistently.
- 2) Adjusting response options to better reflect the real nature of artisan experiences.
- 3) Reducing the length to maintain participant attention and improve completion rates.

This dual process of artisan pilot testing and expert validation helped produce a focused, reliable instrument suitable for exploring digital entrepreneurship among artisan entrepreneurs.

4.8 Survey Distribution and Administration

The survey was administered in both paper-based and electronic formats to maximise accessibility and participation. This dual-mode strategy accommodated varying levels of digital access and preferences among artisan entrepreneurs in Malaysia.

- 1) Paper surveys were handed out in person at artisan bazaars held in malls around Kuala Lumpur and Selangor. Doing it face-to-face made it easier to explain about the survey and its questions on the spot, helping participants feel more confident and reducing any misunderstandings, especially important given the different levels of digital literacy among respondents (Krosnick and Presser, 2010; Fink, 2013).
- 2) Electronic surveys were shared via email and WhatsApp with artisans who had given consent to be contacted through those channels. They were first identified through networks connected to artisan bazaars and the researcher's own industry contacts. This approach allowed participation from those who couldn't attend the bazaars in person and helped reach a wider group beyond the physical marketplace.

Offering different ways to respond helped make the survey more inclusive and reduced potential bias from using only one method (Dillman et al., 2014). Although both paper and electronic formats were available, most of the completed responses came from the paper-based surveys. The online version had a much lower response rate and was often incomplete. Many participants either delayed responding, didn't complete the survey at all, or said they found the digital format difficult to engage with. Because of this, researcher had to shift the focus to paper-based distribution, which proved far more effective. This trend may reflect a wider pattern among artisan entrepreneurs in Malaysia, who tend to prefer face-to-face interactions and often favour more traditional approaches in both business and communication. This also supports existing research on digital hesitation among small-scale creatives and shows the importance of using culturally sensitive methods when collecting data.

4.9 Target Population and Criteria for Selection

The target population comprised artisan entrepreneurs actively involved in both producing and selling handcrafted goods at artisanal bazaars and malls in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor. This population was selected to capture how digital tools intersect with real-world artisanal business practices in a dynamic urban context.

Participants were selected based on three core criteria:

- 1) **Active Production:** Only artisans directly involved in making their products, either personally or through traditional production methods were included. This ensured participants had first-hand experience in integrating digital tools into hands-on craft processes.
- 2) **Market Participation:** Participants had to be selling their products at physical marketplaces, linking their production to actual consumer engagement. This criterion allowed the study to examine how digital tools support or complement traditional face-to-face sales.
- 3) **Digital Engagement:** Artisans needed to have at least some interaction with digital platforms such as social media, e-commerce, or online marketing. This focus enabled the study to explore different levels and forms of digital adoption across artisan businesses.

While some participants had limited digital presence, their inclusion helped illustrate the spectrum of digital engagement within the artisan sector, offering contrast and context to those more digitally integrated.

The purposive sampling method and dual-mode survey distribution were tailored to reach this specific population, ensuring that data collected was both relevant and representative of artisan entrepreneurs navigating the blend of traditional and digital practices.

4.9.1 Sample Size

A total of 300 surveys were distributed across artisanal bazaars and malls in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor, resulting in 193 valid responses a response rate of 64%. This rate is considered strong for in-person survey research, particularly within artisan entrepreneurs' populations that are often informal, isolated, and difficult to access (Dillman et al., 2014; Sax et al., 2003).

The final sample size of 193 was adequate to support meaningful statistical analysis and identify patterns in digital engagement, marketing strategies, and entrepreneurial practices. According to

Field (2018) and Cohen (2017), a sample of this size provides sufficient statistical power for detecting moderate effects in social science research, especially when the target population is relatively homogeneous in scope such as artisan entrepreneurs within a shared geographic context.

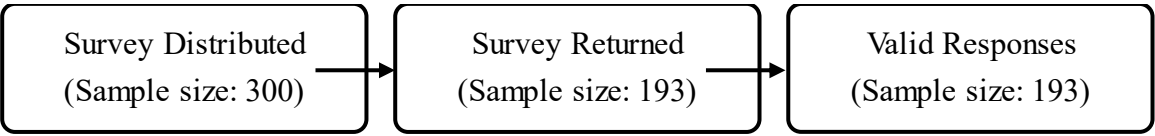


Figure 6: Sample Size

As shown in **Figure 6** above, this response rate reflects strong participant engagement, especially given the logistical constraints of fieldwork and the challenges of accessing artisan entrepreneurs during active market events. The strategy of in-person distribution helped mitigate common issues with non-response and incomplete data, increasing the representativeness of the final sample.

That said, the study recognises certain limitations. Artisans who were not physically present at surveyed locations or who were unwilling or unavailable to respond were excluded, which may introduce non-response bias. However, the high completion rate and alignment between participant profiles and known characteristics of the artisan population suggest the data is sufficiently representative for addressing the research questions.

Finally, descriptive statistics and detailed analysis of the survey responses will be presented in Chapter 5: Survey Findings and Discussion, where the data is examined in relation to the research questions and interpreted within the broader context of artisan entrepreneurship in the digital landscape.

4.9.2 Survey Sample Demographics

A total of 193 valid survey responses were collected from artisan entrepreneurs operating across selected artisan bazaars in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor. The sample provided a broad descriptive overview of artisan entrepreneurs engaged in varying levels of digital and market activity within urban Malaysian settings.

The survey findings indicated that the sample was predominantly female, with 62% of respondents identifying as women, while 36% identified as men. In terms of age distribution, the majority of respondents were younger artisan entrepreneurs, with 61% aged between 18–29 years old, followed by 16% within the 30–39 age category. This reflects a relatively youthful artisan entrepreneurial landscape within the selected urban Malaysian contexts.

The findings also showed that most respondents operated relatively young businesses. Approximately 45% had been operating for between 2–5 years, while 35% had managed their businesses for between 6–10 years. In terms of business structure, the majority of artisans identified as operating independent businesses rather than family-run enterprises, although many still worked within small-scale team structures involving between two to five individuals.

For craft categories, the largest proportion of respondents identified their businesses within modern craft and fashion-related categories, while a smaller proportion identified with traditional or heritage-oriented crafts. This reflects the diverse and evolving nature of artisan entrepreneurship within contemporary urban Malaysian marketplaces.

Survey responses further highlighted several recurring entrepreneurial motivations among participants. These included desires for greater independence and self-employment, income generation or financial sustainability, and interest in preserving or incorporating elements of local culture and craftsmanship within their business activities.

Overall, the survey sample reflects a predominantly young, urban, and independently operated group of artisan entrepreneurs navigating business activities within increasingly digital and commercially dynamic environments. Full descriptive survey tables, charts, and demographic breakdowns are provided in **Appendix J**.

Category	Key Sample Characteristics
Gender	62% Female; 36% Male
Business Type	87% Independent (non-family business)
Age Group	61% aged 18–29 16% aged 30–39
Business Experience	45% operating 2–5 years 35% operating 6–10 years
Craft Types	59% fashion and accessories 14% traditional crafts
Main Motivations	Independence/self-employment income generation preserving local crafts

Table 5 : Summary of Survey Sample Demographics

4.10 Data Collection Process - Survey

The data collection process was designed to ensure accurate, ethical, and inclusive participation from artisans engaged in digital and traditional business practices. Before participating, all respondents were briefed on the study’s aims, assured of confidentiality, and informed that participation was voluntary fostering trust and ethical compliance (Fink, 2013).

4.10.1 Survey Administration

Surveys were offered in both paper and digital formats to accommodate varying access and preferences. Most surveys were completed on paper during face-to-face interactions at artisan bazaars in malls in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor. Digital versions were shared via email or WhatsApp for participants preferring remote access. This flexible approach maximized outreach and participation (Dillman et al., 2014).

4.10.2 Follow-Up Strategy

To address non-completion, a structured follow-up was implemented. Participants who received digital surveys were sent reminders within 24 hours. For paper-based respondents, research assistants returned to the same bazaar venues to offer support or collect completed surveys. This strategy significantly improved response rates and reduced nonresponse bias (Bryman, 2016; Babbie, 2020).

4.10.3 Challenges and Solutions

As mentioned, the initial digital participation was low. Many artisans delayed, forgot, or avoided completing online forms. In response, efforts shifted toward paper-based distribution, which proved more effective, likely reflecting the artisans' stronger comfort with face-to-face interactions and traditional tools.

4.10.4 Response Goals and Outcome

The study aimed for a minimum 50% response rate and surpassed it with 193 completed surveys from 300 distributed (64%). This robust outcome supports the reliability and representativeness of the dataset, allowing for valid generalizations within the target artisan population (Groves et al., 2011; DeVellis and Thrope, 2021).

In summary, this multi-channel, participant-sensitive approach ensured that data collection was contextually appropriate, inclusive, and responsive to real-world barriers. The resulting dataset offers a strong foundation for analysis of how artisans engage with digital entrepreneurship in Malaysia.

4.11 Survey Deployment Strategy

To ensure that the survey effectively captured the diverse experiences of the artisan population, a well-crafted deployment strategy was employed. This strategy aimed to maximise response rates and accurately represent artisans' diversity. This approach adheres to established best practices in survey research, which highlight the significance of comprehensive planning and adaptive methods for achieving reliable and representative results (Dillman et al., 2014). The following subthemes detail the specific components of this survey deployment strategy, outlining the tailored approaches used

to engage participants, distribute the survey, and ensure inclusivity across the artisan population within the target locations

4.11.1 Pre-Survey Preparation

Prior to the formal administration of the survey, a detailed pre-survey planning process was undertaken to ensure that the data collection was both targeted and methodologically rigorous. This preparation involved three key elements: (1) the establishment of clear participant selection criteria; (2) the development of a structured survey distribution flow; and (3) the identification and justification of artisan bazaar locations where survey distribution would be conducted.

These preparatory steps were essential in optimising the effectiveness and efficiency of the fieldwork. Specifically, they ensured that the survey reached relevant respondents; artisan entrepreneurs and that the process was both smooth and replicable. The approach aligns with recognised best practices in survey research, which recommend well-structured, mixed-mode survey strategies to enhance response quality and coverage (Dillman et al., 2014; Groves et al., 2011).

4.11.1.1 Participant Selection Criteria

To ensure the relevance and reliability of survey responses, three specific criteria were applied when selecting survey participants:

1) Bazaar-Based Artisan Entrepreneurs

Only individuals operating stalls at artisan bazaars held in selected urban malls were approached. These bazaars were pre-identified based on their branding and promotion as “artisan-focused” markets, with emphasis on handmade and locally crafted products.

2) Verification of Artisan Status

Despite the artisan branding of these events, not all vendors consistently met the definition of artisan entrepreneurs. Some were found to be resellers or sellers of imported mass-produced goods. To maintain the integrity of the study, a brief screening was conducted to confirm that the vendor was indeed an artisan entrepreneur—specifically, someone who personally produces or designs the majority of their products, primarily through manual or semi-manual techniques, as defined in prior literature (e.g., Fillis, 2002; Pret and Cogan, 2019).

3) Voluntary Participation and Ethical Consent

Only individuals who expressed interest in participating in the study, after being informed about its purpose, were invited to complete the survey. This ensured ethical engagement and voluntary participation in line with research ethics protocols.

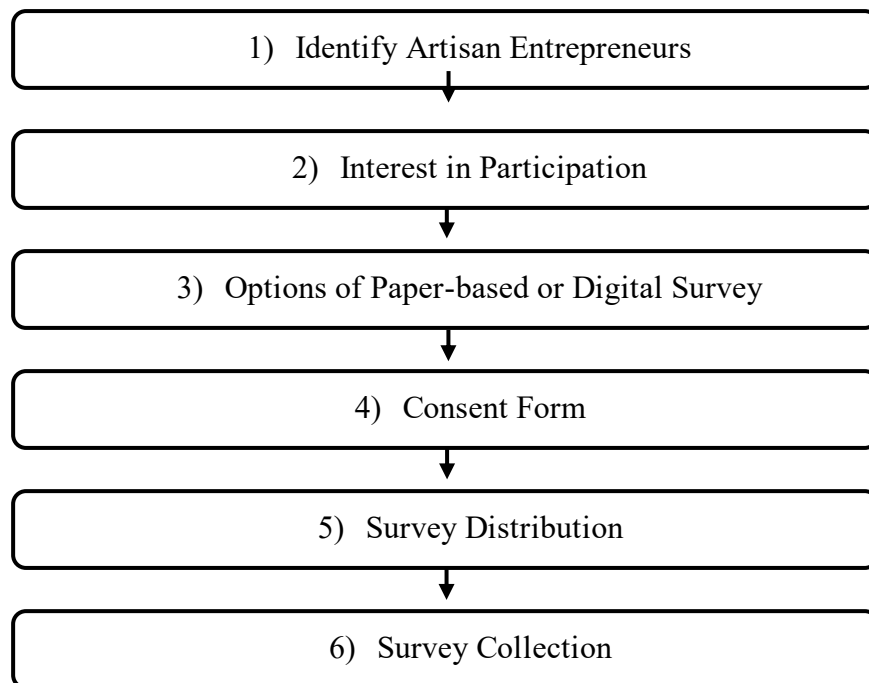


Figure 7: Survey Flow for Participant Selections

To further guide the data collection process, a survey distribution flow as **Figure 7** above was developed. This included practical steps to follow during on-site interactions, including initial screening, informed consent, survey completion (either paper-based or digital), and optional expression of interest in follow-up interviews. This structured approach allowed for a smooth and consistent experience for both the researcher and the participants, ensuring the quality and coherence of the resulting data.

4.11.2 Research Context: Malaysia, Urban Artisan Entrepreneurship, and Shopping Mall Bazaars

This study is situated within the socio-cultural, economic, and institutional context of Malaysia as an emerging economy, where artisan entrepreneurship operates within a rapidly evolving digital and urban environment. Unlike many developed economies, where artisan entrepreneurship is often positioned primarily within niche creative industries or lifestyle entrepreneurship, artisan businesses in Malaysia remain closely connected to cultural heritage, local identity, and community-oriented consumption practices. Handcrafted products are not only valued for their functionality or aesthetic appeal, but are also frequently associated with cultural preservation, national identity, and support for local creative communities. Consumers often perceive locally produced artisanal goods as representations of Malaysian culture, heritage, and authenticity, particularly within increasingly globalised and digitally mediated marketplaces.

As an emerging economy, Malaysia also presents a distinct entrepreneurial environment where digitalisation is expanding rapidly, yet unevenly across sectors and communities. Unlike highly institutionalised entrepreneurial ecosystems often discussed in Western digital entrepreneurship literature, artisan entrepreneurs in Malaysia frequently navigate resource limitations, informal business practices, fluctuating institutional support, and uneven levels of digital capability. These conditions create a more contextually negotiated form of digital entrepreneurship, where artisans selectively adopt digital tools while balancing financial constraints, cultural values, and traditional modes of business practice. The Malaysian context therefore provides an important setting for examining how digital entrepreneurship is experienced and negotiated outside dominant Western and technologically advanced environments commonly represented within existing literature.

This cultural positioning has contributed to growing public support for local artisans and small creative businesses, particularly among urban middle-class consumers who increasingly value locally made, culturally meaningful, and identity-driven products. The broader “support local” movement in Malaysia has become especially visible within artisan markets and creative bazaars, where consumers actively seek products that reflect Malaysian heritage, traditional craftsmanship, and locally embedded entrepreneurial narratives. In this context, artisan entrepreneurship extends beyond purely commercial activity and becomes intertwined with cultural continuity, identity expression, and the preservation of traditional creative practices within contemporary urban settings.

At the institutional level, artisan entrepreneurship in Malaysia is also shaped by ongoing government and private-sector initiatives aimed at supporting SMEs, cultural industries, and local entrepreneurship. Artisan bazaars and creative markets are frequently organised through

collaborations between shopping malls, local councils, government agencies, entrepreneurship programmes, and private event organisers to provide visibility, commercial opportunities, and public exposure for small businesses and independent makers. These initiatives form part of broader national efforts to encourage entrepreneurship, digital participation, and the development of local creative economies within Malaysia's emerging economic landscape. As a result, artisan entrepreneurs often operate within hybrid ecosystems where traditional craft practices intersect with state-supported entrepreneurial agendas, urban consumer culture, and digital commercialisation.

The context of shopping malls is also particularly significant within Malaysia and differs from assumptions commonly associated with Western or UK retail environments. In Malaysia, shopping malls function not only as commercial retail spaces but also as major social, cultural, and leisure environments. Due to the country's tropical climate, urban density, and lifestyle patterns, malls frequently serve as central gathering spaces where individuals and families spend extended periods engaging in shopping, dining, entertainment, and social interaction. Weekend mall culture is especially prominent among urban Malaysian consumers, with malls operating as multifunctional lifestyle hubs rather than solely transactional retail locations.

Consequently, artisan bazaars situated within shopping malls provide strategically important spaces for artisan entrepreneurs to engage directly with large and diverse urban audiences. These bazaars enable artisans to combine traditional face-to-face interaction with digitally supported entrepreneurial practices, including social media promotion, online customer engagement, digital payments, and platform-based marketing. The mall bazaar environment therefore reflects the hybrid nature of artisan entrepreneurship in Malaysia, where physical and digital business practices coexist and continuously interact.

Therefore, the selection of survey locations was equally strategic. A list of artisan bazaars located in major shopping malls around Kuala Lumpur and Selangor was compiled. This urban focus aligned with the broader aim of the study to explore digitally engaged artisan entrepreneurs operating in urban environments. The pre-planning of these locations helped the researcher concentrate fieldwork efforts, minimise unnecessary site visits, and maintain consistency across settings. The five selected venues, detailed in **Table 6** below, reflect a purposeful mix of cultural significance, market positioning, and artisan visibility suited to the study's objectives.

Mall Name	Location	Reason For Selection
Publika Shopping Gallery	Kuala Lumpur	High artisan presence, urban foot traffic
Central Market	Kuala Lumpur	Iconic cultural hub with traditional craft focus
Bangsar Village	Kuala Lumpur	Contemporary artisan mix, affluent demographic
Bangsar Shopping Centre	Kuala Lumpur	Middle-upper market exposure
Empire Shopping Gallery	Selangor	Regional reach, variety of local makers

Table 6: Selected Artisan Bazaars for Survey

4.11.2.1 High Artisan Concentration

All locations featured active artisan vendors engaged in both traditional production and market-facing roles. This ensured access to participants with hands-on experience in both making and selling (Denscombe, 2017).

4.11.2.2 Diverse Market Exposure

The bazaars attract a mixed demographic, including tourists, locals, and niche art consumers. This exposure to varied consumer preferences enriches the data on how artisans adjust business strategies and adopt digital tools (Bryman, 2016).

4.12 Response Rate and Implementation Challenges

A total response rate of 64% (193 out of 300 surveys) was achieved, indicating the effectiveness of the dual-method distribution strategy (paper-based and electronic). However, logistical challenges emerged, particularly in coordinating in-person efforts and managing inconsistent engagement across artisan groups. Participants showed a marked preference for paper surveys, with many digital responses delayed or left incomplete. This feedback informed a strategic shift towards in-person, paper-based distribution, which significantly improved both participation and data quality (Field, 2013).

4.13 Rationale and Effectiveness of Distribution Strategy

As mentioned earlier, the online format saw very low engagement, with many responses left incomplete, delayed, or never returned. It soon became clear that this method was not effective, leading the study to shift fully to paper-based surveys, which proved far more reliable and productive.

While this approach improved inclusivity and response quality, limiting distribution to selected artisanal bazaars and malls may have introduced some selection bias, potentially excluding less visible or informal artisans. However, the use of high-traffic, targeted locations and combined with adaptive, in-person follow-ups, provided a robust and context-sensitive framework for capturing the lived realities of digital engagement among artisan entrepreneurs in Kuala Lumpur (Creswell and Creswell, 2017; Dillman et al., 2014).

4.14 Validation and Reliability

Ensuring the validity and reliability of the survey instrument was central to the rigour of this study. Two key strategies were employed:

4.15 Content Validity Through Expert Review

To ensure the survey covered the right themes and reflected the research framework accurately, it was reviewed by thesis supervisors acting as subject-matter experts. Their feedback confirmed that the questions aligned with the theoretical foundations and captured essential aspects of digital engagement in artisan entrepreneurship. These expert inputs helped improve both the clarity and the relevance of the survey items.

These reviews supported the survey's reliability and ensured it was measuring what it was meant to. Since the survey's main purpose was participant selection and identifying broad trends rather than creating a multi-item scale or composite guide internal consistency testing using Cronbach's alpha was not applied. Cronbach's alpha is usually used to check whether a group of questions all measure the same thing and can be combined into a single score (Tavakol and Dennick, 2011). In this case, such a measure was not necessary, as each question served a specific standalone function.

4.16 Ethical Considerations and Data Protection

Ethical considerations are fundamental to conducting responsible research involving human participants. This study adhered to rigorous ethical standards to safeguard participant well-being, ensure data confidentiality, and uphold overall research integrity. Ethical responsibility informed every stage of the project from participant recruitment to data handling and dissemination. The following subthemes detail the key aspects of the study's ethical approach: (1) informed consent, (2) confidentiality and data security, (3) ethical approval, and (4) cultural sensitivity.

4.16.1 Informed Consent

All participants were provided with a written consent form explaining the study's purpose, procedures, voluntary nature, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. This ensured participants were fully aware and comfortable with their involvement (Haggerty, 2015).

4.16.2 Confidentiality and Data Security

Data were anonymised and stored securely in password-protected files accessible only to the researcher. No personal identifiers were retained, in line with ethical best practices and institutional guidelines (Fisher, 2021).

4.16.3 Ethical Approval

All ethical procedures adhered to institutional guidelines and were approved by the University of Glasgow's Ethics Committee. Participants were provided with clear information sheets and signed consent forms prior to participation. To ensure transparency, copies of the participant information sheet, consent form, and formal ethics approval letter are included in **Appendix A**.

4.16.4 Cultural Sensitivity

Given the diverse artisanal community, particular care was taken to conduct the research in a culturally respectful manner. Survey and interview interactions were approached with cultural awareness and sensitivity, particularly when engaging with traditional artisans (Bringle et al., 2023).

In summary, the study's ethical approach ensures credibility, participant protection, and cultural respect. These ethical foundations strengthen the integrity and trustworthiness of the findings and reflect a responsible and context-sensitive research process (Creswell and Creswell, 2017; Bryman, 2016).

4.17 Data Analysis Method – Survey

4.17.1 Descriptive Analysis and Visualisation

Survey data were analysed using descriptive statistics to summarise patterns in digital tool usage, business characteristics, and artisan demographics. Microsoft Excel was used to generate basic visualisations, such as pie charts and bar graphs to represent categorical data and highlight proportions across key variables. This visual analysis supported a clearer understanding of trends, such as preferred sales channels, levels of digital engagement, and types of artisan products.

The visualisation choices were guided by the structure of the data and research objectives, allowing for an accessible yet systematic exploration of response patterns. This approach was appropriate for a study prioritising practical insights over statistical generalisability, particularly as the survey also served to inform participant selection for the subsequent qualitative phase.

4.17.2 Manual Review and Cross-Verification

Alongside digital tools, manual methods were employed to tally response frequencies and construct basic distributions. Given the manageable size and descriptive nature of the dataset, this approach was both practical and appropriate. The decision not to use statistical software was deliberate as manual analysis allowed for deeper familiarity with the responses and maintained flexibility in exploring nuances specific to the artisanal context.

Moreover, conducting the analysis manually aligned with the exploratory objectives of the survey, which focused on informing qualitative participant selection and identifying broad trends rather than performing complex statistical testing. This hands-on engagement also helped in identifying subtle inconsistencies and patterns that automated outputs might overlook. All findings were cross verified using digital spreadsheets to minimise error and enhance reliability.

4.17.3 Validation and Accuracy

To ensure the accuracy and trustworthiness of the findings, a multi-step validation process was employed. Each response was manually counted and cross-verified against aggregate totals, with multiple verification rounds used to minimise errors and confirm consistency. This hands-on process strengthened the reliability of the descriptive results and upheld the integrity of the dataset (Sauro and Lewis, 2016).

Challenges such as typographical errors and inconsistent data entry emerged during the initial stages. These were systematically addressed through repeated checks and reconciliations, allowing for correction without compromising the dataset. This method of iterative review ensured that the findings remained robust and dependable (Kirk, 2012).

In summary, this layered validation process reinforced the rigour of the study's quantitative analysis and provided a sound basis for interpreting artisan entrepreneurship in a digitally evolving landscape (Creswell and Creswell, 2017; Bryman, 2016).

4.18 Limitations of Data Collection

Despite careful planning, several limitations affected the data collection process and must be acknowledged when interpreting the findings.

4.18.1 Sampling Bias

Reaching a fully representative sample of the artisan community was challenging. Artisans less engaged with digital tools may have been underrepresented, potentially skewing the data toward those already active in the digital space (Groves, 2011; Dillman et al., 2014).

4.18.2 Logistical Constraints

Time limitations during in-person survey distribution especially during peak business hours may have affected the completeness and depth of responses. Some participants, particularly those actively selling at the time, may have rushed through the survey or skipped items (Babbie, 2020).

4.18.3 Self-Report Bias

As with any self-reported data, the risk of recall bias and social desirability bias remains. Although anonymity and neutral phrasing were used to mitigate this, some participants may have presented idealised responses (Tourangeau and Yan, 2007; Podsakoff et al., 2003).

4.18.4 Mitigation Efforts

To minimise these issues, follow-ups, flexible timing, and multiple survey sites were used to improve participation and response quality (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). However, it remains possible that certain artisan profiles, especially those less digitally engaged are underrepresented.

4.18.5 Implications for Interpretation

These limitations suggest the findings should be interpreted with caution, particularly regarding generalisability. Future studies could strengthen representativeness by adopting more inclusive sampling strategies and incorporating additional methods such as observational or longitudinal data.

4.18.6 Conclusion – Survey Method Section

Stage	Key Details
Survey Design	Informed by literature and research objectives; structured into four sections
Pilot Testing	Tested with 3 artisans; refined for clarity, length, and content validity
Sampling Strategy	Purposive sampling; targeted artisans engaged in both craft production and digital activity
Distribution Method	Dual-mode: paper-based (in-person at bazaars) and electronic (email/WhatsApp); paper preferred
Data Collected	300 surveys distributed; 193 completed; 64% response rate
Data Analysis	Descriptive statistics using Excel; manual tallying, frequency tables, and visualisation
Validation Measures	Cross-verification of responses; error correction; transparency in manual review
Ethical Considerations	Informed consent, data anonymisation, cultural sensitivity, institutional approval
Limitations	Sampling bias, self-report limitations, time constraints during fieldwork
Purpose	To explore trends and select participants for the qualitative interview phase

Table 7: Summary of Survey Methodological Process

As shown on the above **Table 7**, the quantitative phase of this research provided a critical foundation for understanding artisan entrepreneurship within the digital economy. Through purposive sampling, flexible survey distribution methods, and careful manual cross-verification, the study collected relevant and reliable data that captured key patterns in digital engagement among artisans. While limitations such as sampling bias and logistical constraints were encountered, these were transparently addressed through appropriate mitigation strategies. Importantly, this phase fulfilled its core purpose as a participant selection tool for the qualitative phase, which follows in the next section of this chapter.

4.19 Interview Method Section

To explore the deeper meanings behind artisans' digital practices, this study employed qualitative methods using in-depth, semi-structured interviews. This approach is particularly suited to capturing the subjective experiences, motivations, and contextual challenges that artisans encounter while navigating digital transformation (Creswell and Poth, 2016).

In-depth interviews offered both structure and flexibility by allowing participants to reflect on their entrepreneurial journeys while enabling the researcher to follow up on emerging themes (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2015). The interview guide was informed by key constructs from Nambisan’s Digital Entrepreneurship Framework and patterns identified in the earlier survey phase.

Interview data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021), which emphasises active researcher engagement and interpretive depth. This method supports a rich, contextual understanding of themes such as digital tool use, strategic decisions, and entrepreneurial identity. By complementing the survey data, this qualitative phase provides deeper, more nuanced insights into how artisan entrepreneurs experience and respond to digitalisation in their everyday practices.

4.19.1 Sampling

Participants for the qualitative phase were **purposefully selected** from those who had completed the quantitative survey and indicated willingness to be interviewed. This purposive sampling ensured that participants had direct experience with digital tools, aligning with the study’s aim to explore artisan entrepreneurship in the digital world (Patton, 2015; Creswell and Poth, 2016). Sample Size and Justification:

Stage	Number Of Participants	Description
Survey responses willing to be contacted	46	Participants who agreed to be contacted for interviews
Selected for follow-up	35	Participants chosen based on research criteria
Declined participation	7	Participants who declined after initial contact
Withdrawn last minute	2	Participants who withdrew at the last moment
Final sample for interviews	25	Final number of participants who completed the interviews
No response	1	Participant chosen to but did not respond to the interview invitation

Table 8: Breakdown of Interview Participants

As shown in **Table 8** above, a total of 25 artisans were interviewed, a sample size considered sufficient to achieve data saturation in qualitative research (Guest et al., 2006; Mason, 2010). Initially, 46 respondents expressed interest; 35 were invited. After attrition due to non-response, withdrawal, or unavailability, 25 interviews were completed. This final sample balanced depth, diversity, and feasibility for in-depth thematic analysis.

4.19.1.1 Participant Selection for Interviews

Participants for the qualitative phase were purposively selected from the 46 survey respondents who ticked yes in the consent checkbox, indicated their willingness to be contacted for a follow-up interview. This ensured that participation was ethically grounded and not based on convenience. From this pool, 35 artisans were initially invited to participate in interviews based on key characteristics derived from the survey data.

Selection Theme	Criteria	Rationale for Selection
1) Artisan Entrepreneur Profiles	Age (all age groups from survey)	To capture diverse generational perspectives and varying levels of digital familiarity and business priorities.
	Business age (recently established to long-standing businesses)	To explore how business maturity influences the way artisans' approach and adapt to digital entrepreneurship.
2) Target Market & Business Orientation	Target audience focus (local, niche, broad, or international)	To understand how and why artisans define and approach different market segments, and whether they meet their intended reach.
	Internationalisation status (actively selling abroad vs. not yet/does not plan to)	To explore artisans' motivations for expanding globally or remaining local, and the enablers or barriers behind these choices.
3) Digital Utilisation	Digital presence and engagement (ranging from minimal to high activity across various digital channels)	To gain deeper insight into not just <i>what</i> platforms artisans use, but <i>why</i> and <i>how</i> they use them, including limitations and intentions.

Table 9: Interview Participant Selection Criteria and Rationale

These criteria included artisan profiles, the nature of their craft (e.g., traditional vs. modern), business scale, years of operation, digital strategy adoption, intensity of digital engagement, internationalisation aspirations, digital adaptation during the COVID-19 pandemic, and future digital expansion plans. More specifically, **Table 9** outlines how interview participants were selected using three core categories derived from the survey: (1) artisan entrepreneur profiles, (2) target markets and business orientation, and (3) digital utilisation. This structure ensured that the final qualitative sample captured a balanced spectrum of artisan entrepreneurs, from those highly digitally engaged to those less embedded, allowing for meaningful variation in digital practices and artisanal trajectories.

The final sample of 25 interview participants was sufficient to achieve thematic saturation, as supported by qualitative research standards (Guest et al., 2006). This number also provided a manageable and rigorous dataset for in-depth thematic analysis, particularly given the researcher's choice of manual coding to enable deeper interpretive engagement. This sample size struck an appropriate balance between analytic richness and practical feasibility for a doctoral-level study.

Ultimately, this sampling approach reflects both theoretical and pragmatic considerations and aligns with the study's sequential exploratory mixed methods design. It also demonstrates reflexivity by recognising the heterogeneity of artisan entrepreneurs, thereby supporting a more nuanced and contextually grounded understanding of digital entrepreneurship in artisanal contexts.

In short, these criteria were chosen because they directly reflect key themes presented in the thesis literature review chapters; Chapter 2: Artisan Entrepreneurship, and Chapter 3: Digital Entrepreneurship in Artisan Entrepreneurship, as well as the study's theoretical positioning (Nambisan, 2017; Bazeley, 2020). This ensured that the qualitative sample was not only grounded in real-world diversity but also aligned with the core conceptual aims of the thesis.

4.19.2 Challenges and Mitigation

Logistical issues, such as scheduling conflicts and initial hesitation, were addressed through flexible arrangements and clear communication about the value of their participation. These strategies supported robust participation and reduced dropout risk (King and Horrocks, 2010; Roulston, 2010).

This ethically sound approach to sampling ensures that the qualitative data collected is both comprehensive and insightful, providing valuable perspectives on artisan entrepreneurship in the digital world.

4.20 Data Collection Process - Interview

The qualitative phase involved conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews with artisan entrepreneurs, selected through purposive sampling from the survey pool (as outlined earlier in this chapter). This approach was chosen to explore the lived experiences, motivations, and decision-making processes of artisans operating within the digital economy. In-depth interviews are particularly effective for capturing participants' subjective perspectives and the meanings they attach to their entrepreneurial practices (Patton, 2015). The method facilitated a deeper exploration of how artisans engage with digital tools in their day-to-day business operations and strategic planning.

4.21 Interview Design and Guide Development

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were selected for their ability to combine consistency with flexibility, enabling participants to respond in their own words while allowing the researcher to explore emerging themes aligned with the study's aims (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2015).

An interview guide was first shaped by insights gathered during the preceding survey phase, which also served to identify suitable participants. Patterns emerging from the survey further informed question development. A structured interview guide was then designed using Nambisan's (2017) Digital Entrepreneurship Framework, focusing on three core constructs: digital artefacts, digital platforms, and digital infrastructures. This approach supported deeper exploration of artisans' digital strategies, not merely identifying the tools they used, but uncovering the reasons, contexts, and impacts behind those decisions.

Interviews were conducted in informal and comfortable settings such as local cafés or, where necessary, via digital platforms chosen by the participants to promote openness and ease (King and Horrocks, 2010). Each session began with a clear introduction outlining the study's purpose, interview format, and the participants' rights, including anonymity and the option to withdraw at any time.

Although guided by pre-prepared questions, interviews remained flexible. Follow-up questions and spontaneous probes were introduced based on participant responses, allowing emergent themes to be explored in greater depth (Rubin and Rubin, 2011). This responsiveness proved critical in drawing out nuanced insights from diverse experiences for artisan entrepreneurs.

With informed consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim by the researcher. The transcription process included multiple reviews to ensure accuracy and completeness, an essential step in preserving the integrity and rigour of the qualitative dataset (Saldana, 2016; Braun and Clarke, 2021).

This approach ensured a methodologically sound, ethically grounded, and analytically rich data collection process, attuned to the varied realities of digital engagement among artisan entrepreneurs. The interview guide, included in **Appendix D**, comprised 13 core questions with sub-questions designed to elicit key themes while remaining flexible to each interview's natural flow. Rather than a rigid script, it functioned as a thematic roadmap, allowing the researcher to follow up on emerging insights and adapt to participants' unique contexts. For example, prompts such as *“How do you deal with the challenges of adapting to digital strategies for your artisan business?”* encouraged deeper reflection on lived experiences. This flexibility was central to capturing the depth, nuance, and diversity of perspectives across the sample.

4.22 Critical Considerations

4.22.1 Reflexivity

Reflexivity was a central component of the qualitative phase of this mixed methods study. As Finlay (2002) and Berger (2015) emphasise, reflexivity entails the critical examination of how a researcher's own positionality, including personal background, professional experience, and relationship to participants may influence the research process. The researcher herself is an artisan entrepreneur in Malaysia, therefore occupied an 'insider' position, which provided valuable contextual understanding and rapport with participants. At the same time, this positionality carried the risk of interpretive bias, including the potential to make assumptions or inadvertently shape participant responses.

To manage these dynamics, reflexive field notes were maintained throughout data collection and analysis to record personal reactions, decision-making, and methodological reflections. These notes

served as an audit trail, helping the researcher remain critically self-aware and to bracket personal expectations. Strategies such as neutral questioning, open-ended prompts, and iterative checking during coding were used to ensure that the analysis remained grounded in participants' narratives rather than the researcher's preconceptions. By actively reflecting on the researcher's role and influence, the study enhanced its trustworthiness and upheld a commitment to authentic representation of artisan voices.

4.22.2 Ethical Practices

This study adhered to strict ethical principles to safeguard participants' autonomy, dignity, and well-being (Bryman, 2016). Prior to each interview, participants were clearly briefed on their rights including the voluntary nature of their involvement, their right to withdraw at any time, and the opportunity to ask questions before, during, or after the interview. The researcher avoided intrusive or sensitive topics unless introduced by the participant. Interviews were conducted in locations chosen by the participants to ensure comfort and openness. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent, and data were anonymised during transcription and securely stored. These practices aimed to create a respectful, transparent, and participant-led research environment.

4.22.3 Ethical Considerations

Ethical conduct was central to this study's design and implementation. Several key measures were taken to ensure participant protection, data integrity, and compliance with institutional guidelines.

4.22.3.1 Informed Consent

All participants provided informed consent prior to participation. Each was given clear information about the study's objectives, procedures, and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any point without consequences. This process ensured transparency and empowered participants to make fully informed decisions (Bryman, 2016; Creswell and Creswell, 2017).

4.22.3.2 Confidentiality and Data Security

To protect participants' privacy, no identifying personal data were collected. All responses were anonymised, and data were stored in secure, password-protected files accessible only to the researcher. These practices aligned with ethical data protection protocols and helped ensure the integrity and confidentiality of the research (Field, 2013; Babbie, 2020).

4.22.3.3 Sensitive Data Handling

Although the research did not involve highly sensitive or vulnerable populations, care was taken to prevent discomfort or harm. Questions were non-intrusive, and participants retained control over what they chose to share. This sensitivity helped maintain trust and data quality (Maxwell, 2013).

4.22.3.4 Cultural Sensitivity

Given the cultural diversity of participants, particular attention was paid to culturally appropriate engagement. Local research assistants supported communication, and materials were adapted to reflect linguistic and cultural needs. This approach helped ensure inclusive participation and respectful interaction (Bringle et al., 2023).

In conclusion, by integrating informed consent, ethical oversight, secure data handling, and cultural awareness, this study upheld the highest ethical standards. These practices were essential not only for protecting participants, but also for enhancing the quality and credibility of the research process. A sample of the consent form and the ethical approval documentation is provided in **Appendix A** and **Appendix B**.

4.22.4 Data Analysis – Interview

To analyse the interview data gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, a systematic and reflective approach was adopted to ensure depth, rigour, and credibility. This phase aimed to generate a nuanced understanding of how artisan entrepreneurs conduct their business in the digital world. The analysis focused on uncovering the meanings behind their decisions, strategies, and interactions with digital platforms, exploring not only what tools they use, but why and how these

tools shape their entrepreneurial experiences. The process was designed to trace the underlying motivations, contextual influences, and evolving digital practices that define artisan entrepreneurship in the digital world.

4.22.5 Transcription of Interviews

The first step in the analysis process was the transcription of the semi-structured interviews. Interviews were recorded with participants' consent using a high-quality external microphone connected to an iPhone, ensuring clear and accurate capture of each conversation's details. The audio files were then downloaded and securely stored in a dedicated drive. Transcription was carried out manually by listening to each interview and typing out the content. This method allowed for a detailed and accurate representation of the conversations, as manual transcription facilitated a deeper engagement with the data and helped retain the contextual nuances of participants' responses (Braun and Clarke, 2013). The transcripts were meticulously reviewed for accuracy by cross-referencing with the original audio recordings stored on the drive. This thorough verification process was crucial for maintaining the validity and reliability of the qualitative data (Creswell and Creswell, 2017).

The manual transcription process required the researcher to listen to each interview repeatedly, which naturally facilitated close engagement with the data. This repeated exposure allowed for early familiarisation and a deeper understanding of the participants' narratives. As a result, the researcher was able to begin identifying patterns and recognising key themes even before formal coding began, making the subsequent analytical process more intuitive and grounded in the data.

4.22.6 Interview Data Analysis Process

The analysis of interview data followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework for thematic analysis, offering a flexible yet systematic approach to exploring artisan entrepreneurs' digital engagement.

The process began with open coding, where interview transcripts were carefully read and initial codes were generated inductively from the raw data. These early codes captured recurring ideas, experiences, and patterns related to artisans' digital practices and lived realities. Coding was conducted manually using colour-coded highlights and digital annotations, allowing visual

segmentation of data. Each segment was labelled with descriptive phrases that closely reflected the artisans' own words. This phase was intentionally open and exploratory, ensuring that insights emerged organically rather than being shaped by pre-existing categories.

As coding progressed, similar or related codes were reviewed, clustered, and refined into broader conceptual groupings. This process was both iterative and interpretive. Mind-mapping, reflective field notes, and sticky-label grouping techniques were used to draw connections between codes and form preliminary themes. For instance, codes such as "WhatsApp communication," "Instagram replies," and "Email enquiry" were integrated under the broader theme of "Digital Communications."

This integrative stage involved the development and refinement of themes, assessing each for coherence and distinctiveness. Sub-themes were then developed to capture further nuance and complexity. The final themes were grounded in the data but also analytically aligned with the study's research aims and theoretical framing.

An example of the coding-to-theme development is provided in **Appendix F**, offering a visual overview of how initial codes were transformed into meaningful categories. While the complete thematic matrix is not included here due to space limitations, it is available upon request to ensure transparency and auditability of the analysis.

4.22.6.1 Thematic Analysis

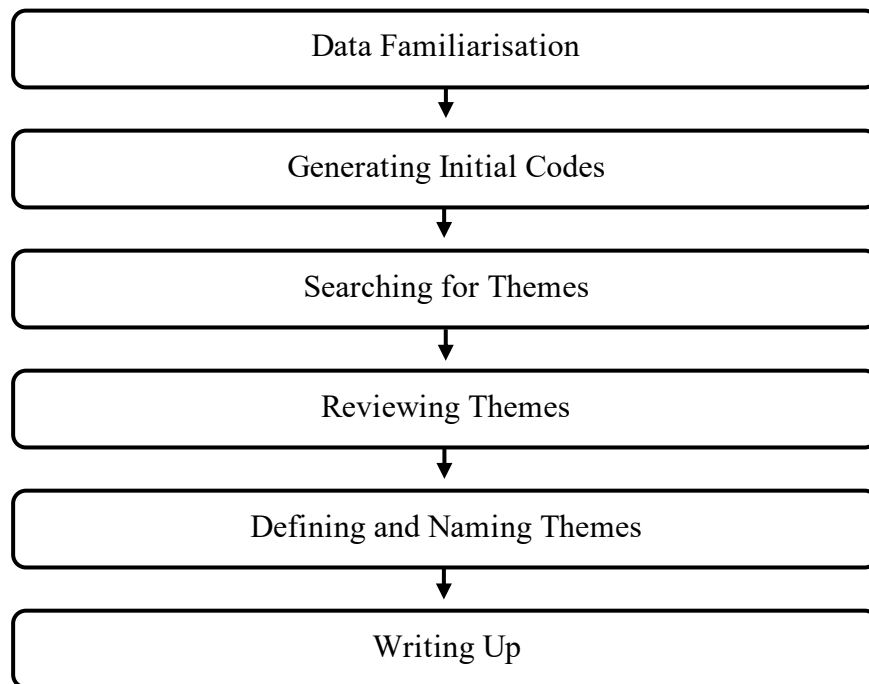


Figure 8: Braun and Clarke's 6 Phases Framework

Thematic analysis was used to interpret the qualitative data from in-depth interviews, following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework (2006, 2013, 2019). This method is particularly suitable for exploring complex phenomena such as digital transformation in artisan entrepreneurship, offering both flexibility and depth. It enables researchers to move beyond surface-level responses and uncover meaningful patterns within participants' narratives.

Braun and Clarke's six phases include: (1) familiarisation with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. These phases allow for ongoing reflection and refinement throughout the analysis. By applying this systematic process, the analysis ensured that the identified themes were both grounded in the data and analytically aligned with the aims of this thesis. This approach supported a robust response to the study's central research question: *How do artisans in emerging economies conduct their business in the digital world?*

1) Familiarisation with the Data

Analysis began with repeated reading of interview transcripts, enabling immersion in participants' narratives. Manual transcription aided this phase, helping the researcher develop early familiarity with emerging ideas, patterns, and language surrounding digital practices.

2) Generating Initial Codes

Transcripts were manually coded using coloured highlighters and notes to label meaningful data segments. Codes such as “positives of Instagram use”, “profitability” and “emotional wellbeing” were derived inductively, capturing both explicit and underlying meanings in the data (Charmaz, 2006).

3) Searching for Themes

Codes were then grouped into broader categories representing shared meanings or experiences. For example, codes linked to communication channels such Instagram's Direct Messenger (DM) and WhatsApp were organised under the theme Digital Customer Engagement, reflecting how artisans manage client relations through platform-based tools.

4) Reviewing Themes

Themes were continuously reviewed and refined through iterative engagement with the data, ensuring coherence within and across themes. Cross-checking with original transcripts ensured that each theme accurately reflected participants' views. Member checking was also conducted with selected participants to validate interpretations.

5) Defining and Naming Themes

Each theme was clearly defined to reflect both descriptive and analytical dimensions of artisans' digital engagement. For instance, the theme Digital Marketing Challenges was refined to include subthemes such as platform fatigue, limited resources, and algorithm confusion, reflecting layered barriers artisans face.

6) Producing the Report

The final write-up synthesised themes into a coherent analytical story, supported by rich, illustrative quotes. These narratives not only explained what digital tools were used but also why and how they mattered in artisans' entrepreneurial journeys, connecting individual accounts to broader patterns and theoretical constructs.

4.23 Validation Techniques

To ensure the validity and credibility of the findings, several rigorous validation techniques were employed, reflecting the study's commitment to robust research practices.

4.23.1 Member Checking

After the initial thematic analysis, selected artisan entrepreneurs who had participated in both the survey and interviews were contacted via email or phone to take part in a member-checking process. Of the five participants contacted, three expressed interest and agreed to assist. These participants were presented with a summary of the emerging themes derived from the interview data and were invited to provide feedback on whether the interpretations accurately reflected their experiences as artisan entrepreneurs. All three confirmed that the themes resonated with their realities, although minor refinements were made to further enhance the clarity and inclusiveness of the final interpretations. This process ensured that participant voices were authentically represented and that the analysis was grounded in lived experience (Creswell and Poth, 2016). An example of the member-checking feedback is provided in **Appendix G**.

4.23.2 Methodological Triangulation

Methodological triangulation was employed to enhance the validity and credibility of the findings by comparing and synthesising insights from both the survey and interviews. This process enabled the researcher to identify patterns that emerged across methods, assess their consistency, and uncover deeper contextual meanings.

For example, the survey revealed a range of motivations behind why artisan entrepreneurs started their businesses. These themes were echoed and further unpacked in the interviews, where participants articulated deeper reasons, such as a sense of cultural responsibility to preserve traditional crafts that held personal significance, and the desire for a more flexible lifestyle that allowed them to spend more time with family, especially compared to their previous corporate roles.

This triangulation approach mitigated the limitations of relying on a single method by reinforcing key findings across multiple data sources. It also contributed to a more nuanced and contextually grounded interpretation of the data (Flick, 2018).

4.23.3 Peer Review

Peer review was employed to validate the research process and strengthen the credibility of the findings. The researcher engaged in regular discussions with academic colleagues in the same field and held supervisory meetings to critically review the study's methodology, data analysis, and thematic interpretations. These experts provided constructive feedback that helped to refine coding structures, clarify interpretations, and identify any potential biases (Bornmann and Daniel, 2008).

This external scrutiny added an additional layer of rigour to the research, ensuring that the findings were not only analytically sound but also accurately reflected the voices and lived experiences of the artisan entrepreneurs. As a result, the analysis became more precise, transparent, and trustworthy, better capturing the complexity of conducting business in the digital world.

4.24 Integration of Survey and Interview Data

This study adopted a sequential exploratory mixed methods design to generate a comprehensive understanding of how artisan entrepreneurs navigate the digital world. The quantitative phase provided a broad overview of digital tool usage, market behaviour, and entrepreneurial motivations, while the qualitative interviews offered context-rich narratives that explained and expanded upon these trends. This design allowed for systematic integration where qualitative insights both validated and enriched the patterns observed in the survey data (Fetters and Molina-Azorin, 2020; Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018).

To support the credibility and analytical depth of the findings, methodological triangulation was employed. As defined by Denzin (2017) and later expanded by Creswell and Plano Clark (2018), triangulation refers to the use of multiple methods or data sources to examine the same phenomenon. In this study, it served several key functions:

- 1) **Cross-verification:** Themes such as digital platform adoption and marketing challenges were identified in both the survey and interviews, reinforcing their significance and strengthening internal validity (Flick, 2018).
- 2) **Contextual enrichment:** While the survey revealed trends in digital tool use, interviews provided insights into artisans' reasoning, challenges, and strategic decision-making, thereby deepening interpretation.

- 3) **Bias mitigation:** Surveys may overlook nuance, and interviews may reflect subjective perspectives. Combining both reduced these individual limitations and provided a more balanced representation of artisan digital entrepreneurship.
- 4) **Enhanced credibility:** The alignment between methods increases the interpretive trustworthiness of the findings and ensures the study's conclusions are grounded in both statistical and experiential evidence (Patton, 2015).

The alignment between the survey and interview data previously demonstrated through methodological triangulation strengthened the interpretive trustworthiness of the findings and ensured that the conclusions were grounded in both statistical patterns and lived experiences (Patton, 2015).

4.25 Data Insights

4.25.1 Data Insights – Survey

The quantitative phase offered a broad statistical overview of digital tool usage and business practices among artisan entrepreneurs. It captured key dimensions such as levels of digital engagement, types of tools used, and general operational trends. This phase enabled the identification of patterns and relationships that informed the qualitative phase (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018). Key insights include:

- 1) **Digital Tool Utilisation:** Statistical analyses revealed widespread use of platforms like Instagram for marketing and Shopee for sales, indicating digital tools' growing integration into artisan strategies.
- 2) **Correlation Patterns:** Relationships emerged between levels of digital engagement and business performance, suggesting that digital adoption may influence entrepreneurial outcomes.
- 3) **Emerging Trends:** Aggregated data highlighted patterns in tool adoption across artisan segments, providing a macro-level view that contextualises later qualitative findings.

4.25.2 Data Insights – Interview

The qualitative phase added narrative depth and interpretive richness, helping to contextualise the statistical trends identified in the survey. Through semi-structured interviews, participants shared first-hand experiences, motivations, and strategic reasoning behind their digital engagement.

- 1) **Motivations and Challenges:** Artisans elaborated on their platform preferences, explained barriers such as time, skills, and algorithm shifts, and reflected on the role of digital tools in their business models.
- 2) **Contextual Understanding:** While the survey showed what tools were used, interviews clarified how and why they were used in revealing situational complexities that numbers alone could not capture (Braun and Clarke, 2006).
- 3) **Narrative Insights:** Personal stories uncovered diverse digital strategies, adaptive behaviour, and the interplay between cultural context and digital entrepreneurship.

4.26 Thematic Matrix and Analytic Transparency

Appendix I presents a sample from the thematic matrix, illustrating how final themes, sub-themes, and participant quotes were derived from the interview data. This matrix serves to demonstrate the interpretive process used in the thematic analysis and provides transparency regarding how key themes were grounded in participant narratives and refined through iterative coding.

While **Appendix I** offers an illustrative example of this process, the complete thematic matrix comprising 20 final themes, their sub-themes, detailed descriptions, and supporting participant quotes is not included in full due to space constraints. However, it is available upon request to ensure scholarly rigour and auditability. This framework underpins the thematic interpretations discussed in Chapter 6: Interview Findings and Discussion.

4.27 Integration of Survey and Interview Data

Integrating quantitative and qualitative data provides a comprehensive understanding of digital tool usage among artisan entrepreneurs, leveraging a sequential exploratory mixed-methods design. This approach blends broad statistical trends with in-depth personal narratives to offer a well-rounded view of how digital tools impact artisan businesses.

4.28 Comparative Analysis and Validation

The quantitative phase of this study identified broad trends among artisan entrepreneurs, particularly in their adoption of digital tools such as social media and e-commerce platforms. These findings offer a foundational understanding of how artisans engage in digital entrepreneurship. In contrast, the qualitative phase provided deeper, more contextualized insights by unpacking the underlying motivations, challenges, and situational factors that shape their digital engagement. By employing a convergent mixed methods approach (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2010), triangulating quantitative and qualitative data enhances internal validity and yields deeper explanatory insights. For instance, while survey data revealed the adoption of digital marketing tools, interview findings added nuance by highlighting how artisans strategically use these tools to access wider markets beyond their immediate local environments.

This comparative analysis integrates numerical trends with lived experiences, offering a more nuanced and validated account of digital entrepreneurship within the context of artisan entrepreneurship.

Appendix H demonstrates the comparison between quantitative findings and qualitative insights, serving as an example of how data from both phases were integrated to validate and enrich the study's conclusions.

4.29 Enhanced Interpretation

The integration of quantitative and qualitative data facilitates a more nuanced interpretation of digital tool usage among artisan entrepreneurs. Survey findings offer a macro-level overview of adoption patterns, including the types and prevalence of digital tools used. In contrast, qualitative data provide contextual richness by capturing artisans' personal narratives, challenges, and strategic choices. This synthesis allows for a more robust understanding of how digital tools influence artisan entrepreneurship, not only in terms of adoption rates, but also in how these tools are embedded in daily practices and entrepreneurial identity (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018). For example, while survey data may show widespread use of digital platforms for sales, interview insights reveal how artisans assess their effectiveness and tailor digital tools to align with their unique business strategies.

4.30 Data Quality and Rigor

Ensuring data quality and methodological rigor was a central priority throughout the research process. Instrument validity was addressed through the careful design and pilot testing of both the survey and interview protocols. Each instrument was developed based on an extensive review of relevant literature, ensuring that the constructs measured, particularly those relating to digital tool adoption and business growth within the artisan sector were conceptually and contextually sound. To enhance internal validity and trustworthiness, methodological triangulation was employed by cross-verifying findings from quantitative and qualitative data sources. Additionally, ethical standards were rigorously upheld, including informed consent procedures, anonymity assurances, and secure data handling, all of which contributed to the study's credibility and integrity. This rigorous approach underpins the reliability of the findings and ensures that the conclusions drawn reflect the nuanced realities of digital engagement among artisan entrepreneurs.

4.31 Limitations of the Study

While this study offers valuable insights into the dynamics of artisan entrepreneurship in a digital context, several limitations should be acknowledged to provide a balanced and critical account of the research process. These limitations do not undermine the findings but rather help contextualise them, offering transparency and framing areas for further investigation. The following subthemes outline the key limitations encountered in this study: (1) methodological limitations, (2) sampling limitations, (3) issues of generalisability, and (4) challenges related to data integration. Each is discussed in turn below.

4.31.1 Methodological Limitations

The reliance on self-reported data from surveys and interviews introduces inherent biases, such as social desirability and recall bias, which may affect the accuracy and reliability of responses. Participants might present their experiences in a more favourable light or struggle to recall past events accurately, potentially skewing results (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Additionally, the semi-structured nature of interviews could introduce interviewer bias, where the interviewer's expectations or behaviour might influence responses (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2015). Efforts to mitigate these biases included careful question design, interviewer training, and the use of

standardised procedures for data collection, but these limitations remain a consideration in interpreting the findings.

4.31.2 Sampling Limitations

The study's sample, drawn from artisans attending specific bazaars in Kuala Lumpur, may not fully represent the diversity of artisan entrepreneurs across different regions or contexts. This purposeful sampling strategy provides detailed insights into a specific segment but limits the generalizability of the findings to artisans outside this context (Patton, 2002). Future research could benefit from a more diverse sample, including artisans from various geographic locations and socio-economic backgrounds, to enhance the generalizability of the findings.

4.31.3 Generalisability

The findings of this study are primarily situated within the context of artisan entrepreneurs in Malaysia, which limits their applicability to other geographic regions or global artisan domains. While the results offer valuable insights into the Malaysian urban artisan landscape, they may not fully represent the experiences of artisans operating in different socio-economic, cultural, or regional contexts (Yegidis et al., 2017). To enhance generalisability and build upon these insights, future research should examine diverse artisanal sectors across varied geographic locations using a range of methodological approaches.

4.31.4 Data Integration

The study's integration of quantitative and qualitative data, while providing a comprehensive view of digital tool impacts, also faces challenges in synthesizing disparate data types. Ensuring that the integration process captures both the breadth of quantitative trends, and the depth of qualitative insights requires meticulous attention to detail and careful alignment of data sources (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2010). Future research might focus on refining integration techniques to better align and interpret mixed-methods data.

Despite these limitations, the study contributes significantly to understanding the impact of digitalization on artisan entrepreneurship. Future research could address these limitations by

including diverse samples, exploring different contexts, and employing alternative methodologies to provide a more comprehensive view of the phenomenon.

4.32 Supplementary Interviews with Industry Stakeholders

While the primary data collection focused on interviews with artisan entrepreneurs, a series of additional interviews were conducted with four key stakeholders within Malaysia's artisan entrepreneurship landscape. These individuals included: (1) Khalil, a director at a government agency supporting SME development; (2) Saiful, a representative from a government-linked organisation focused on sustainable entrepreneurship; (3) Suraya, a government officer involved in the screening process for SME funding applications; and (4) Syed, a member of an NGO working closely with digitally engaged SMEs, including artisans.

These interviews offered complementary perspectives that enriched the main findings, providing broader institutional context alongside the lived experiences of artisan entrepreneurs. Due to privacy considerations, all participants requested anonymity and are referred to using pseudonyms. Ethical procedures, including informed consent and participant information forms were fully applied to these interviews.

Conducted after the artisan interviews concluded, these semi-structured conversations were shorter in length and arranged through professional networks and snowball referrals, many stemming from artisans who had already participated in the study. The discussions centred on key themes such as the digitalisation of artisan businesses, access to financial support, and how artisan entrepreneurship is defined and recognised at the institutional level. A copy of the interview guide for these stakeholder interviews is included in **Appendix I**.

Although these interviews were not part of the original methodological design, they proved valuable in triangulating the data and strengthening the study's overall contribution. The insights helped inform the analysis presented in Chapter 6, particularly Section 6.2, which explores tensions between artisan realities and institutional support frameworks.

4.33 Conclusion Chapter 4

This study adopted a sequential exploratory mixed methods design to examine artisan entrepreneurship within the context of digital transformation, framed through the theoretical lens of Digital Entrepreneurship (Nambisan, 2017). The research began with a quantitative survey that gathered broad data on artisan profiles, business practices, and the utilisation of digital technologies. This phase enabled the identification of key trends and informed the purposive selection of participants for the qualitative phase (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). The survey instrument was pre-tested to ensure validity and reliability (Fink, 2017), thereby strengthening the credibility of the quantitative findings.

In the survey phase, in-depth interviews were conducted to explore the personal experiences and contextual factors shaping the understanding towards artisans' digital utilisation with digital platforms (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). This allowed for a more thorough and nuanced understanding of artisan entrepreneurship in the digital environment. Thematic analysis of the interview data (Braun and Clarke, 2013) yielded rich insights that not only complemented but also extended the statistical patterns observed in the survey. The integration of both data strands facilitated a comprehensive interpretation of how digital tools influence artisan business practices, bridging broad trends with artisans lived entrepreneurial realities (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018).

Throughout the research process, ethical standards were rigorously maintained. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, confidentiality was ensured, and ethical approval was granted by the University of Glasgow's Ethics Committee. While acknowledging certain limitations such as the reliance on self-reported data and the context-specific nature of the sample, the study adopted a methodologically robust and transparent research design. Despite these constraints, it contributes valuable insights into the digitalisation of artisan entrepreneurship and establishes a solid foundation for the presentation of core findings and discussions. These are further elaborated in Chapter 5 (Survey Findings and Discussion) and Chapter 6 (Interview Findings and Discussion), where key thematic results are examined in depth and later synthesised in Chapter 7 (Conclusion).

CHAPTER 5 – SURVEY FINDINGS

5.0 Survey Findings

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents findings from the survey phase of the study, which served two primary purposes: first, to support the purposive selection of participants for the in-depth interviews; and second, to provide contextual insights into artisan entrepreneurship within the Malaysian digital environment. While the interviews form the primary analytical component of this thesis, the survey findings offer preliminary insights into patterns of business orientation, market engagement, and digital utilisation among artisan entrepreneurs.

The survey was designed with three objectives: (1) to identify artisan entrepreneurs who met the inclusion criteria outlined in Chapter 4; (2) to identify early patterns relating to artisans' business practices and digital engagement; and (3) to provide contextual understanding of artisan entrepreneurship within increasingly digitalised business environments.

The findings are presented in relation to existing scholarship on artisan entrepreneurship and digital entrepreneurship, drawing particularly on Nambisan's (2017) digital entrepreneurship framework as a guiding analytical lens. This supports the broader aim of understanding how artisan entrepreneurs in an emerging economy negotiate and experience digital entrepreneurship.

As discussed in Chapter 4, 300 paper-based surveys were distributed at artisan bazaars located in shopping malls across Kuala Lumpur and Selangor, resulting in 193 valid responses. Although the findings are not statistically generalisable due to the purposive and urban nature of the sample, they provide grounded insights into contemporary artisan entrepreneurial practices within digitally mediated environments. The chapter is organised into two sections:

1. Target Markets and Business Orientation
2. Digital Utilisation

The chapter concludes by reflecting on how the survey findings informed participant selection, interview development, and the direction of the qualitative inquiry. Selected visual summaries are provided in **Appendix J**, with in-text references included throughout the chapter.

5.2 Target Markets and Business Orientation

5.2.1 Target Markets: Navigating Local and Global Frontiers

The survey findings revealed that artisan entrepreneurs in this study served a broadly diverse customer base. **Chart 6 in Appendix J**, demonstrated that 34% of artisans in the survey targeted local customers, followed by 31% expatriates, 30% tourists, and 5% corporate organisations. This appears consistent with the view that artisans often cater to their immediate and regional communities (Luckman, 2015; McRobbie, 2016). However, a closer look at the survey results points to more layered dynamics and tensions within the domestic market.

5.2.2 Locals Customers

Local customers formed the largest market segment among respondents, reflecting both accessibility and strong community orientation. However, targeting local buyers also presents challenges surrounding pricing, perceived value, and consumer understanding of artisanal work. Previous studies suggest that local consumers may undervalue artisan products due to familiarity with the materials, production processes, or perceptions of craft as informal labour rather than premium creative work (Fillis, 2004; Gentry et al., 2001; Ahmad and Buchanan, 2015).

The survey findings appear consistent with these observations. Although many artisans operate within curated urban bazaars and premium retail spaces across Kuala Lumpur and Selangor, local consumers may still associate artisan products with traditional or informal craft practices, contributing to lower price expectations. In response, artisans appear to adapt through branding, storytelling, smaller product ranges, and selective use of social media to communicate product value and differentiation.

At the same time, the continued importance of local markets suggests that artisan entrepreneurship is not shaped purely by commercial expansion. Consistent with Down and Warren's (2008) discussion of entrepreneurship as identity-based practice, local engagement may also reflect emotional, cultural, and relational considerations alongside economic motivations. This supports the broader argument developed throughout this thesis that artisan entrepreneurship involves ongoing negotiation between commercial opportunity, cultural meaning, and personal values.

5.2.3 Expatriates and Tourists: Valuing Stories

Expatriates and tourists also formed significant market segments for artisan entrepreneurs in this study. In the Malaysian context, where tourism, multicultural heritage, and international communities intersect, artisan products often carry symbolic and cultural value beyond their functional use. Previous studies suggest that expatriates and tourists are frequently drawn to products associated with authenticity, local identity, and storytelling (Berthon, 2019; Jenkins and Romanos, 2014).

The survey findings indicate that storytelling plays an important role in how artisans position their products to non-local audiences. Narratives surrounding heritage, production techniques, cultural symbolism, and handmade processes appear central to communicating authenticity and differentiating artisan products from mass-produced alternatives. This supports Soukhathammavong and Park's (2019) argument that storytelling enhances perceptions of authenticity within cultural and heritage consumption contexts.

At the same time, reliance on expatriate and tourist markets introduces vulnerabilities. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the instability of tourism-dependent business models, particularly during periods of restricted mobility and reduced international travel. Some survey participants also noted seasonal fluctuations in demand, particularly during festive periods when expatriates purchased locally made products as gifts or souvenirs.

These findings suggest that artisan entrepreneurs increasingly use digital platforms to diversify market reach and reduce dependence on temporary or physically localised customer groups. More broadly, the findings reinforce the idea that artisan entrepreneurs operate not only as producers of handmade goods, but also as cultural intermediaries who translate local heritage and identity for wider audiences through storytelling, design, and digital visibility.

5.2.4 Fast-Track Internationalisation: A Disruption to the Traditional Narrative

Artisans are often portrayed in the literature as locally embedded entrepreneurs who remain intentionally small-scale and hesitant toward expansion or internationalisation (Eversole, 2018; Luckman, 2015; Fillis, 2004). However, the survey findings challenge these assumptions. **Chart 7** in **Appendix J** shows that 74% of respondents reported targeting international customers, with many indicating that international engagement began within the first year of business operations.

These findings suggest that internationalisation is not necessarily a late-stage or reluctant process among artisan entrepreneurs in this study. Instead, many appear to adopt outward-facing business orientations from an early stage, aligning with aspects of the ‘born-global’ perspective discussed by Knight and Cavusgil (2004). While these businesses remain relatively small in scale, the findings indicate that artisans may still pursue international visibility and market reach through digital platforms.

The findings may also reflect generational and technological shifts within artisan entrepreneurship. As outlined earlier in the demographic profile, many respondents were younger entrepreneurs operating within digitally mediated business environments. The accessibility of e-commerce platforms and social media appears to reduce traditional barriers to international market access, enabling artisan entrepreneurs to maintain small-scale production while engaging wider audiences (Cavallo et al., 2019; Guercini and Milanesi, 2017).

This contrasts with earlier studies that frequently positioned artisans as dependent on local markets, tourism, or place-based forms of exchange (Fillis, 2010; Luckman, 2015; Pret and Cogan, 2019). Instead, the survey findings suggest a more dynamic form of artisan entrepreneurship in which digital tools support broader market engagement without necessarily displacing artisan identity, authenticity, or cultural values.

These findings provide an important contextual foundation for the interview phase of the study, which further explores how artisan entrepreneurs negotiate international visibility, digital expansion, and the preservation of artisanal identity within digital environments.

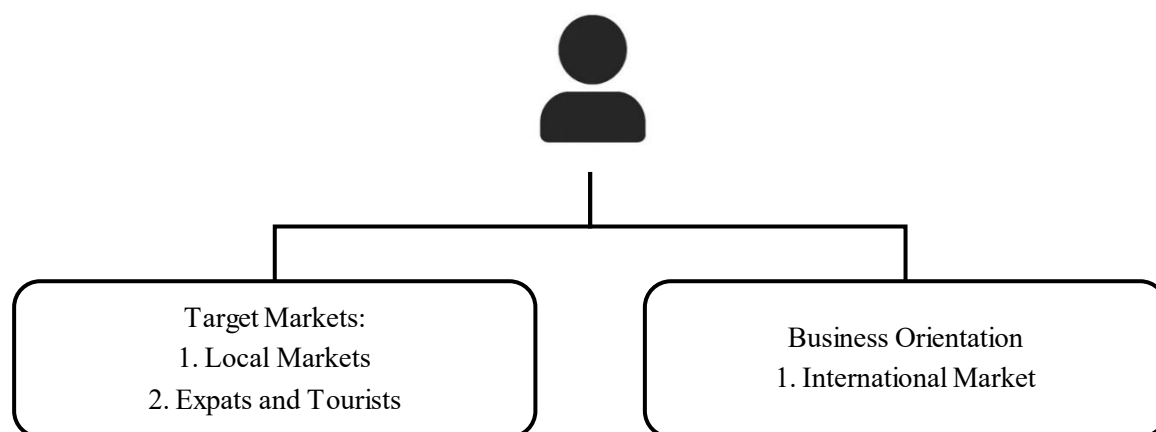


Figure 9: Target Markets and Business Orientation

Figure 9 illustrates the target market orientations and business positioning of artisan entrepreneurs in this study. The findings suggest that artisan entrepreneurship in the digital world is not confined to a simple distinction between local and global or offline and online engagement. Rather, many artisans appear to combine physically embedded business practices with broader digital market outreach. This reflects a more fluid and adaptive form of artisan entrepreneurship, where small-scale businesses increasingly engage international audiences while maintaining artisan identity and locally grounded practices. The next section further explores how artisan entrepreneurs utilise digital tools and platforms within their businesses.

5.3 Digital Utilisation of Artisan Entrepreneurs

Artisan entrepreneurs traditionally operate in place-based settings such as boutiques, home studios, and markets, where interactions are personal, sensory, and narrative-driven (Luckman, 2015). These rooted practices have long linked artisan identity with physical presence and authenticity. Literature often frames artisans as slow to digitalise, concerned about losing creative control, diluting authenticity, or undermining community-based values (McRobbie, 2016; Fillis, 2004; McNeill & Moore, 2015). Small-scale producers are also suggested to resist digital norms of speed, scale, and performance (Galloway & Anderson, 2009; Miller & Rose, 2008).

The survey findings challenge these assumptions. Rather than rejecting digital tools, artisans demonstrate selective adoption, blending traditional selling with targeted online strategies. This

hybrid approach preserves craft values while extending visibility, resilience, and narrative engagement. Digital tools are not just functional; they reshape entrepreneurial practice, creating opportunities for autonomy, creative expression, and engagement with new markets (Nambisan, 2017). At the same time, digitalisation introduces new forms of visibility, surveillance, and performance pressures (Miller & Rose, 2008).

The survey captured how artisans use digital tools, for what purposes, and how these relate to their values and business strategies. The following subsections present five key areas of digital engagement:

1. Digital platforms as sales channels
2. Digital marketing as identity work and strategic intimacy
3. Digital influence on craft transformation
4. COVID-19 as a digital catalyst
5. Future digital plans of artisan entrepreneurs

These findings indicate that artisans are not passive users of technology; rather, they strategically integrate digital tools to support their business goals, maintain authenticity, and navigate the evolving digital landscape. The interview phase will further explore the motivations, decision-making processes, and lived experiences behind these practices.

5.3.1 Digital Platforms as Sales Channels: Between Necessity and Supplement

Artisans in this study primarily sell through physical spaces—bazaars, markets, studios, and boutiques—reflecting enduring local embeddedness, community interaction, and face-to-face engagement (Fillis, 2004; Cruz & Teixeira, 2010; Ratten, 2020). Survey data shows 89% rely mainly on offline channels, even among younger entrepreneurs pursuing international markets (**Chart 8, Appendix J**). This suggests that in-person interaction remains central to artisanal values such as craftsmanship, authenticity, and relational trust (Solomon & Mathias, 2020).

At the same time, artisans integrate digital platforms selectively. Among online sellers, the most used channels were social media, e-marketplaces, and their own e-commerce sites, often complementing offline strategies rather than replacing them. Platforms like TikTok Live and Instagram allow direct sales and storytelling while maintaining personal customer connections. Only 11% of artisans used online platforms as their primary sales channel, highlighting that digital adoption is context-driven,

incremental, and shaped by values, capacity, and product type (Ghezzi & Cavallo, 2020; Nambisan, 2017; Reuschke & Mason, 2022).

This “strategic hybridity” indicates that artisans navigate digital adoption to enhance rather than disrupt their traditional practices, balancing operational needs, brand identity, and customer expectations. The survey provides an overview of channel usage; the interview phase will explore the motivations, trade-offs, and decision-making behind these choices.

5.3.2 Digital Marketing as Identity Work: Tools, Stories, and Strategic Intimacy

Survey results show that 94% of artisans use digital marketing, primarily for storytelling, brand visibility, and relational engagement, rather than purely transactional purposes (Chart 9, Appendix J). This suggests that artisans adapt digital tools to align with values of authenticity, creative control, and personal connection (Fillis, 2002; Ratten, 2020). Digital platforms thus support identity work, extending artisans’ narrative presence without replacing traditional practices (Kapferer, 2012; Spivack & Dacin, 2021).

5.3.2.1 Social Media: Visibility, Familiarity, and Everyday Relationality

Social media is the most commonly used tool, with Instagram, WhatsApp, and TikTok dominating. Instagram enables curated storytelling through images and reels, mirroring offline narrative practices (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Luckman, 2015). TikTok allows more casual, experimental engagement, resonating with younger artisans (Shen & Wang, 2024). WhatsApp facilitates intimate, direct communication, supporting trust-based customer relationships (Reuschke & Mason, 2022; Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019).

These platforms are used strategically and complementarily: Instagram for curated presence, TikTok for experimentation, WhatsApp for relational engagement. The survey shows that artisans are not passive users; they shape digital marketing to reflect their values, pace, and creative identity. The interview phase will further examine the motivations, decision-making, and emotional labour behind these practices.

5.3.2.2 Content Marketing: Narrative Capital and Emotional Differentiation

Content marketing—videos, tutorials, stories, and process documentation—was the second-most reported digital marketing strategy among artisans. It enables entrepreneurs to communicate values, craft processes, and emotional significance, turning storytelling into symbolic and relational capital (Pulizzi, 2012; Kapferer, 2012; Holliman & Rowley, 2014). Survey data indicate artisans use content to differentiate their products not only by uniqueness or price but through narrative depth, embedding identity, culture, and heritage into their offerings (Von Briel et al., 2018; Solomon & Mathias, 2020; Igwe et al., 2018).

Content marketing functions as a form of emotional labour: artisans translate lived experience into value, fostering trust and loyalty. Differences in age, experience, and digital literacy suggest varied approaches, which will be further explored in the interview phase to understand motivations, strategies, and outcomes in practice.

5.3.2.3 Email Marketing: Loyalty, Reciprocity, and Crisis Resilience

Email marketing was also widely used, particularly for maintaining relationships with loyal customers. Unlike social media, emails provide a high-trust, low-noise channel for announcements, storytelling, and exclusive offers, fostering long-term engagement and emotional connection (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019; Beverland, 2005; Micheaux & Bosio, 2019).

Survey findings suggest artisans value email for its personal and direct communication, enabling them to maintain closeness with customers who may not engage via social media. It complements relational and identity-driven marketing strategies, supporting artisan values of intimacy, trust, and community (Thomas et al., 2022; Bakas et al., 2019). These patterns will be further examined in interviews to explore why artisans choose email over other platforms and how it fits into broader digital engagement strategies.

5.3.3 Digital Influence on Craft Transformation

The survey findings challenge the common assumption that artisan entrepreneurs are resistant to digital innovation. All respondents agreed that digital technologies significantly influence their craft development, suggesting that digital engagement has become an important part of contemporary

artisan entrepreneurship. This finding contrasts with earlier literature that often portrays artisans as technologically marginal or slow to adopt digital practices (Fillis, 2004; Ratten, 2020).

Three key areas of digital influence emerged from the survey:

1. Increased production efficiency
2. Identification of new market trends
3. Lower production costs

These findings support broader discussions on digitalisation within microenterprises (Nambisan, 2017; Prajogo, 2016), while also highlighting that artisans adopt digital tools selectively and in ways that align with craft values, creative identity, and authenticity (Bakas et al., 2019; Ferreira et al., 2019).

5.3.3.1 Increased Production Efficiency

Survey findings indicate that artisans use digital tools to improve workflow efficiency while maintaining the handcrafted nature of their products. Digital technologies were associated with design support, scheduling, inventory management, and production planning, enabling artisans to streamline operations without compromising craft quality.

The findings suggest that efficiency is interpreted differently across artisan businesses depending on business goals, production scale, and creative priorities. For some artisans, efficiency relates to improved coordination between creative and operational tasks rather than mass production. This supports Prajogo's (2016) argument that digital integration can enhance operational performance in small firms while remaining adaptable to business context.

Overall, the findings challenge assumptions that digital technologies and artisan practices are incompatible. Instead, they suggest that artisans integrate digital tools pragmatically to support both business management and creative work.

5.3.3.2 Identification of New Market Trends

Survey findings also revealed that artisans use digital platforms such as Pinterest and TikTok to identify market trends, monitor customer preferences, and generate creative inspiration. Exposure to

global aesthetics, viral content, and consumer feedback appears to influence how artisans adapt designs, materials, and product presentation.

This finding aligns with Jaya's (2022) discussion of digital platforms as spaces where entrepreneurs adapt global trends for local contexts. However, the findings suggest that artisans are not passive adopters of trends. Rather, they selectively reinterpret digital influences through their own creative and cultural perspectives.

At the same time, digital exposure may introduce pressures associated with algorithmic visibility and rapidly changing online trends (Hjorth & Pink, 2014). While digital platforms create opportunities for inspiration and innovation, they may also contribute to creative fatigue or increasing similarity across handmade products. These tensions between creativity, visibility, and authenticity will be explored further in the interview findings chapter.

5.3.3.3 Lower Production Costs

Survey findings indicate that digital tools have helped artisans reduce operational costs through more efficient sourcing and low-cost marketing. Platforms such as Amazon, Shopee, Taobao, and Pandahall enable direct access to suppliers, bypassing intermediaries and associated fees. This enhances purchasing autonomy, price transparency, and cost-effectiveness (Wang et al., 2019).

While cost savings provide strategic advantages, allowing reinvestment in marketing, content creation, or packaging—digital sourcing also introduces risks. Visibility of suppliers and materials may facilitate imitation, potentially undermining the uniqueness and authenticity central to artisan identity (Luckman, 2015). Overall, digital tools support selective, values-aligned adoption, balancing efficiency with craft integrity. These trade-offs will be explored further in the interview phase.

5.3.4 COVID-19 as a Digital Catalyst

The COVID-19 pandemic acted as a forced accelerator for digital adoption. According to the survey, 93% of respondents reported that the pandemic significantly increased their use of digital tools, including:

1. Digital sales channels (e.g., TikTok Shop, Instagram Shop)
2. Communication platforms (e.g., WhatsApp)
3. Digital logistics and delivery services (e.g., Grab, Lalamove)

This aligns with Nambisan's (2017) view of digitalisation as a non-linear, context-driven process. For many artisans, the pandemic shifted digital adoption from optional to necessary, revealing both opportunities and constraints. While these strategies enabled resilience and continuity, they also raise questions about sustainability, costs, and long-term integration post-crisis.

These findings illustrate that digital entrepreneurship in artisan contexts is selective, contingent, and shaped by institutional, cultural, and practical pressures. The interviews will further unpack the motivations, strategies, and tensions underlying this accelerated digital transformation.

5.3.5 Artisans' Future Digital Plans: From Necessity to Strategy

Survey findings indicate that artisans are moving beyond reactive, pandemic-driven digital adoption toward more proactive and strategic forms of engagement. Over the next two to five years, respondents identified three main priorities: (1) diversifying digital sales channels, (2) developing user-friendly websites, and (3) expanding accepted digital payment methods.

These plans reflect growing digital confidence and more intentional approaches toward business resilience and long-term sustainability (Reuschke & Mason, 2022). Many artisans expressed interest in combining e-commerce platforms, live shopping features, and physical retail events, suggesting a preference for hybrid business models that balance digital visibility with personalised customer interaction. Rather than replacing traditional artisan practices, digital tools appear to function as complementary extensions of existing business strategies.

The intention to develop independent websites also signals a move toward greater autonomy and control over branding, storytelling, and customer engagement. At the same time, plans to diversify digital payment systems, including platforms such as GrabPay, ShopeePay, and Touch 'n Go, reflect

broader shifts toward digitally integrated consumer markets in Southeast Asia (Zhou et al., 2022). These findings challenge earlier assumptions that artisans are reluctant to formalise or digitally expand their businesses (Luckman, 2015). Instead, the survey suggests that artisans adopt digital tools pragmatically when these tools support customer accessibility, operational efficiency, and business sustainability.

Despite these developments, artisans' digital engagement remains selective and values-driven. Many respondents continue to balance innovation with concerns surrounding authenticity, identity, and creative autonomy. Their approach therefore reflects a measured form of digital resilience: adapting strategically to changing market conditions while attempting to preserve the cultural and relational dimensions of artisan entrepreneurship. The interview findings chapter will further explore how artisans negotiate these opportunities, tensions, and identity considerations in practice.

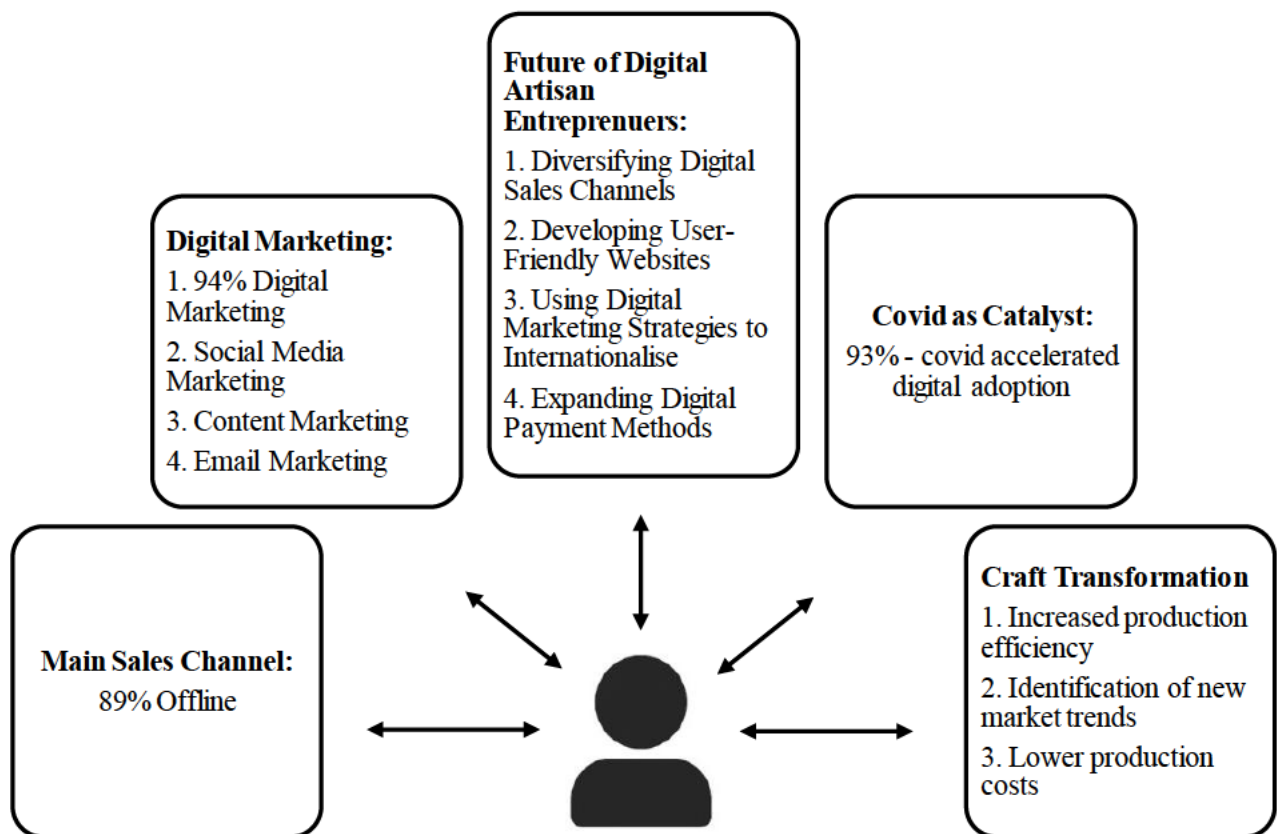


Figure 10: Digital Utilisation of Artisan Entrepreneurs

Figure 10 above illustrates the digital utilisation patterns of artisan entrepreneurs captured in the survey. It highlights key insights into how artisans are navigating digital entrepreneurship, not through wholesale adoption, but via careful adaptation that aligns with their values, capacities, and business logic. While offline sales remain dominant, the strategic use of digital marketing, especially through social media and content-driven tools, reflects a hybrid entrepreneurial model grounded in authenticity and relational engagement. The impact of COVID-19 served as a turning point, not only accelerating digital uptake but also pushing artisans to rethink operational practices in terms of cost, production, and market reach.

What emerges is not a linear transition from offline to online, but a layered evolution in which artisans selectively integrate digital tools to sustain autonomy, identity, and resilience. These findings underscore Nambisan's (2017) view of digital entrepreneurship as embedded within socio-technical ecosystems, where entrepreneurs do not passively adopt technologies but reshape them according to contextual logics. The aspirations expressed that developing websites, accessing global markets, and diversifying payment systems, signal an entrepreneurial imagination that is forward-looking yet grounded in local realities. This nuanced understanding provides more than a backdrop for the interview phase; it sharpens its focus.

5.4 Conclusion Chapter 5

This chapter presented survey findings across two key areas: (1) artisan target markets and business orientations, and (2) digital tool utilisation. These findings provide an empirical foundation that contextualises the more in-depth interview data in the following chapter.

While primarily used for participant selection, the survey offers early insights into the evolving landscape of artisan entrepreneurship in Malaysia, highlighting entrepreneurial ambitions, selective digital engagement, and adaptive business practices. Some findings reinforce prior studies, such as the continued importance of traditional business methods and face-to-face interactions, while others challenge assumptions that artisan entrepreneurship is static, growth-averse, or disconnected from digitalisation.

The survey also informed the study's conceptual and methodological approach, helping refine interview questions and identifying areas such as digital engagement, business adaptation, and entrepreneurial motivation for deeper exploration.

Overall, the survey functions as a supplementary lens, connecting broader theoretical debates with the lived realities of artisan entrepreneurs. The next chapter builds on these findings through interviews, uncovering the motivations, decisions, and contextual nuances behind artisans' digital practices, including the emotional, cultural, and ethical dimensions that survey data alone cannot capture.

CHAPTER 6 – INTERVIEW FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

6.0 Interview Findings and Discussion

6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from in-depth, semi-structured interviews with artisan. This chapter presents findings from in-depth, semi-structured interviews with artisan entrepreneurs, selected through the survey phase as explained in Chapter 4 (Methodology). The interviews were designed to offer deeper insights into key themes identified in the literature and survey findings, while addressing the central research question: How do artisan entrepreneurs in an emerging economy negotiate and experience digital entrepreneurship?

Guided by Nambisan's (2017) Digital Entrepreneurship Theory, the chapter explores how artisan entrepreneurs navigate digital opportunities and constraints. It bridges the domains of artisan entrepreneurship and digital innovation, offering grounded empirical insights into how craft-based entrepreneurs adapt, strategise, and evolve in digitally mediated economies.

While previous research often portrays artisans as lifestyle-driven, risk-averse, or dependent on institutional support (Fillis, 2004; Pret and Cogan, 2019; Ratten and Ferreira, 2017), this study challenges these assumptions. The participants in this research demonstrate entrepreneurial ambition, strategic adaptability, and cultural rootedness, revealing a more complex, dynamic profile of the modern artisan entrepreneur.

The chapter is organised around four key themes:

- 1) **Challenging Traditional Stereotypes** – Artisans reject passive or limited entrepreneurial portrayals, positioning themselves as ambitious and globally oriented, while maintaining cultural integrity.
- 2) **Independence in the Digital World** – Participants show strong self-reliance in learning, financing, and scaling their businesses, often without institutional support.
- 3) **Selective Digital Strategies** – Rather than blindly adopting platforms, artisans engage with digital tools strategically, aligning them with brand identity, personal values, and market goals.
- 4) **Challenges of Digital Entrepreneurship** – Despite adaptability, artisans face emotional, structural, and financial challenges, including digital fatigue, algorithmic demands, and institutional disconnects.

The chapter ends with **Tensions in the Artisan Entrepreneurship Industry**, drawing on supplementary interviews with industry stakeholders to highlight misalignments between institutional perspectives and artisan realities.

Together, these findings move beyond surface-level interpretations to reveal how artisans redefine entrepreneurship on their own terms. They display quiet resilience, creativity, and autonomy, offering a richer understanding of what it means to be an artisan entrepreneur in the digital world. These insights lay the groundwork for the concluding chapter, which addresses theoretical contributions, practical implications, and policy recommendations.

6.1.1 Theme 1: Artisans Challenging Traditional Stereotypes

6.1.1.1 Introduction – Theme 1

The rise of digital platforms and global consumer networks has fundamentally redefined how artisans perceive their entrepreneurial potential. Digital ecosystems, such as social media, e-commerce platforms, and online branding tools, have removed traditional constraints, allowing artisans to scale beyond local markets and directly engage with global consumers. This shift challenges the assumption that artisans are bound by regional economies or that digital expansion is incompatible with artisanal craft (Nambisan, 2017). Instead, digital tools have empowered artisans to take ownership of their financial trajectories, restructure their businesses for expansion, and position themselves within international value chains.

This theme explores how artisans are challenging traditional stereotypes by embracing growth-oriented strategies, prioritising financial sustainability, and redefining their role as cultural entrepreneurs in a digital world. It is revealed under subthemes of:

- 1) Ambition and Business Expansion of Artisan Entrepreneurs** - Challenging conventional narratives of small-scale subsistence by pursuing deliberate business expansion, digital entrepreneurship, and global market integration.
- 2) Financial Motivation as Primary Priority** - Prioritising financial sustainability over traditional assumptions of artistic or cultural fulfilment as their primary business motivation.
- 3) COVID-19 as Catalyst for Financial Reorientation**

- 4) Artisans Sense of Responsibility in Globalising Local Crafts** - Positioning themselves as cultural ambassadors who globalize their craft, balancing heritage preservation with international marketability.

Ultimately, this analysis highlights the entrepreneurial agency of artisans, demonstrating that they are no longer peripheral actors in global markets but strategic, ambitious business owners navigating a rapidly evolving digital and economic landscape.

6.1.1.2 Ambition and Business Expansion of Artisan Entrepreneurs

This study challenges the longstanding assumption that artisans intentionally resist business growth in favour of remaining small-scale and locally embedded (Fillis, 2002; Ratten et al., 2019). While earlier scholars have attributed this to a desire to preserve creative integrity, maintain lifestyle autonomy, and avoid the pressures of mass production in order to protect cultural authenticity (Bakas et al., 2019; Solomon and Mathias, 2020), the findings here suggest a transformative shift; that many artisans are actively seeking growth and market expansion, particularly through digital channels, without compromising their values.

The participants interviewed in this study challenged common portrayals of artisan entrepreneurs as micro-entrepreneurs primarily satisfied with subsistence-level incomes and localised operations (Bakas et al., 2019). Many articulated ambitious and strategic aspirations surrounding business growth, global brand visibility, and international expansion, reflecting entrepreneurial identities that extended beyond traditional assumptions associated with artisan entrepreneurship. These findings resonate with previous research discussing evolving understandings of “success” within artisan entrepreneurship (Bislimi, 2022; Blundel, 2002; Fuller, 2003; Paige and Littrell, 2002), while also revealing how participants negotiated digital entrepreneurship as part of broader personal, cultural, and commercial aspirations. Rather than describing digital tools solely as mechanisms for sustaining traditional craft businesses, participants frequently positioned digital engagement as an opportunity to expand visibility, strengthen competitiveness, and pursue entrepreneurial growth on their own terms.

Fatin, a beaded craft artisan, shared her global vision:

"I may come from Kota Kinabalu, but I want my craft to be sold beyond Malaysia, as far as it can go in the global market, to the UK, US, wherever possible. I don't think any business should remain small these days. There are so many opportunities and platforms we can use to market our products."

Her statement reflects a broader sentiment expressed by many participants in this study. Far from resisting growth, these artisans are actively pursuing it, leveraging digital platforms to position themselves as competitive players in international commerce. For them, expansion is not merely an economic aspiration but a deliberate strategy for long-term sustainability. Scaling up enables artisans to secure financial stability, enhance brand visibility, and gain credibility in increasingly saturated markets. This challenges traditional portrayals of artisans as digitally hesitant or narrowly local in ambition. Instead, the findings suggest that internationalisation is seen not as a risk, but as a necessary evolution for survival and success in today's digital economy.

Similarly, Ain, a jewellery artisan, shared:

"My goal is to go beyond Southeast Asia. I want to expand into Western markets and grow my business to a much bigger scale. I see myself as a global entrepreneur, and in order for my business to sustain in the market for the next decade, tapping into international markets is crucial. That's why we've started to seek opportunities both online and offline to sell our products in Singapore and Australia, for instance."

This perspective reflects a shift away from passive or traditional growth models. Today's artisans are actively shaping their own entrepreneurial trajectories, developing sophisticated strategies to scale, brand, and market their businesses globally.

Recent scholarship has begun to acknowledge this shift by tracing the transformative journeys of artisans. Scholars such as Solomon and Mathias (2020), Kwiatkowski et al. (2021), and Ramadani et al. (2017) argue that the conventional framing of artisans as purely lifestyle entrepreneurs is increasingly outdated, as it overlooks their growing engagement with market-oriented strategies, digital technologies, and participation in global value chains. This study extends and empirically substantiates these claims by demonstrating that contemporary artisans are not only embracing economic innovation but are also actively reshaping the artisan sector through digital entrepreneurship.

The global aspirations are not occurring in isolation. Artisans are being fuelled by digital platforms, which expose artisans to new possibilities, success stories, and role models that redefine what they believe is possible. Digital technologies have done more than just offer access to larger audiences, as they have fundamentally reshaped artisans' entrepreneurial mindset, making international expansion not just a hope, but a necessary goal (Nambisan, 2017).

In contrast to earlier accounts of artisan entrepreneurship, which often relied on local craft fairs, small-scale retail partnerships, and word-of-mouth marketing (Hoyte, 2018), many participants in this study described using digital platforms as important spaces for entrepreneurial learning and business exposure. Through social media, e-commerce platforms, and online content, participants observed branding strategies, pricing approaches, and customer engagement techniques adopted by digitally visible businesses, which influenced how they approached the growth and positioning of their own artisan ventures.

This study challenges the assumption that artisans are inherently traditional entrepreneurs, where skills and business practices are passed down through generations with little change (Igwe et al., 2018). Past research often framed artisans as embedded in local economies, prioritising creative autonomy and cultural heritage over business expansion (Ratten et al., 2019, Teixeira and Ferreira, 2017). These studies largely failed to anticipate how digital ecosystems could transform artisans' ambitions. Earlier research suggested that artisans avoid scaling their businesses, yet this study finds that artisans actively benchmark against successful global brands, refine their business models, and position themselves for international expansion.

Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Shopee expose artisans to real-time insights into global business success. Many artisans in this study described how observing leading artisans online provided a blueprint for growth, allowing them to refine strategies and expand their vision. This learning-by-observation approach was described by several artisans.

Beyond discussions of business expansion and digital growth, many participants also spoke about their entrepreneurial journeys with strong emotional attachment and personal pride. As artisans reflected on observing successful digital entrepreneurs and leading artisan brands online, many began reminiscing about the early stages of their own businesses and how much their work had evolved over time. During several interviews, artisans vividly recalled the earliest products they had created, often describing them in detail or showing photographs stored on their phones. These moments frequently carried emotional significance, as participants reflected on how far their

businesses had progressed despite financial pressures, operational challenges, and the uncertainties of sustaining artisan entrepreneurship within increasingly competitive digital marketplaces.

From an observational perspective, these reflections often shifted the tone of the interviews from strategic business discussion toward more personal narratives of resilience, identity, and achievement. Many artisans emphasised that they had built their businesses independently, managing multiple responsibilities simultaneously, including production, branding, customer communication, packaging, and digital marketing. Their emotional attachment to their entrepreneurial growth suggests that business expansion was not viewed solely in economic terms, but also as a deeply personal validation of creative labour, persistence, and self-development within the digital entrepreneurial environment.

Ain, a jewellery artisan, reflected on how digital exposure has shaped her business ambitions:

“I follow closely few artisans online from different countries and analyse their strategies, basically how they market their products, how they tell their stories, and their pricing strategies and more. Seeing their success shows me that growth is possible for small artisan businesses, and it pushes me to think bigger.”

This reflection exemplifies two key mechanisms evident across the data: (1) digital benchmarking and (2) observational learning, both of which are well-established in entrepreneurship research. Digital benchmarking refers to a strategic, analytical process through which artisans study and adapt the practices of digitally advanced peers (Reuber and Fischer, 2011). For instance, Yadav et al. (2024) found that Indian artisans improved their branding, pricing, and customer engagement by systematically observing global counterparts.

Similar practices were observed in this study. Participants frequently described using platforms such as Instagram to monitor the work of other artisans, drawing inspiration, identifying best practices, and avoiding approaches perceived as inauthentic or harmful to their brand. This behaviour signals a deliberate, self-directed form of learning that goes beyond surface-level imitation, grounded in ongoing digital engagement. As Hamid et al. (2022) observes, contemporary artisans are increasingly entrepreneurial in their digital behaviour, leveraging online tools not only for visibility, but as dynamic learning environments through which they expand, refine, and professionalise their business practices.

Observational learning, by contrast, refers to a more passive, yet equally powerful mechanism through which artisans internalise new possibilities by witnessing the success of others (Autio et al.,

2018). While digital benchmarking involves deliberate analysis and adaptation, observational learning shapes artisans' entrepreneurial mindsets more subtly, often by expanding their imagined futures. Exposure to global artisan brands thriving in digital spaces can challenge pre-existing limitations and broaden aspirations.

This study challenges the assumption that digital entrepreneurship is exclusive to tech-based or innovation-intensive sectors. The findings demonstrate that artisans, despite operating outside of traditional tech domains are actively and strategically engaging with scalability and international markets. However, their digital strategies are often culturally grounded and highly selective, shaped by the values of their craft rather than by technological novelty alone. This aligns with Kapp's (2017) argument that the essence of artisan entrepreneurship lies not in the absence of digital tools, but in the preservation of creativity, authenticity, and originality, regardless of whether those expressions are mediated through digital platforms. Embracing technology, in this context, does not dilute their identity as artisans, but rather enables them to amplify their craft in new and expansive ways.

These findings also depart from dominant narratives in earlier artisan entrepreneurship literature, which frequently portrayed artisans as rural, indigenous, and largely confined to traditional, small-scale economies with limited aspirations for growth (Ratten et al., 2019; Ramadani et al., 2017). Such portrayals often emphasised reliance on heritage, informality, and localised networks over entrepreneurial strategy or global orientation. In contrast, the artisans in this study were not only digitally engaged but also deeply ambitious, actively seeking to grow, scale, and sustain their businesses beyond local markets. This marks a significant shift in how artisan entrepreneurs are positioning themselves within the digital economy and calls for a reframing of how they are understood and supported in both academic and policy discourses.

This study offers a fresh and contemporary perspective on artisan entrepreneurship by foregrounding entrepreneurial ambition, digital literacy, and strategic adaptation to global market dynamics. It aligns with and meaningfully extends a small but growing body of research that positions artisans not as passive tradition-bearers, but as innovative, market-savvy entrepreneurs operating within hybrid spaces of tradition and modernity (Kwiatkowski et al., 2021; Yadav et al., 2022). By centring artisan voices and examining their digital strategies through the lens of entrepreneurial theory, this research provides a more nuanced understanding of how artisans are actively reshaping their roles within an increasingly interconnected and digitally mediated craft economy.

These findings make it clear that today's artisan entrepreneurs are not content with staying small or operating solely within their local communities. While aspirations for growth and expansion may be common in other forms of entrepreneurship, they have not traditionally been associated with artisans. For too long, artisan entrepreneurship has been perceived as a less serious or less ambitious form of business, often framed as hobbyist, informal, or purely lifestyle driven. This perception overlooks the real value artisans contribute to local economies and their potential to impact global markets.

Recognising that artisans do, in fact, seek growth and internationalisation challenges these long-standing stereotypes. It signals a shift, a wake-up call that a new generation of artisan entrepreneurs is emerging. These artisans remain deeply rooted in their craft, identity, and culture, yet they also demonstrate the ambition, courage, and adaptability to scale up and compete in a digital, global economy. They are not only learning from their peers but actively positioning themselves for success, echoing recent scholarly calls to rethink what entrepreneurial success looks like in the artisan context.

However, while this study provides strong evidence that many artisans are embracing global aspirations through digital platforms, it is equally important to recognise an alternative perspective. Several artisans interviewed expressed a conscious resistance to large-scale expansion, preferring measured growth in order to preserve the integrity of their craft. This reluctance was not due to a lack of ambition or capability, but reflected a strategic choice rooted in values such as quality, creative autonomy, and meaningful customer relationships. Some participants voiced concerns that scaling up could lead to misinterpretation or imitation of their work, experiences they found emotionally distressing and disheartening, particularly given the deeply personal nature of their craft.

Akmal, a leatherwork artisan, reflected on this trade-off:

"I don't want to scale up too much too quickly because I don't want to compromise work, my craft. If I grow too big, I'll risk compromising the quality of my craft and personal connection with my customers, which are both very important elements in my business."

This insight highlights the complexity of artisan growth trajectories, revealing that digital entrepreneurship among artisans is not always driven by conventional metrics of scale or revenue, but often shaped by deeply personal and creative values. For artisans like Akmal, growth is not inherently negative. Rather, it must be carefully managed. Rapid expansion, particularly through digital algorithms that reward scale and volume, can dilute craftsmanship, depersonalise customer relationships, and create dependency on visibility-driven platforms.

This cautious approach aligns with studies such as Bakas et al. (2019), which suggest that artisans often prioritise the preservation of authenticity and cultural meaning over rapid commercialisation. Rather than viewing limited growth as a constraint, these artisans frame it as a deliberate strategy to maintain control over their creative processes and outputs. In a digital marketplace increasingly shaped by mass production, algorithmic visibility, and homogenised trends, scarcity and exclusivity are not limitations but carefully managed assets, as markers of value, differentiation, and artistic integrity.

Julie, a paper craft artisan, articulated this clearly:

"My craft is targeted to a very niche market; exclusive audiences, and I don't want to jeopardise that. My customers love that my brand is under the radar and that they own pieces not many people have. It's the exclusivity and sense of community that I'm trying to protect. But if someone is truly a fan of what I do, they know where to find me; digitally and physically."

These accounts highlight a critical insight, that not all artisans equate success with expansion. Instead, success is redefined on their own terms of balancing visibility with intimacy, growth with integrity. This further supports the need to reframe artisan entrepreneurship beyond binary categories of "scalable" versus "static," and to recognise the intentional strategies artisans use to navigate growth in ways aligned with their values and craft.

Moreover, these findings resonate with Kwiatkowski et al.'s (2021) study, which identified four key tensions that shape artisans' growth journeys. While many artisans express a desire to expand, they also grapple with the need to maintain a small-scale logic traditionally associated with artisan identity. Kwiatkowski et al. (2021) highlights the tension between small-scale craft production and business growth imperatives, where artisans are torn between maintaining creative authenticity and meeting increasing market demands. It affirmed those observations, even as artisans engage with digital tools and global platforms, their aspirations are often tempered by concerns about losing control over quality, creative ownership, or the relational nature of their business. For artisans, whose entrepreneurial identity is often modest and rooted in personal craftsmanship rather than conventional growth logics, the idea of scaling up represents a significant shift that brings both opportunity and risk.

This divergence between artisans who pursue international expansion and those who consciously resist large-scale growth underscores the complexity of contemporary artisan entrepreneurship. It reinforces the need for a more nuanced understanding of artisan business models where success is

not solely defined by revenue or scalability, but also by the ability to preserve craftsmanship, maintain close customer relationships, protect brand exclusivity, and sustain meaningful connections with a niche community.

6.1.1.3 Financial Motivation as Primary Priority

This study challenges the long-standing traditional stereotype that artisans are not financially driven entrepreneurs; an idea that has dominated scholarly discourse for decades (Fillis, 2002; Luckman, 2015; Bennett, 2014). Within this traditional framework, financial goals were assumed to be secondary, simply a means to sustain their craft, rather than a core objective of their business activities (Luckman, 2015).

However, the findings from this study present a more complex and contemporary picture of artisan entrepreneurship. It supports Bakas's et al., (2019) argument that artisan entrepreneurship increasingly leans toward profitability and commercial intent. The artisans interviewed were not only creatively driven but also explicitly prioritised financial sustainability, scalability, and long-term business growth. Profitability was not seen as a secondary outcome of creative expression, but as a core entrepreneurial objective. Participants described strategically structuring their businesses around revenue generation, diversifying income streams, and positioning themselves to compete in both local and international markets.

Lana, a doll artisan clearly articulated this shift:

“The main motivation for my business now is financial profitability. I started out as a hobbyist, but now that I’m doing this full-time, I need to make a living from it. Especially in today’s world, where there are so many different ways—both digital and non-digital—to sell my dolls. This digital era has opened up endless opportunities to scale and grow, and it’s allowed us to build multiple income streams across different platforms.”

This shift toward profitability-first business models aligns with Effectuation Theory (Sarasvathy, 2001), which argues that entrepreneurs do not begin with fixed, long-term business plans. Instead, they make strategic decisions based on available resources, real-time feedback, and emerging opportunities. Several artisans in this study, including Lana, entered the sector as hobbyists with little emphasis on financial planning. However, as they engaged more deeply with the market, particularly through digital platforms, they refined their financial models, identified new revenue streams, and adapted their strategies to maximise profit. These artisans treat their businesses as iterative, adaptive

ventures, adjusting their goals and practices in response to external signals, in line with the core principles of effectual thinking.

This evolving mindset reflects a growing emphasis on financial viability within artisan entrepreneurship. These findings demonstrate that artisan entrepreneurship holds real potential for profitability and financial growth, even at a small scale. As Kwiatkowski et al. (2021) argued, artisanship can serve as a primary income source and even double an individual's earning capacity when strategically managed.

For many participants who expressed strong ambitions surrounding business growth and financial sustainability, access to financial support mechanisms such as capital assistance or targeted funding schemes emerged as an important concern in supporting the transition from informal or subsistence-based operations toward more commercially sustainable businesses. As Hill (2021) noted, such interventions may play an important role in facilitating the commercial development of artisan enterprises while still allowing artisans to preserve their core creative and cultural values.

6.1.1.4 COVID-19 as a Catalyst for Financial Reorientation

Findings from the interview extends that argument by demonstrating that artisans are not merely reacting to crisis conditions, but are proactively reconfiguring their business models, strategically shifting their priorities to remain competitive, resilient, and financially sustainable in a post-pandemic economy. The COVID-19 pandemic was more than a temporary disruption to artisan businesses, it was a financial and strategic turning point that forced many to reassess their priorities, business models, and long-term sustainability (Kwiatkowski et al., 2021; Segares, 2022). The crisis revealed that artisans are far more financially strategic than previously assumed. The closure of craft fairs, boutique stores, and traditional marketplaces was not merely an operational challenge but an existential shock. Artisans who had long depended on offline, relationship-based sales found themselves without reliable income, prompting a re-evaluation of how they could sustain their businesses.

The economic vulnerability of traditional artisan models became particularly apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic, compelling many artisans to explore new, digitally enabled strategies in pursuit of financial stability. This shift suggests that the crisis not only exposed vulnerabilities but

also opened new opportunities, especially for those artisans who strategically leveraged digital tools to accelerate financial growth, as was evident in this study.

For some artisans, this pivot led to greater financial success than they had previously imagined. The surge in digital consumption during lockdown periods opened new income streams and prompted a reassessment of what was possible through online commerce.

One artisan, Dahlia, who sells handmade fragrances, described how the pandemic reshaped her entire approach to business and profitability:

“After profiting more than triple the profit we’re used to just in the first few months of the pandemic, it truly changed our perspective towards digital business model and our financial goals. We had to restructure our business plan; to make full use of these opportunity window we had during lockdown and maximise profitability.”

This shift was also recognised by institutional stakeholders involved in supporting artisan entrepreneurship in Malaysia. Khalil, a director at a government agency supporting SME and artisan development, observed that the pandemic significantly altered artisans’ entrepreneurial behaviour and financial orientation. According to him, many artisans became noticeably more commercially driven and strategically ambitious after COVID-19:

“Before the pandemic, many artisans were comfortable remaining small-scale and operating within familiar markets such as trading at their local, usual markets. But after COVID, we noticed a major shift. Artisans became more aggressive in seeking opportunities, more visible online, and more focused on profitability and business sustainability. They no longer wanted to rely on comfortable same-old business models. They wanted to diversify, adapt quickly, and explore new markets.”

This institutional perspective reinforces the findings from artisan participants themselves, suggesting that COVID-19 acted not only as an economic disruption but also as a catalyst for entrepreneurial transformation within the artisan sector. Rather than simply accelerating digital adoption, the pandemic appeared to reshape artisans’ broader commercial mindsets, encouraging greater adaptability, experimentation, and growth-oriented thinking within increasingly uncertain market conditions.

The transition observed in this study aligns with Crisis-Induced Adaptation Theory (Bacq et al., 2020), which posits that external shocks push businesses beyond short-term survival tactics, compelling them to engage in long-term financial restructuring. Initially, artisans turned to digital

platforms as emergency measures to counter the collapse of traditional sales channels. However, unlike the temporary, reactive shifts described in Bacq et al.'s framework, artisans in this study demonstrate a more strategic and permanent adaptation, transforming digital engagement into a central pillar of their business models. Rather than simply using online platforms as stopgap solutions, artisans have integrated new business model for a long-term financial sustainability, signalling a fundamental shift in how craft-based businesses conceptualize growth and resilience in the post-crisis economy.

Recent research by Yadav et al. (2024) discussed this issue. Yadav et al. (2024) found that Indian artisans who transitioned to e-commerce during COVID-19 did not return to sporadic, localised sales after restrictions eased. Instead, they scaled their digital businesses, leveraging them for financial sustainability. Many small businesses that pivoted financially during the pandemic did not revert to previous models but instead built upon their new digital capabilities, treating them as permanent revenue channels, as discussed by artisans in this study.

This aligned with recent observations that artisan entrepreneurs have not only sustained their digital operations post-pandemic but are now actively scaling them. This suggests that COVID-19 pandemic did not merely accelerate digital adoption, but it fundamentally reshaped artisans' financial strategies and business priorities.

Mila, who runs a curated baby clothing business, shared how this turning point permanently changed how she allocates resources and measures success:

“Of course, we would never go back to the old ways of doing business. In the past, I used to spend so much on multiple bazaars every weekend just to maximise my income. But after the COVID-19 pandemic, I started spending the same amount on online ads—and it brought in more profit than I ever expected. So yes, I'll stick with this strategy moving forward to meet my financial goals.”

What emerges from this analysis is that the pandemic did not simply introduce digital entrepreneurship as an alternative sales channel, rather it fundamentally redefined how artisans perceive their financial and entrepreneurial identities. Traditionally, artisans have been portrayed as craftspeople first and entrepreneurs second, driven more by passion for their craft than by commercial ambition (Hoyte, 2019; Kuhn and Galloway, 2015). However, the findings from this study suggest a significant shift that many artisans now identify primarily as business owners,

viewing digital platforms not as optional tools for branding, but as essential instruments for financial survival, scalability, and long-term sustainability.

Nonetheless, while financial growth has become a dominant priority for many, this transition is not universally embraced, nor is it without tension. For some artisans, the shift toward profit-driven digital entrepreneurship generates conflict between creative integrity and market expectations. As digital platforms reward viral content, trend-aligned aesthetics, and algorithmic optimisation, artisans may feel pressured to adjust their creative practices to meet commercial demand.

Srnicek (2017) warns that platform capitalism often extracts value from small-scale entrepreneurs, creating cycles of financial investment that do not necessarily result in stable returns. Additionally, the demand for constant engagement through social media, rapid customer responsiveness, and continuous content creation, places significant emotional and mental pressure on artisans. Hochschild's (1983) concept of emotional labour is useful here, highlighting how the "always-on" nature of digital entrepreneurship creates conditions for burnout. Unlike traditional retail models, which allowed artisans to operate at their own pace, digital entrepreneurship often demands perpetual activity, making work-life balance increasingly difficult to sustain.

This subtheme highlights how the COVID-19 pandemic acted as a digital catalyst, prompting artisans to rethink their business strategies and embrace digital tools not just for survival, but for long-term growth. While profitability became a central goal for many during this shift, the transition was not purely about financial gain, it also involved navigating tensions between digital efficiency and maintaining creative autonomy. The pandemic didn't just accelerate digital adoption; it reshaped how artisans perceived risk, opportunity, and sustainability in their craft-based businesses. The following subtheme builds on this momentum, exploring how artisans are now expanding their vision, balancing local authenticity with a growing responsibility to represent cultural identity on a global stage.

6.1.1.5 Artisans' Sense of Responsibility in Globalising Local Crafts

The interviews reveal a fundamental shift in how artisans perceive their roles, not merely as custodians of cultural heritage, as often portrayed in past literature, but as global ambassadors for local craft. Rather than anchoring their businesses solely in local traditions, contemporary artisans actively seek to introduce their work to international audiences. This challenges dominant narratives

that frame artisan entrepreneurship as inherently place-based or preservationist (Fillis, 2015; Ratten et al., 2019; Ramadani et al., 2017) and instead, signals the rise of a new entrepreneurial model that focused on international visibility, global brand-building, and strategic participation in transnational markets.

Earlier research, such as Pret and Cogan (2019), positioned artisan entrepreneurship as inherently place-bound, with cultural value embedded in regional traditions, as well as geographic identity. Within this framing, artisans were portrayed as custodians of heritage, operating primarily within community-based economies, local tourism markets, and state-driven heritage initiatives (Bennett, 2014; Luckman, 2015). This place-based perspective reinforced the idea that artisan work is intrinsically linked to locality, authenticity, and cultural preservation, rather than entrepreneurial expansion or global reach.

Danial, a brass artisan, shared how his patriotic identity shapes his business strategy:

“I am a proud Malaysian, so I carry the 'Made in Malaysia' name proudly in every creation. I try to incorporate Malaysian elements in my crafts—whether through the materials, the makers, or the historical story behind the product—it will always be central to my artisan business. That’s why my Malaysian branding is strong. I want to introduce Malaysian craft to the world, to show that we are on par with other international artisans.”

Several younger artisans also described their entrepreneurial journeys through deeply personal narratives of cultural attachment, memory, and identity. For some participants, their commitment to promoting Malaysian crafts internationally was shaped by childhood experiences and emotional connections with older family members, particularly grandparents who introduced them to traditional crafts, local materials, and cultural practices from an early age. These memories appeared to foster not only appreciation for local craftsmanship, but also a perceived responsibility to ensure that these cultural elements remained visible and relevant within contemporary markets.

One participant, who had been born in Germany but raised in Malaysia for most of her life, described how her strong attachment to Malaysian identity became intensified through experiences of being questioned or mocked by others for being “overly patriotic” toward Malaysia. Rather than distancing herself from local identity, these experiences appeared to strengthen her emotional commitment toward Malaysian culture and artisan entrepreneurship. She described her business as a personal way of proving her connection to Malaysia through actively promoting local crafts, materials, and cultural narratives to wider audiences. In this sense, artisan entrepreneurship extended beyond economic

activity and became intertwined with identity affirmation, emotional resilience, and cultural representation.

Observationally, discussions surrounding local identity and Malaysian craftsmanship often generated particularly emotional responses during interviews. Several participants spoke passionately about preserving cultural visibility within global digital spaces, suggesting that internationalisation was not viewed solely as market expansion, but also as an opportunity to elevate Malaysian creative identity internationally. These findings indicate that contemporary artisan entrepreneurship may simultaneously operate as commercial practice, identity work, and cultural advocacy within the digital world.

This sense of responsibility and global ambassadorial role aligns with Cultural Entrepreneurship Theory (Lounsbury and Glynn, 2001), which posits that cultural entrepreneurs do not simply inherit and preserve traditions but actively reinterpret and commercialise them for evolving markets. However, this study extends the theory by showing that artisans are not just adapting to new markets, they are actively shaping global narratives around their craft. By doing so, they challenge the dominant institutions that have historically controlled cultural representation. Unlike previous generations who relied on heritage institutions or state-led preservation programmes for legitimacy, today's artisans leverage on digital platforms to assert direct control over how their work is perceived, valued, and consumed globally. This strategic positioning not only expands their market reach but redefines what it means to be an artisan in the digital world.

This shift toward global representation also resonates with Institutional Theory (Scott, 2001), which explains how industries evolve in response to economic and cultural shifts. In traditional artisan economies, success was defined through community recognition and cultural continuity. This marks a broader transformation in the cultural economy, where artisans are no longer defined solely by place-based identities but are increasingly operating within global frameworks that prioritise scalability, competitiveness, and digital visibility. As Teixeira and Ferreira (2019) argue, environmental factors such as market trends, cultural shifts, and globalisation can significantly shape the evolution of artisans' crafts. In this context, artisans entering global markets must navigate a delicate balance: preserving the authenticity and heritage of their work, while also adapting to changing consumer expectations and digital demands.

Nonetheless, participants' aspirations to position themselves and their crafts within wider international markets were often enabled through digital platforms, which reduced many of the

traditional barriers associated with market visibility and audience reach. In contrast to earlier accounts of artisan entrepreneurship that relied heavily on craft fairs, government-sponsored exhibitions, or institutional recognition, many participants described using social media, e-commerce platforms, and influencer collaborations to expand their visibility beyond local markets. These findings suggest that, within the context of this study, digital entrepreneurship was experienced not merely as an alternative sales mechanism, but as an important means through which artisans negotiated visibility, entrepreneurial identity, and global market participation in the digital world.

However, this expanded visibility also brings new tensions. While digital tools allow artisans to share their work with broader audiences, they simultaneously introduce pressures to cater to global consumer preferences, particularly those of developed economic settings. This tension between cultural authenticity and market demands is increasingly recognised in recent scholarship, with researchers warning that artisans may be pushed to adapt or dilute their products in ways that compromise their cultural specificity and meaning (El-Maghraby et al., 2023). Thus, the same digital tools that enable empowerment and outreach may also risk eroding the very identities that make artisan products unique.

This raises a critical dilemma: while digital visibility creates opportunities for economic sustainability, it can also pressure artisans to modify their traditions to remain competitive. If artisans tailor their work too closely to global trends, do they risk losing cultural authenticity? Or can such adaptation be understood as part of an evolving, globally relevant artisan economy?

This tension was reflected in the experience of Suri, a bespoke bag artisan, who initially promoted her work with a strong Malaysian identity. As she expanded internationally, however, she realised that cultural storytelling alone was not always effective:

“At first, I promoted my pieces as proudly Malaysian-made. But I realised international buyers were more interested in things like sustainability and eco-materials. So, I had to tweak how I presented my products, now I highlight the use of unique, natural materials more than the cultural story. It’s not that I’ve abandoned it, but I had to shift focus to match what the global market values.”

Her experience highlights the strategic recalibration that many artisans now undertake, not by discarding heritage, but by reframing it to meet broader global expectations. This reflects a shift in

artisan identity, as they navigate a digital cultural economy increasingly shaped by visibility algorithms, consumer preferences, and branding discourses.

Ultimately, artisans in this study are not merely passive custodians of tradition, but active cultural ambassadors in the global craft economy. They challenge conventional assumptions that artisan entrepreneurship is only about preserving static heritage. Instead, they demonstrate how tradition can evolve alongside digital innovation and market expansion. What is particularly striking is that many artisans carry this cultural responsibility voluntarily—no one asked them to represent local identity on the world stage, yet they feel compelled to do so. This sense of duty reflects pride and passion, but it also raises important questions: to what extent must artisans continually bear the weight of cultural representation for their businesses to remain authentic and sustainable in global markets? As artisan entrepreneurship moves further into the digital world, navigating this tension between cultural rootedness and commercial imperatives will be central to its future trajectory.

6.1.1.6 Theme 1 Conclusion - Artisans Challenging Traditional Stereotypes

This theme challenges long-standing assumptions that position artisans as passive, subsistence-oriented, or intentionally resistant to business growth. Rather than reflecting disinterest in expansion or commercial ambition, participants in this study described more nuanced entrepreneurial motivations shaped by changing economic realities, increased digital exposure, personal aspirations, and evolving understandings of what artisan entrepreneurship can become within contemporary markets.

Importantly, the findings suggest that artisans are not forcefully abandoning traditional artisan values or identities in pursuit of growth. Instead, these shifts appear to be occurring more organically, as artisans gradually respond and adapt to changing market conditions, digital opportunities, consumer expectations, and broader entrepreneurial environments. Participants frequently described recognising that sustaining artisan businesses, preserving cultural relevance, and remaining competitive increasingly required greater visibility, adaptability, and strategic engagement with digital tools.

At the same time, growth was not necessarily understood through conventional entrepreneurial assumptions of rapid scaling, mass production, or large external investment. Rather, artisans described more selective and self-directed forms of expansion, often enabled through accessible

digital platforms, social media visibility, online storytelling, and direct customer engagement. Many participants viewed digital entrepreneurship not as a complete transformation of their artisan identity, but as a practical and strategic extension of existing entrepreneurial practices that allowed them to expand market reach while still retaining control over their creative direction, business values, and cultural representation.

These findings therefore complicate dominant assumptions within both artisan entrepreneurship and digital entrepreneurship literature, where artisans are often portrayed as either resistant to commercial growth or forced to compromise authenticity in order to participate in digital markets. Instead, the findings indicate that artisans actively negotiate these tensions in ways that reflect their own priorities, capacities, and definitions of success. Within this context, digital entrepreneurship appears less as a rigid or universally applied model of technological transformation and more as a flexible, contextually negotiated process shaped by artisan values, autonomy, and selective adaptation. Consequently, this theme suggests that artisan entrepreneurship in the digital world may no longer be adequately understood solely through traditional lifestyle or subsistence-based frameworks. Rather than remaining static custodians of heritage, participants in this study demonstrated how artisans can simultaneously pursue cultural preservation, entrepreneurial ambition, and digital visibility, while continuing to shape growth on their own terms within evolving entrepreneurial ecosystems.

6.1.2 Theme 2: The Independence of Artisan Entrepreneurs

6.1.2.1 Introduction – Theme 2

For decades, artisan entrepreneurship has been characterised as heavily dependent on external institutions, particularly government agencies, financial bodies, and traditional craft networks (Luckman, 2015; Fillis, 2002). This dependency includes relying on government-led initiatives for business growth, such as business matching events, participation in local and international craft fairs, and referrals for financial aid like grants or soft loans. Artisans have also traditionally depended on subsidised classes, seminars, and state-sponsored training to access new market knowledge and adapt to evolving business environments.

For instance, government institutions have long played a central role in facilitating market access, supporting skill development, and offering financial assistance to sustain artisan livelihoods. As a result, prior research has consistently portrayed artisans as reliant on structured support systems for

business expansion and survival (Pret and Cogan, 2019). While this support has been important for preserving craft heritage, it has also contributed to a culture of dependency, limiting artisans' agency in shaping their own entrepreneurial paths and reducing their ability to act independently.

However, institutional stakeholders also cautioned that increased entrepreneurial independence does not always lead to positive outcomes. Suraya, a government officer involved in evaluating SME funding applications, noted that while many younger artisans prefer operating independently and avoiding institutional involvement, this autonomy can also expose them to greater financial and operational risks:

“Not all independent businesses work out successfully. We have seen quite a number of artisans who tried to manage everything on their own without proper planning or financial knowledge, and eventually experienced losses or business failure before approaching institutions for financial support.”

This perspective complicates overly celebratory narratives of entrepreneurial independence by highlighting the vulnerabilities that may accompany self-directed business practices. While many artisans value autonomy, flexibility, and freedom from institutional structures, the findings suggest that independence may also involve uneven access to business knowledge, financial planning capabilities, and long-term strategic support. The findings therefore indicate that artisan independence should not be understood as entirely empowering or restrictive, but rather as a negotiated and often fragile entrepreneurial position within uncertain digital and market environments. However, artisans in this study expressed a clear shift away from traditional dependency models. They emphasised the need to become more independent, adopting self-sustaining business strategies, taking charge of their own expansion, and actively seeking alternative funding mechanisms to support and grow their ventures. Many also engaged in self-directed learning to build the skills needed for digital and entrepreneurial success. In doing so, these artisans reject the conventional narrative of reliance on institutional support, challenging long-standing assumptions in the literature that frame them as dependent or lacking entrepreneurial agency.

This transformation reflects a broader paradigm shift in artisan entrepreneurship, which can be examined through three interconnected subthemes:

- 1) **Redefining Business Expansion** – Artisans are no longer waiting for government-backed expansion opportunities but are actively pursuing direct-to-market strategies, securing retail partnerships, and leveraging digital platforms.

- 2) **The Rise of Self-Directed Learning** – Artisans no longer depend on institutional training programs; they are self-learning through digital resources, mentorship networks, and experiential trial-and-error.
- 3) **Funding Artisans' Growth** – Artisans no longer rely on government grants but are diversifying their financial strategies through crowdfunding, private investors, and reinvestment models.

While these findings signal a critical shift toward independence, they also introduce tensions. The move away from institutional safety nets presents new challenges, such as increased competition without government support, such as official recommendations, as well as financial pressure from the costs of self-directed learning and maintaining financial independence. This chapter critically examines these dynamics, assessing both the opportunities and contradictions embedded in this transformation.

6.1.2.2 Redefining Business Expansion

In Malaysia, government agencies such as the Malaysian Handicraft Development Corporation (Kraftangan Malaysia) have played an important role in supporting artisan entrepreneurs by providing market access, financial grants, and opportunities to showcase their work at both local and international craft fairs and bazaars. This institutional support has also been recognised in the literature on artisan entrepreneurship, where scholars acknowledge the availability of various forms of assistance that can be leveraged by artisans for business growth, commercialisation, and international expansion (Hill, 2021; Kwiatkowski et al., 2021).

However, while these initiatives were initially designed to promote cultural preservation and economic sustainability, they have also produced unintended consequences, namely, a culture of dependency. In some cases, artisans became increasingly reliant on institutional aid and community-based support, rather than developing autonomous business strategies (Pret and Cogan, 2019). This reliance has fostered a more passive entrepreneurial model, in which artisans often wait for external agencies to create opportunities on their behalf, ultimately constraining their agency and limiting self-driven growth.

Artisans in this study demonstrated increased independence in how they approach business expansion. Many participants described viewing themselves not as passive recipients of institutional support, but as increasingly self-directed entrepreneurs who actively took responsibility for their

business growth and strategic decision-making. Participants frequently discussed pursuing opportunities independently through cultivating direct relationships with retail buyers, initiating collaborations with other entrepreneurs, and engaging with organisations to expand opportunities for both local and international market exposure.

Ain, a jewellery artisan, shared her efforts in strategising for business growth:

“Some days are spent just trying to find the right person to contact for business growth. I search for department buyers at Robinsons or Parkson on LinkedIn, or I look for the right officers at MATRADE (Malaysia External Trade Development Corporation) or INSKEN (National Entrepreneurship Institute), pitching for a chance to participate in their international craft fairs or other initiatives. Sometimes, I even reach out to boutique owners in the United Kingdom or the United States, just to explore whether they’d be open to selling our crafts on consignment. It’s a hit and miss, but at least I know I’ve tried my best.”

This transition from institutional reliance to autonomous entrepreneurial agency signals a fundamental transformation in artisan entrepreneurship, especially one that aligns with Effectuation Theory (Sarasvathy, 2001), which emphasises action-oriented decision-making based on available artisans’ means, emerging opportunities, and evolving goals in an increasingly digital and global business environment.

Effectuation Theory challenges the notion that entrepreneurs passively follow predetermined pathways or depend heavily on institutional actors for market access, such as artisans relying on government agencies like the Malaysia External Trade Development Corporation (MATRADE), which facilitates international craft fairs and export programmes to promote Malaysian-made products abroad. While such initiatives are designed to support market expansion, Effectuation Theory posits that entrepreneurs actively create opportunities by leveraging resources already within their control (Bislimi, 2022).

In this study, digital platforms such as Instagram, LinkedIn, and Etsy emerged as powerful tools that enabled artisans to bypass traditional gatekeepers, form direct partnerships, engage with buyers, and access global markets independently. These platforms allow artisans to make adaptive, real-time decisions in response to shifting digital market dynamics, reflecting the core principles of effectual thinking.

This suggests that artisan entrepreneurship is no longer defined by a state-dependent or institutionally anchored model. Instead, it is evolving into a more agile, resource-driven practice, in which artisans take strategic risks, pursue digital expansion, and reshape their businesses through iterative learning

and adaptation. This proactive shift challenges earlier portrayals in the literature that depicted artisans as primarily motivated by lifestyle autonomy and personal fulfilment, prioritising creative freedom and work–life balance over commercial scalability (Solomon and Mathias, 2020). Scholars such as Fillis (2002) and Bennett (2014) similarly suggested that artisans deliberately maintained small-scale operations to safeguard the authenticity and integrity of their craft. However, this study indicated a reconfiguration of such priorities: while authenticity remains valued, it increasingly coexists with goals for growth, innovation, and long-term financial sustainability within a digital and globalised artisan entrepreneurship.

This was debunked by Jim, a lighting craft artisan, who shared:

“People around me expect us to remain small and stay within Kuala Lumpur because they think, for small artisans like us, that’s the best way to run our business. But that’s far from the truth. Our handcrafted lights are being ordered by architects and interior designers beyond Kuala Lumpur. We’ve approached international audiences ourselves and managed to supply for independent apartment projects in Australia and Indonesia, which shows that local artisans like us with a very niche market and specific crafts rooted in Malaysian elements, can go much further than what people expect us to be.”

Observationally, discussions surrounding international expansion and external perceptions of artisans often generated visible pride and emotional satisfaction among participants. Several artisans appeared particularly motivated by challenging assumptions that artisan businesses should remain small-scale, localised, or commercially limited. During interviews, participants frequently spoke with increased enthusiasm when describing international orders, collaborations, or recognition beyond Malaysia, suggesting that these achievements carried symbolic significance beyond financial success alone. In several cases, artisans appeared eager to demonstrate that their businesses were capable of competing beyond local markets despite operating within niche or handcrafted sectors traditionally perceived as small-scale. These reactions reflected not only entrepreneurial ambition, but also a strong sense of accomplishment in redefining what artisan entrepreneurship could achieve within the digital world.

Jim’s reflection exemplifies a broader sentiment among participants who viewed growth not as a rejection of artisan values, but as a necessary evolution to remain relevant and sustainable. Rather than avoiding expansion, they sought to scale in ways that preserved creative control and design integrity. This reinforces the study’s argument that artisan entrepreneurship in the digital world is

not static or risk-averse but defined by a dynamic negotiation between preserving tradition and embracing transformation.

Indeed, the findings of this study demonstrate a clear commercial ambition and a desire to grow beyond local markets. This shift signals a broader reconceptualisation of artisan entrepreneurship, not as a localised, subsistence-based practice, but as a growth-oriented, entrepreneurial sector characterised by strategic expansion, strong digital engagement, and global market presence. It highlights a fundamental departure from institutional dependency, as artisans increasingly self-initiate opportunities for advancement.

This study demonstrates that contemporary artisans are proactively redefining what business expansion looks like in artisan entrepreneurship, strategically challenging traditional norms, taking bold steps toward growth, and asserting their place in a digitally driven, global marketplace, thereby opening new avenues for scholarly debate on how expansion is conceptualised within culturally rooted, creative sectors like artisan entrepreneurship.

6.1.2.3 Digital Platforms as the New Gateway

A key facilitator of this transition is the rise of digital platforms, which has dismantled many of the traditional key barriers to new market entry. In the past, artisans' market access was largely restricted to local craft fairs, government-backed exhibitions, and word-of-mouth marketing. Today, artisans have direct and immediate access to global consumers through the multiple channels of platforms, which allow them to bypass institutions and independently establish business connections.

Fatin, a beads artisan, shared how her efforts in utilising hashtags on Instagram landed her an opportunity that was beyond her imagination:

“For some reason, I always use hashtags like #internationalartisans, #handmadewithlove, #asianartisans, #asiancrafts, and many more to allow my posts to be viewed beyond local audiences. Little did I know, my hashtags helped my post get viewed by a boutique owner in Texas, United States, who was interested in my hand-beaded handbag crafts. She sent me an email and offered to purchase my bags in bulk and sell them in her boutique. I was happy for the opportunity, not only because it allowed my crafts to be available overseas, but also because it made me proud. I come from a small part of the city and never imagined I could be supplying to a boutique halfway across the world.”

This ability to independently navigate market expansion through digital tools, even though efforts such as using hashtags on a social media post that has opened up new opportunities for artisans. This aligns with Digital Entrepreneurship Theory (Nambisan, 2017), which argues that digitalisation supports entrepreneurship by allowing small-scale business owners to reach global markets without relying on traditional stakeholders.

Artisans in this study exemplify this shift, showcasing that using social media and e-commerce platforms, not just as branding tools, but as market access strategies that allows for international scalability of their artisan businesses. Similarly, Krismajayanti's (2025) study highlights how silver artisans in Bali began using simple digital marketing tools to expand their crafts, beyond their local customer base in Indonesia.

Nonetheless, while digital tools provide unprecedented autonomy, they have also introduced artisans to new forms of dependency. For instance, artisans who previously relied on institutional support for market access are now increasingly dependent on digital platforms, their algorithms, e-commerce regulations, and platform visibility mechanisms. This raises an important critical question: does adopting digital entrepreneurship truly equals to independence for artisans, or is it simply introducing new intermediaries, such as platform algorithms, global branding expectations, and social media trends that artisans must now follow and navigate?

Ain, a jewellery artisan shared her worries:

“While we’re trying to do things on our own and be brave and take risks, we also have our own fears and worries. We always try to identify any possible risks or consequences of our actions and have backup plans for every risky decision, especially for international expansion. We don’t have any support or safety net to fall back on if we fail. That’s why we must keep on gaining new knowledge before we do anything. We have to learn new things, identify challenges, and calculate risks so we don’t end up making a mistake that, let’s say, costs us a lot of money.”

While artisans are increasingly breaking free from institutional dependency, gaining greater autonomy over their business trajectories, this independence also introduces new forms of vulnerability. Unlike previous generations who operated within state-supported ecosystems, today’s artisans must navigate growth, competition, and digital entrepreneurship without formal safety nets or institutional guidance. This shift places greater responsibility on the individual artisan, demanding informed decision-making, strategic adaptability, and continuous learning to remain competitive and resilient in a fast-changing digital economy.

Past scholars have highlighted the critical role of continuous learning in artisan entrepreneurship for long-term business sustainability (Rashid and Ratten, 2021), a point reaffirmed by the findings in this study. Although artisans are masters of their craft, with techniques and creations deeply embedded in personal identity and cultural heritage, learning cannot remain static. As Marquest et al. (2018) argue, artisans can strengthen their creative distinctiveness by integrating new innovations into their craft practices, resulting in products that are both original and market responsive.

This evolving landscape sets the stage for the next section, which examines how artisans engage in self-directed learning, not only to refine their craftsmanship but also to advance their business strategies. In today's dynamic digital economy, such learning is not a luxury but a necessity. As Rashid and Ratten (2021) note, learning enables artisans to adapt to global shifts, such as the increasing demand for sustainable products, thereby enhancing their capacity for innovation and competitiveness. Consequently, it is vital for artisan entrepreneurs to continuously broaden their knowledge and evolve their business models, moving beyond the static, tradition-bound portrayals often reinforced in earlier scholarship.

6.1.2.4 The Rise of Self-Directed Learning

Artisans have historically relied on government-led training programmes to develop new skills, acquire business knowledge, and obtain certifications. In Malaysia, such institutional initiatives were often facilitated by agencies like MARA (Majlis Amanah Rakyat), a government body focused on supporting the socio-economic development of Bumiputera entrepreneurs. These programmes were specifically designed to provide structured entrepreneurial learning and support for small business owners, including artisans.

However, the findings from this study reveal a shift toward greater self-reliance. Many artisans now demonstrate a high level of independence, actively seeking knowledge through self-directed learning rather than relying solely on institutional offerings. Some participants deliberately chose not to participate in government-led programmes, opting instead for digital alternatives such as online classes and informal learning communities. This reflects a broader transformation in how artisans approach business education, moving away from state dependency and towards more flexible, accessible, and self-determined learning pathways.

According to Bunga, an artisan chocolatier:

“I try to fill my schedule with any free classes I can find online, not just for business growth, but also to learn about new ingredients or techniques that could improve my artisan chocolates. For instance, there’s a growing worldwide demand for Dubai-style chocolate, so I took a class specifically on that, using ‘kunafeh’ as the base of my chocolate. It’s been a great opportunity to tap into that trend and blend it with my signature local chocolate flavours which I think was worth the investment.”

These findings show that artisans are increasingly leveraging digital tools to drive their self-directed learning, accessing online classes, tutorials, seminars, and digital communities that goes far beyond the traditional institutional structures that typically require physical presence. As Nambisan (2017) argues in his Digital Entrepreneurship Theory, digital technologies have fundamentally changed how entrepreneurs seek and apply knowledge, offering real-time access to learning that supports business innovation.

During quieter moments at bazaar booths, several artisans were observed watching online tutorials, social media marketing videos, or craft-related content through their mobile phones and tablets. Participants often spoke enthusiastically during interviews about new techniques, digital trends, branding strategies, and platform changes they had recently learned through online content. In several cases, artisans voluntarily demonstrated social media planning tools, video-editing applications, or examples of competitor content they used for inspiration and benchmarking. This culture of self-directed learning was also visible within both artisan studios and bazaar environments. Rather than functioning solely as craft production spaces, many artisan working environments were equipped with tools associated with digital branding and online business management, including professional cameras, tripods, studio lighting, packaging backdrops, content-planning materials, and mobile editing applications. These observations reflected how digital entrepreneurship had become deeply embedded within artisans’ everyday business routines, extending beyond craft production itself.

These observations suggest that learning among artisan entrepreneurs was not episodic or institutionally dependent, but instead operated as an ongoing and continuous process embedded within daily entrepreneurial practice. The findings therefore reinforce the argument that contemporary artisan entrepreneurs are highly proactive in navigating digital entrepreneurship, constantly adapting, experimenting, and refining both their creative and commercial strategies within rapidly evolving digital environments.

While some of these opportunities were free, others required financial investment, demonstrating artisans' willingness to pay for knowledge they believed essential to their entrepreneurial growth. This shift reflects a broader mindset change, where continuous learning is no longer viewed as optional, but as a necessary part of sustaining and scaling their business.

This mindset was particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced many artisans to quickly pivot their business models and embrace digital strategies as a means of survival. As physical markets closed and consumer behaviour shifted, artisans had to acquire new skills, especially in digital branding and online commerce to remain viable. This aligns with Segares (2022), who found that digital restructuring became a key survival strategy for artisan entrepreneurs during crisis conditions.

Azhar, a candle artisan that prioritised his self-learning initiatives to survive the COVID-19 phase:

“In the beginning, I signed up for multiple free classes at Harvard Business School during COVID because they were free, and I was panicking about the lockdown and how it was impacting the way I ran my business. Then, I figured I should invest more in learning if I wanted my business to flourish, especially since I felt like I gained so much from those free classes. Ever since then, I've tried to take as many classes as I could, within my means. Some were paid, some were not, but honestly, it gave me the confidence to keep running my business during those difficult times, especially with all the lockdowns and restrictions.”

The findings from this study revealed that artisans' transition toward self-directed learning is driven by necessity, it is what they need to grow and sustain their businesses in a fast-changing marketplace. As market conditions evolve rapidly, many artisans recognise that relying solely on institutional programmes, such as government-led business trainings, is no longer sufficient.

In fact, several participants expressed frustration with these institutional training structures, describing them as outdated, repetitive, and disconnected from real-world artisans' businesses. This echoes a study in South Africa which argued that training initiatives intended to help artisans often fail to match the real business realities artisans face, resulting in a gap between formal education and the skills needed for them to survive in current market conditions (Gamble, 2016).

Danial, a brass artisan shared his negative experience with a business workshop conducted by one of the government institutions:

“It was almost like a basic ‘Business 101’ class that gave us no new input. It felt like we were being treated as amateurs, even though many of us already had years of experience selling our products and had a digital presence, with the ability to sell our products overseas. What we need

are intensive classes with new knowledge to help us sustain our businesses in today's market conditions, such as knowledge about new tools, trends, and opportunities that goes beyond just providing basic courses that aren't updated with what's going on in the real world."

According to the findings, many artisans' dissatisfaction with institutional training led them to seek alternatives such as self-guided learning pathways, often by learning through doing. This reflects Rae's (2006) Entrepreneurial Learning Theory, which emphasises experiential and reflective learning, where entrepreneurs improve their business strategies through trial and error, and by responding to market feedback.

Huril, a handmade cosmetics artisan, described her process of learning digital marketing strategies through hands-on experience:

"I had to learn everything by myself; how to take pictures for content, edit them, write captions, use hashtags, and run online ads while managing ad preferences and more. Over time, I got better because of feedback from close family and friends, as well as valuable suggestions and recommendations from my customers."

While self-directed learning has empowered artisans to take charge of their development, it also introduces significant challenges. Artisans now wear multiple hats; as producer, strategist, marketer, and financial manager, all without the benefit of formal guidance. This multi-role reality reflects a more complex artisan identity, one rooted in independence but vulnerable to overwhelm and burnout.

The cognitive, emotional, and financial demands of managing every aspect of a business alone are high. From course fees and digital tools to paid ads and social media upkeep, artisans must make constant decisions with limited support. While this fosters agility and responsiveness, it also risks exhaustion.

Mathias (2014) highlights the necessity of artisans adopting hybrid roles to remain competitive. This study affirms that, revealing participants as proactive learners and adaptive strategists who are reconfiguring artisan entrepreneurship on their own terms. Far from being resistant to change—as older narratives suggest (Fillis, 2002; Luckman, 2015), they show entrepreneurial behaviours that rival traditional startups.

Scholars such as Bouette and Magee (2015) and Rashid and Ratten (2021) argue that learning is central to entrepreneurial resilience. This study extends that claim, positioning self-directed learning as a key marker of artisan innovation and independence.

Moving forward, more nuanced industry support is needed; not one-size-fits-all training, but co-created systems that reflect the lived realities of digital artisan entrepreneurship. As we'll explore in the next section, these challenges intersect directly with how artisans fund their growth and sustain their independence.

6.1.2.5 Funding Artisans' Growth

6.1.2.5.1 From Institutional Dependency to Financial Autonomy

Artisans' reliance on institutional agencies for financial assistance is not uncommon. Traditionally, artisan businesses have often been heavily dependent on government grants, subsidies, and institutional funding to sustain and grow their ventures. For instance, Criscuolo (2002) noted that artisans in Europe significantly relied on public subsidies to maintain their businesses, while Hilson and McQuilken (2014) observed similar patterns in Ghana. In Malaysia, agencies such as Kraftangan Malaysia, MARA (Majlis Amanah Rakyat), CENDANA, MyCreative Ventures, and MaGIC have historically provided key financial support as part of broader cultural preservation initiatives.

However, the findings of this study suggest a growing movement among participants away from reliance on traditional institutional support systems and toward more self-directed financial strategies. Many artisans described seeking alternative forms of funding through private investors, crowdfunding, business pitching opportunities, strategic partnerships, and self-financing practices. These experiences reflected an emerging entrepreneurial orientation that recognised the limitations of conventional grant structures while placing greater emphasis on financial independence, adaptability, and entrepreneurial agency.

Participants consistently described institutional support as unreliable, overly bureaucratic, and misaligned with their actual business needs. They expressed frustration with complex application processes, restrictive eligibility criteria, and the lack of relevance to their evolving growth strategies. These sentiments echo critiques from scholars like Hill (2021) and Kwiatkowski et al. (2021), who highlighted the gap between institutional intentions and the real needs of growth-oriented artisans.

Wan, a pottery artisan, articulated this shift:

“Government grants helped in the beginning, but they're unpredictable, and the amount is insufficient to sustain a business in the current economic condition. I wanted something more stable and with larger sums, so I started looking at private investors and even tried for

crowdfunding. It gives me control over my own growth and access to more reasonable amounts that can actually make a difference.”

Wan’s experience reflects a wider trend of artisans taking financial matters into their own hands, in pursuit of funding options that align with their vision and scalability needs. This proactive shift exemplifies what Ungar (2012) defines as adaptive capacity—the ability to strategically respond to constraints by creatively leveraging available resources.

Bislimi (2022) similarly argues that institutional funding often leads to poor outcomes due to inefficiencies in distribution and a lack of post-funding support, particularly during post-growth phases. This study echoes these concerns, as artisans recounted how short-term, project-based grants fell short of supporting sustained, long-term growth. The result is a strategic pivot—financial autonomy becomes not just an aspirational ideal, but a necessary survival mechanism.

6.1.2.5.2 Structural Gaps and Unequal Access to Institutional Funding

Despite the growing trend of financial independence, this transition is not universal. Some artisans remain deeply embedded within legacy systems of institutional support, particularly those whose work is rooted in traditional or niche crafts. These artisans often continue to rely on government grants, not out of passivity, but because their craft’s nature and market context make alternative funding less feasible.

Participants noted structural inequalities in how institutional funding is distributed. Many perceived a bias toward traditional crafts like batik or wood carving and felt that artisans in historically recognised cultural regions such as Kelantan or Terengganu were prioritised. In contrast, those creating more modern or hybrid craft forms, particularly urban-based or digitally driven artisans, found themselves marginalised.

Lana, a doll artisan, captured this issue perfectly, stating:

"From my two cents, the funding system is not designed for people like us with long-term growth plans, especially for more modern kinds of artisans like me. My business is about handmade dolls, and while I do sometimes create collections inspired by local elements like traditional clothing, or special dolls for Eid, Christmas, and Chinese New Year, I’m still considered a 'modern artisan.' That means I’m not prioritised, unlike those involved in traditional crafts like batik-making. My business plan is often seen as ‘too much’ because it has a very global vision,

which, according to these institutions, doesn't align with the idea of preserving traditional heritage the way a 'traditional' artisan would."

Moreover, artisans in this study frequently reported turning to alternative funding sources such as private investors, crowdfunding, and strategic partnerships, due to the structural limitations of institutional financial schemes. While government initiatives were available, they were widely perceived as short-term, project-based grants that failed to support long-term scaling or sustainability. Participants described being trapped in fragmented funding cycles that did not align with their entrepreneurial ambitions. These findings challenge earlier claims that institutional support guarantees sustained artisan growth (Rashid and Ratten, 2021). Instead, they reveal a disconnect between policy design and the evolving realities of digitally engaged, growth-oriented artisans.

This shift toward financial autonomy signals a growing entrepreneurial agency, but it also raises critical questions: Is this independence a proactive choice, or a forced response to institutional inefficiencies? As Bislimi (2022) notes, poorly distributed and mismanaged institutional funds often stall momentum, particularly in the post-growth phase. The artisans in this study echoed such frustrations, describing convoluted processes and rigid eligibility that left them underfunded and unsupported. In this context, financial independence is less a marker of empowerment and more a strategic adaptation to structural gaps.

Yet this transition is not universally accessible. Some artisans, particularly those engaged in highly traditional or heritage-based practices, often in rural or culturally significant regions, remain dependent on institutional aid. This reliance does not reflect a lack of innovation, but rather the nature of their craft, which may not appeal to commercial investors. As Banerjee and Mazzarella (2022) observe, institutional support systems often prioritise heritage preservation over entrepreneurial innovation, marginalising artisans whose work falls outside dominant narratives.

Pret and Cogan (2019) further argue that when state support fails to evolve alongside entrepreneurial needs, it can reinforce inequality by privileging outdated models of artisanship. This study supports that view: while some artisans are forging independent financial paths, others remain constrained by legacy systems. The result is a dual reality; one of proactive financial self-determination for some, and structural dependency for others, underscoring the need for more inclusive, responsive funding mechanisms that reflect the diversity of artisan entrepreneurship in a digital world.

Kim, a modern sculpture artisan reflected on her financial reliance on government institutions:

“I see others getting investors, but that’s not an option for me. My craft is too niche, and I don’t have the right networks for that kind of funding. I can’t just switch to being a fast-paced artisan, convert to a digital strategy overnight, and build a highly profitable business in a short amount of time. It’s not as easy as people think.”

This study highlights a decisive shift toward financial independence among artisans, driven not by convenience but by growing disillusionment with institutional funding. Participants described government grants and loans as overly bureaucratic, rigid, and ill-suited to the needs of modern or hybrid craft businesses. In response, many turned to alternative strategies such as private investment, crowdfunding, and self-financing to support their ambitions for long-term and international growth.

Yet, this shift is far from universal. For artisans engaged in heritage-based or niche traditions, institutional support remains a lifeline. Their crafts often fall outside the commercial logic required to attract private capital, underscoring the continued relevance of public funding in preserving cultural diversity. Rather than advocating for the rejection of institutional aid, these findings call for more inclusive, flexible, and future-oriented support structures that reflect the diversity of artisan entrepreneurship today.

Ultimately, this transformation signals more than a financial evolution, as it redefines artisans’ businesses. The findings from this study suggest that many participants increasingly positioned themselves not as passive recipients of institutional aid, but as strategic and self-directed entrepreneurs navigating alternative pathways for business growth and financial sustainability. The central question, therefore, is not merely whether artisans can access alternative funding, but who remains excluded from these evolving financial ecosystems, and what such exclusion reveals about the structural inequalities still embedded within the artisan economy. In a digital world, the future of artisan entrepreneurship depends not only on innovation and adaptability, but also on support systems that are inclusive ensuring that all artisans, regardless of whether their crafts are culturally embedded or more contemporary in nature, are not left behind.

6.1.2.6 Theme 2 Conclusion – The Independence of Artisan Entrepreneurs

This theme highlights a significant shift in how artisan entrepreneurship is experienced and enacted within contemporary digital environments. Rather than relying heavily on institutional structures, formal training pathways, or traditional support systems, participants in this study described increasingly self-directed approaches toward business growth, learning, problem-solving, and long-

term sustainability. Their entrepreneurial journeys reflected not simply independence in operational terms, but a deeper form of mental, strategic, and emotional self-reliance that shaped how they navigated uncertainty, limitations, and opportunity within the digital world.

Across the interviews, artisans consistently demonstrated a strong willingness to work with whatever resources, knowledge, and opportunities were available to them. Participants frequently described teaching themselves new digital skills, adapting to changing market trends, learning through experimentation, observing competitors and online entrepreneurs, and continuously seeking ways to improve their businesses despite financial, physical, and emotional constraints. In many cases, artisans simultaneously managed production, branding, digital marketing, customer communication, logistics, and financial planning largely on their own, revealing forms of entrepreneurial resilience that extended far beyond traditional understandings of small-scale craft work.

Importantly, this independence did not emerge as a simple rejection of institutional support, but rather appeared to develop organically through necessity, experience, and repeated exposure to rapidly changing entrepreneurial conditions. Participants often described recognising that survival within increasingly digital and competitive markets required constant adaptation, continuous self-learning, and greater personal initiative. Within this context, digital entrepreneurship was experienced not merely as technological participation, but as an ongoing process of self-development, improvisation, and strategic adjustment embedded within everyday entrepreneurial practice.

At the same time, the findings complicate overly celebratory narratives of entrepreneurial independence. While participants demonstrated admirable resilience, determination, and adaptability, this level of self-reliance also carried significant emotional, financial, and operational pressures. Many artisans described the exhaustion of constantly needing to remain visible, informed, creative, and commercially competitive while managing businesses with limited external support. The findings therefore suggest that artisan independence should not be understood solely as empowerment, but as a negotiated condition that simultaneously produces autonomy, vulnerability, flexibility, and strain.

Rather than portraying artisans as passive makers or institutionally dependent entrepreneurs, this theme suggests that contemporary artisan entrepreneurs actively shape their own entrepreneurial pathways through continuous negotiation between resource limitations, personal values, market demands, and digital opportunities. In doing so, the findings reflect broader shifts within digital

entrepreneurship, where entrepreneurial success is not always driven by scale or formal structures, but increasingly shaped by adaptability, self-directed learning, resilience, and the ability to strategically navigate uncertainty with limited resources.

6.1.3 Theme 3 – Artisans' Selective Digital Strategies

6.1.3.1 Introduction – Theme 3

The digital economy is often framed around scalability, automation, and algorithm-driven market expansion (Nambisan, 2017). Dominant digital entrepreneurship models assume that success depends on omnichannel presence, data-driven optimization, and performance marketing (Kenney Zysman, 2020). However, this approach largely neglects entrepreneurial models that prioritize authenticity, relational engagement, and controlled market positioning, particularly within artisan entrepreneurship.

Unlike conventional digital businesses that prioritize growth-at-scale, artisan entrepreneurs engage in purpose-driven, selective digitalization. Their approach to digital entrepreneurship is not about maximizing automation and visibility but about curating brand identity, fostering customer trust, and preserving cultural integrity (Asandimitra et al., 2024). Instead of passively adopting digital platforms, artisans exercise strategic selectivity, choosing digital tools based on brand positioning, audience alignment, and business objectives.

This chapter examines how artisans navigate digital entrepreneurship by balancing the opportunities and constraints of digital platforms. Two key dimension's structure this discussion:

- 1) Selective Use of Digital Tools and Channels – Artisans do not engage in blanket digital adoption; instead, they carefully choose digital platforms based on their distinct functionalities, audience dynamics, and the brand's authenticity.
- 2) Digital Strategies for Sales, Engagement, and Credibility – Artisans employ different platforms for different purposes, leveraging WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok, Shopee, and websites to manage customer relationships, enhance brand visibility, and ensure business legitimacy.

By shifting the focus from digital adoption to digital negotiation, this chapter challenges the assumption that digital success is dependent on automation, scalability, and algorithmic optimization. Instead, artisans demonstrate that curation, selectivity, and authenticity can be equally powerful strategies for navigating the digital economy.

6.1.3.2 The Selective Use of Digital Tools and Channels

Scholars within Digital Entrepreneurship Theory have traditionally linked success with automation, scalability, and algorithmic visibility (Nambisan, 2017; Sussan and Acs, 2017). These assumptions reflect debates in platform capitalism literature (Kenney and Zysman, 2016; Cutolo and Kenney, 2021), showing how entrepreneurs are expected to optimise digital engagement through multichannel strategies, shaping the digital expectations artisans now face.

The prevailing narrative suggests that to thrive in the digital economy, businesses must expand their digital footprint, be constantly visible, follow trends, and operate at speed and scale.

However, findings from this study challenge these dominant assumptions. In fact, they echo the study by Drummond et al. (2020), which found that artisans use digital tools and channels in highly intentional, strategic, and often deeply personal ways rather than for omnipresence or rapid scalability. Unlike conventional digital entrepreneurs who aim to saturate multiple platforms to maximise presence and algorithmic reach (Nambisan, 2017), the findings suggest that many participants engaged with digital platforms selectively and purposefully, often choosing platforms based on alignment with their values, target audiences, and identity-driven entrepreneurial goals rather than solely on reach or growth potential.

As Azfar, a candle artisan, described his intentional digital strategy:

“All my platforms online have their own purposes. I also curate different content for different platforms to better suit my goals and audiences. From the get-go, I knew that I wanted to remain exclusive, therefore, not to be too ‘in your face’ online.”

Azfar’s quote illustrates his strategic and purposeful thinking, reflecting a clear sense of goals and a deep understanding of digital affordances, market differentiation, and identity expression. This aligns with broader findings in this study: artisans do not seek omnipresence in the digital world. Instead, artisans in this study selectively engage with digital platforms that enable them to cultivate community, foster trust, and preserve a sense of intimacy with their audiences. Their digital engagement is not only strategic but often deeply intentional rooted in emotional investment and cultural values. Each platform choice reflects more than market logic; it reflects a desire to maintain authenticity and integrity in how their craft is represented. This aligns with broader discussions in artisan entrepreneurship that frame the entrepreneurial journey as transformative (Solomon and Mathias, 2020; Ramadani et al., 2017), where artisans increasingly transcend traditional stereotypes by pursuing growth while remaining anchored in their creative and cultural identities.

What emerges is a different entrepreneurial logic is grounded in effectuation (Sarasvathy, 2001), cultural stewardship (Lounsbury and Glynn, 2001), and relational value creation. This model does not seek scale for its own sake. Instead, it privileges sustainability without scalability, authenticity without automation, and connection over conversion.

This finding presents a significant theoretical tension. It demands that Digital Entrepreneurship Theory expand its boundaries beyond models of high-speed growth and algorithmic optimisation. Artisans show that success in the digital world is not always about being faster, louder, or more visible, it can also come from being more intentional, authentic, and connected. Their selective approach opens new possibilities for understanding how entrepreneurship can unfold in digital spaces not through automation, but through carefully curated engagement. These findings encourage a rethinking of how success is defined in artisan digital entrepreneurship, as artisans operate with different mindsets and goals from conventional entrepreneurs. While they do leverage digital platforms, they do not aim to be everywhere or seek overwhelming visibility; an approach that warrants further study.

The following section explores the findings on which platforms and channels artisans are using, and the reasoning behind these choices. It examines how they engage with digital tools in ways that are selective, strategic, and deeply intentional, while still maintaining their unique identity in the digital world.

6.1.3.3 Digital Strategies for Artisan Entrepreneurs

Building on the previous section, this part examines how artisans engage with digital tools across three key areas: (1) sales and branding, (2) customer engagement and community building, and (3) professional credibility. The findings show that artisans use digital platforms deliberately and strategically, tailoring their choices to fit specific goals and audiences. Unlike conventional entrepreneurs, their decisions are grounded in values such as authenticity, craft identity, and intentional growth. These insights highlight that artisans are not simply adapting to digital tools, as they are actively reshaping what it means to be an entrepreneur in the digital age.

6.1.3.4 Sales and Branding: WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok as Direct Sales Channels

In digital entrepreneurship literature, success is often equated with scale, automation, and omnichannel presence, where platforms are expected to maximise visibility, optimise conversion, and accelerate business growth (Sussan and Acs, 2017; Nambisan, 2017). However, this study challenges such assumptions by showing that artisan entrepreneurs adopt a different logic. Rather than seeking ubiquity, they are highly selective, choosing platforms that enable direct engagement, cultural storytelling, and trust-building values central to the artisan business model (Pret and Cogan, 2019).

Findings reveal that artisans in this study rely on WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok as core tools for sales and branding, but each is used with deliberate intention rather than volume-based optimisation. WhatsApp is prized for its capacity to support personal, trust-based interactions. Customers often enquire directly, discuss customisation, and receive personalised guidance, fostering a sense of intimacy that formal e-commerce platforms lack.

Rather than adhering to the multichannel, metrics-driven model of platform capitalism (Kenney and Zysman, 2020), artisans in this study deliberately select platforms that help build community, trust, and intimate customer relationships. Their digital engagement is thoughtful and value-driven that mirrored research by Solomon and Mathias (2020) and Ramadani et al. (2017) that characterises artisan digitalisation as a deeply transformative, identity-powered journey.

Ain, a jewellery artisan, shared:

“I love WhatsApp as a communication and sales tool. I build relationships with my customers, learn what they like. It’s two-way—so I can explain why certain materials cost what they do. They always come back and message me again. The trust and connection on WhatsApp are just different.”

Many artisans noted the benefits of the WhatsApp Business Catalogue for presenting product information up front, which made follow-up conversations more efficient. However, WhatsApp’s labour-intensive model also created operational pressure. Some artisans reported high volumes of enquiries during peak seasons, forcing them to use autoreplies, only to find customers dissatisfied.

Julie, a paper craft artisan, recalled:

“I set up an autoreply, but my customers hated it. They’d rather wait than get a robotic message. I was so busy replying that I couldn’t focus on production.”

Her experience illustrates a central tension in using WhatsApp for business: while the platform enables authentic, direct communication that builds trust with customers, it also creates pressure to be constantly available. This emotional and time burden can compromise artisans' ability to focus on other aspects of their business. Banerjee and Mete (2024) similarly observe that entrepreneurs who rely heavily on continuous engagement may struggle to grow sustainably without adopting selective forms of automation.

To balance this need for intimacy with scalability, many artisans in this study turned to Instagram as a complementary platform. Unlike WhatsApp, Instagram allows for curated, visual storytelling through Reels, Stories, and photo grids, enabling artisans to showcase their processes, products, and brand values without the constant demand for real-time interaction.

Fatin, a beads artisan, explained:

“My Instagram is very close to my heart. I think carefully about what I post—it shows the vibe I want people to feel. I want global customers to see that my brand is at par with any artisan business out there.”

Rather than pursuing highly visibility-driven digital practices centred on constant trend engagement or frequent posting, many participants described adopting more selective and intentional forms of digital engagement aligned with their creative values and business priorities. Their content is often limited and purposeful preserving a sense of exclusivity around their unique crafts (Marques et al., 2019). Tuten and Solomon (2017) affirmed that Instagram facilitates visual storytelling and direct product sales, especially for small-scale entrepreneurs. However, artisans also expressed concerns about Instagram's shifting algorithms. As reach declines, discoverability becomes harder without paid ads. In fact, some artisans in this study reported using collaborations and targeted hashtags to offset these changes but remained cautious of overdependence on paid visibility.

In contrast to WhatsApp's depth and Instagram's curated storytelling, artisans in this study acknowledged that TikTok provides a faster, algorithm-driven form of visibility. Several participants noted that a single viral video on the platform led to a surge of orders through TikTok Shop, making it a powerful, albeit unpredictable, sales driver. This aligns with Kenney and Zysman's (2020) analysis of platform economies, where algorithmic amplification creates new market opportunities for small producers. However, artisans also recognised the volatility of TikTok's visibility, raising concerns about sustainability and consistency in digital engagement.

Overall, while conventional entrepreneurs optimise for scale and automation, artisans demonstrate an alternative digital logic, by using platforms selectively to maintain authenticity, exclusivity, and relational depth. WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok are not maximised for volume, but integrated strategically to reflect the artisanal values of trust, story, and community. This approach highlights not just different tools, but a different philosophy of digital entrepreneurship.

6.1.3.5 Customer Engagement and Community Building: WhatsApp, Telegram, and TikTok as Digital Interaction Tools

In mainstream digital entrepreneurship, customer engagement is increasingly mediated through automation, artificial intelligence, and CRM systems designed for efficiency and scale (Nambisan, 2017). However, artisans in this study reveal a starkly different model that built on high-touch, relationship-based interactions that centre trust, transparency, and personalised dialogue. Instead of chatbots or email funnels, artisans leverage WhatsApp, Telegram, and TikTok for direct, intentional engagement. Each platform plays a distinct role: WhatsApp fosters intimate communication, Telegram provides structured outreach, and TikTok enables real-time visibility and interaction.

This supports the idea that digital entrepreneurship is not a one-size-fits-all model but a spectrum shaped by context, values, and industry. Yet, artisans' resistance to scalable automation introduces tensions between sustainability, growth, and authenticity.

Findings revealed that WhatsApp serves as a primary tool for one-on-one engagement and is highly relevant in the daily operations of artisans. Customers often initiate direct conversations to inquire about products, discuss materials, or request customisations, fostering a communication style rooted in dialogue, trust, and personal connection rather than automation. This approach reflects broader patterns identified in earlier research, where artisans are shown to maintain close-knit social networks with their customers (Hasanah et al., 2023; Bhattacharjya et al., 2018; Brooker and Joppe, 2014). These relationships often distinguish artisans from conventional entrepreneurs, whose models tend to prioritise speed, automation, and transactional efficiency over long-term relational engagement.

The relational nature of WhatsApp communication was also evident during several interviews. In one particular interview, an artisan participant was continuously interrupted by incoming WhatsApp notifications from customers throughout the session. The messages extended beyond transactional

enquiries about pricing or product availability, often including requests for opinions, design preferences, personalised recommendations, and updates regarding ongoing custom orders. The participant appeared accustomed to maintaining these constant streams of communication simultaneously while managing the interview, reflecting how deeply integrated WhatsApp had become within the everyday operational realities of artisan entrepreneurship.

These interactions highlighted that customer engagement within artisan businesses frequently extends beyond conventional buyer-seller relationships and instead resembles ongoing relational exchanges built on familiarity, trust, and accessibility. Rather than relying on automated systems or detached customer service processes, artisans often positioned themselves as personally available to customers, maintaining highly responsive and emotionally engaged communication practices. This suggests that digital entrepreneurship among artisans may operate through relational proximity and personalised interaction rather than purely transactional efficiency.

Ain, a jewellery artisan, shared:

"I have a WhatsApp group where my best customers get first access to new collections. They love the personal connection, and I love that I can chat with them directly."

This use of WhatsApp groups highlights an overlooked layer: community-building beyond one-on-one sales. Some artisans also shared that they participated in peer groups with other makers, such as Sukaseni Artisan Events (in Malaysia) collectives that illustrates how WhatsApp sustains not just customer ties but professional, maker-to-maker networks. This dual functionality reflects the platform's flexibility as both a commerce and community tool.

Tools like the WhatsApp Business Catalogue help balance efficiency with personalisation by allowing customers to browse products in advance. However, as customer bases expand, artisans also struggled to maintain this hands-on engagement model.

Bob, a textile artisan, reflected:

"When my business grew, I tried setting up auto-replies, but my customers didn't like it. They'd rather wait for a personal response than feel like they're talking to a machine."

This tension between authenticity and operational burden is echoed in Banerjee and Mete (2024), who warn that while direct engagement builds loyalty, it risks becoming unsustainable. To mitigate this, some artisans discussed that they incorporate Telegram as a complementary tool. Unlike WhatsApp's conversational interface, Telegram's broadcast-channel structure enables artisans to

update large audiences efficiently without the pressure of immediate replies. It's especially useful for managing growing customer bases or avoiding the noise of hundreds of direct messages (DMs).

In contrast, TikTok Live offers an interactive space that combines visibility with authenticity. Artisans use it to showcase processes, respond to questions in real time, and connect with audiences in ways that feel immediate and unscripted.

Nisa, a batik artisan, described:

"Going live on TikTok helps me connect with my followers in a real way. They see me working, they ask questions, and they buy because they trust me."

This aligns with platform economy research by Kenney and Zysman (2020), which argues that real-time, transparent content fosters consumer trust particularly in sectors where authenticity is a core value. For artisans, authenticity is not only central to their craft, as noted by Bakas et al. (2019), but also deeply embedded in the way they conduct business. Participants frequently described favouring honest storytelling, behind-the-scenes insights, and direct customer interaction over highly polished or heavily commercialised forms of online content. Through this approach, artisans reinforce their identity as authentic creators rather than conventional sellers, challenging dominant norms of transactional entrepreneurship in the digital space.

TikTok Live also doubles as a sales channel through TikTok Shop, blurring the lines between engagement and commerce. However, TikTok's strength is also its fragility. Visibility is algorithm-dependent, which makes reach unpredictable. Artisans noted that while a single viral video can generate hundreds of sales, engagement can drop just as quickly.

To address this, artisans strategically redirected TikTok traffic to WhatsApp or Instagram, where relationships can be nurtured beyond the algorithm. In this sense, TikTok becomes an entry point, not a relational endpoint. Collectively, these findings illustrate that artisan entrepreneurs use digital platforms not to automate relationships but to design human-centred engagement ecosystems. Their approach diverges sharply from mass-market digital entrepreneurs, who prioritise efficiency, speed, and data-driven decision-making. Instead, artisans prioritise authenticity, emotional trust, and cultural storytelling, creating value through connection, not just visibility.

However, this model also comes with its challenges. Artisans who resist scalable automation often face structural limitations, especially as their audiences grow. Participants in this study articulated the tension between maintaining personal, high-touch engagement and managing the demands of

expansion. The key question emerges: Can this relational model scale sustainably, or must artisans adopt selective automation without compromising their core values?

These insights expand the discourse on digital entrepreneurship, challenging assumptions that growth, speed, and automation are universal metrics of success. For artisans, sustainability is measured not by scale but by quality of engagement, trust, and cultural integrity. Their strategic use of WhatsApp, Telegram, and TikTok demonstrates how digital tools can be adapted to uphold community-driven values. Rather than resisting digital entrepreneurship all together, artisans are actively reshaping it on their own terms.

6.1.3.6 Credibility and Professional Legitimacy: Websites, E-Commerce, and Digital Legitimation

In the digital economy, business credibility is increasingly shaped by online presence. While large-scale entrepreneurs often equate legitimacy with automation and platform scalability, artisans in this study take a more nuanced approach. They strategically adopt websites, e-commerce platforms, and social proof tools to establish legitimacy, while ensuring these digital tools align with their craft values, business scale, and customer relationships.

According to artisans in the interview, a dedicated website is seen as a mark of professionalism, particularly in emerging economies like Malaysia, where credibility is often judged by the presence of a formal web presence. While social platforms such as Instagram and TikTok support visibility and engagement, they do not always meet the expectations of institutional buyers or international clients seeking structure, trust, and accountability.

This awareness of digital legitimacy is further supported by survey findings discussed in Chapter 5, where a significant number of artisans indicated plans to create their own websites as part of their digital future. Despite the availability of free platforms like social media or e-commerce marketplaces, these artisans recognised the value of owning a branded digital space that reinforces their professionalism, signals business maturity, and offers greater control over customer experience and data.

Izzy, a candle artisan, shared:

"Many corporate clients ask if I have a website. It's not enough to have an Instagram page; they want to see a 'real business' presence. For international orders, having a website helps establish trust."

However, building and maintaining a website comes with its own challenges. Unlike social media, which offers built-in visibility and viral potential, websites require ongoing SEO, traffic generation, and technical upkeep, tasks that can be resource-intensive for small artisan businesses (Banerjee and Mete, 2024). This raises important questions: are websites a long-term asset, or are they becoming redundant in the age of fast-moving social commerce?

Generational and customer-type differences further complicate this dynamic. While younger buyers are comfortable making purchases via Instagram DMs or TikTok Shop, corporate and older clients often perceive legitimacy through more traditional digital markers, like formal websites.

In addition to personal websites, several participants described engaging with structured e-commerce platforms such as Shopee, Etsy, and TikTok Shop as part of broader efforts to strengthen customer trust and reach wider audiences. These platforms provide built-in traffic, payment systems, and customer protections that help foster buyer confidence, particularly for first-time or international customers.

Bob, a textile artisan, explained:

"I used to sell only through Instagram and WhatsApp, but I realised that many buyers trust Shopee and TikTok Shop because they offer buyer protection. It helps customers feel safe when making purchases."

These platform-integrated protections, reviews, and automated fulfilment offer legitimacy advantages that direct sales cannot. However, these advantages come with significant trade-offs. Artisans expressed concern over losing control of branding, facing pricing pressures, and being subjected to platform algorithms that favour low-cost, mass-produced goods. This reflects concerns raised in platform economy literature (Kenney and Zysman, 2020), where small producers are structurally disadvantaged on large platforms due to algorithmic ranking systems. This also means that artisans could be invisible in search results prioritised by price and delivery speed metrics that rarely favour handmade goods. Moreover, as noted earlier in this chapter, many artisans worry that increased visibility on mass platforms could lead to their work being misinterpreted, decontextualised, or even copied and sold at cheaper prices. These anxieties further explain their

cautious, selective engagement with such platforms, and highlight the fragility of authenticity in hyper-commercial digital spaces.

Ultimately, while mainstream businesses pursue automation and omnichannel optimisation, artisan entrepreneurs demonstrate an alternative model of digital legitimacy that is relational, layered, and strategically hybrid. As Fillis (2010) and Pret and Cogan (2019) argue, small-scale creative enterprises often build trust and legitimacy not through scale, but through authenticity, cultural identity, and close customer relationships. Findings from this study affirm that artisans do not passively adopt platform norms; instead, they tactically integrate multiple digital tools to align with their values, preserve brand integrity, and foster long-term sustainability.

6.1.3.7 Theme 3 Conclusion – Artisan Entrepreneurs’ Selective Digital Strategies

This theme suggests that artisans’ digital strategies are shaped by far more than commercial or technological considerations alone. Rather than pursuing digital visibility purely for rapid growth, automation, or mass-market expansion, participants in this study described more selective, relational, and value-driven forms of digital engagement that reflected their broader entrepreneurial identities, personal philosophies, and ways of relating to customers and communities.

Participants frequently demonstrated careful and intentional choices regarding which digital platforms to use, how visible they wished to become, and the kinds of customer relationships they wanted to cultivate. WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok, and other digital tools were not simply adopted for efficiency or profit maximisation, but often because they enabled artisans to maintain sincerity, trust, personal interaction, and creative control within increasingly commercialised digital environments. In many cases, artisans appeared more concerned with building meaningful customer relationships, preserving authenticity, and sustaining manageable forms of growth than pursuing highly aggressive or impersonal digital expansion strategies.

Importantly, these selective digital approaches were not necessarily rooted in technological resistance or lack of entrepreneurial ambition. Instead, the findings indicate that artisans actively negotiate the tensions between visibility, commercialisation, emotional connection, and creative identity within platform-based economies. Their digital strategies therefore reflected forms of entrepreneurship that were simultaneously adaptive and restrained, strategic yet personal, and commercially aware without being exclusively profit-driven.

The findings also revealed that digital entrepreneurship among artisans was often shaped by collaborative and community-oriented dynamics rather than purely competitive market behaviour. Participants regularly shared knowledge, exchanged platform strategies, recommended digital tools, and learned from one another in ways that reflected mutual support rather than aggressive rivalry. This suggests that digital entrepreneurship within artisan contexts may operate through more relational and collective forms of engagement than those commonly associated with mainstream entrepreneurial narratives centred on scale, disruption, or hyper-competition.

Institutional stakeholders also recognised this pattern of strategic selectivity among artisans. Khalil, a director at a government agency supporting artisan development, acknowledged that many contemporary artisans appear increasingly disengaged from government-supported digital platforms and institutional initiatives, which they often perceive as outdated, slow-moving, or disconnected from current market realities:

“Many younger artisans already have their own digital strategies and preferred platforms. Sometimes they are less interested in government digital platforms because they feel those systems are outdated or slower compared to what they can achieve independently online. Unfortunately, this also means they may miss opportunities we could provide, such as international trade fairs, official retail collaborations, or overseas exposure.”

This institutional perspective further reinforces the findings of this study by suggesting that artisans’ digital selectivity extends beyond platform usage and into broader decisions surrounding institutional participation and entrepreneurial autonomy. While this selective disengagement allows artisans to maintain flexibility, independence, and control over branding and customer relationships, it may also distance them from institutional opportunities that could support broader international exposure and long-term expansion. Consequently, this theme complicates dominant assumptions within digital entrepreneurship literature that often prioritise visibility, automation, scalability, and algorithmic growth as universal indicators of entrepreneurial success. Instead, the findings suggest that artisan entrepreneurs selectively engage with digital technologies in ways that align with their own values, emotional priorities, cultural identities, and preferred modes of working. Within this context, digital entrepreneurship appears less as a uniform process of technological optimisation and more as a contextually negotiated practice shaped by authenticity, relational trust, creative autonomy, and purposeful adaptation.

6.1.4 Theme 4 – The Challenges of Digital Entrepreneurship of Artisan Entrepreneurs

6.1.4.1 Introduction – Theme 4

While earlier themes in this study have illustrated how artisans are challenging traditional stereotypes (Theme 1), demonstrating increasing independence (Theme 2), and embracing digital entrepreneurship through selective digital strategies (Theme 3), it is equally important to acknowledge that this transformation is not without its challenges. This theme shifts the focus to explore the less visible, yet deeply significant difficulties that artisan entrepreneurs face in the digital economy, as expressed by the artisans themselves during the interviews. These challenges have not only shaped their experiences but have also played a role in evolving how they conduct their businesses in the digital world.

This theme explores the structural, cultural, and emotional challenges faced by artisans as they navigate digital entrepreneurship. While digital platforms present opportunities for increased visibility, autonomy, and financial growth (Nambisan, 2017; Elia et al., 2020), they also introduce new constraints, particularly for small-scale, culturally embedded entrepreneurs like artisans. These constraints often stem from the tension between platform logics and the values that underpin artisanal work, such as authenticity, personal connection, and creative autonomy.

In contrast to larger businesses that are often able to scale operations and delegate responsibilities, many participants described managing their artisan businesses independently or within very small teams (Igwe et al., 2018). As a result, participants frequently discussed the pressures of balancing ongoing digital demands and platform expectations while attempting to remain committed to their craft practices, often describing emotional exhaustion, stress, and blurred boundaries between personal and professional life. This theme will be explored through the following subsections: (1) Financial Constraints and Platform Dependency, (2) Maintaining Artisanal Identity and (3) Navigating Cultural Misrepresentation, (4) The Emotional Burden of Artisan Entrepreneurs, and (5) Peer Support and Strategic Selectivity in Entrepreneurial Well-Being.

Understanding these challenges is essential to answering this study's central research question: *How do artisans in emerging economies conduct their business in the digital world?* This theme offers a more holistic picture of artisan entrepreneurship, not just in how artisans adapt and thrive, but also how they cope, resist, and sustain themselves in an increasingly demanding digital landscape.

6.1.4.2 Financial Constraints and Platform Dependency

The transition of traditional artisan entrepreneurs into the digital space reveals how the integration of digital technologies into their businesses presents both opportunities and constraints. This shift is shaping a new era of artisan entrepreneurship in the digital world. While earlier themes have highlighted how artisans are moving away from traditional stereotypes, such as relying on financial support from third parties which has led many artisans to actively pursue financial independence and digital autonomy. However, this section explores the paradox that emerges when, in striving to be self-sustaining, artisans encounter new financial challenges. These include the burdens introduced by the very digital strategies and platforms they depend on for growth.

Findings from this study reveal that although digital platforms grant artisans access to global markets, they also impose significant financial costs such as platform fees, digital advertising expenses, as well as algorithm-driven visibility barriers that challenge the long-term financial sustainability of artisan businesses in the digital world.

Maryam, a jewellery artisan, described her financial struggles in trying to maintain a consistent digital presence:

“At first, I was only budgeting a sum for my Facebook ads to promote my Instagram page, but then when I had a website, I had to spend more on SEO (Search Engine Optimization) to promote it. And now, I also must spend money for KOLs (Key Opinion Leaders – influencers) on TikTok to get FYP (For You Page – the main feed where content goes viral) for my products. These are all burdensome for me, having to keep up with everything just for continuous digital presence.”

Indeed, artisans experience ongoing financial strain due to the high costs associated with maintaining a digital business presence. Unlike traditional artisans who once relied on physical marketplaces or government-supported exhibitions, digital artisans must continuously invest in online visibility to remain competitive. This investment takes multiple forms, all of which require constant reinvestment rather than a one-time digital transition.

One of the most frequently discussed issues in the interviews was the cost artisans must incur for platform fees and commissions. Many sell through e-commerce platforms such as Shopee, Etsy, and TikTok Shop, all of which charge transaction fees that eat into already narrow profit margins. While these platforms expand market access, they also create structural dependencies, where artisans must pay to participate and be seen. Still, many feel they have no choice but to use them, viewing

digital platforms as essential to remain competitive, especially when compared to the limited reach of traditional, bazaar-based selling.

Jim, a lighting artisan, explained that despite the high costs, he continues investing in digital platforms to ensure market reach:

“Website, Instagram allows me to be reachable by interior designers, contractors, beyond my own reach. This is why I always maintain my website, despite the high yearly maintenance fee, as it allows my target audience to search us and find us online.”

In addition to platform fees, artisans also invest heavily in advertising and algorithmic visibility. Findings indicate that platforms like Instagram and TikTok increasingly operate on a “pay-to-play” model, where visibility is closely tied to financial investment. This supports Srnicek’s (2017) argument that platform capitalism extracts value from small businesses through monetised visibility, effectively transforming independent entrepreneurs into financially dependent participants. While these platforms claim to democratise access, in reality, artisans must continuously pay to remain visible. Without financial resources for ads, their digital presence becomes unstable. Many artisans shared that without ongoing advertising, their engagement drops significantly, illustrating how algorithmic visibility is driven less by merit and more by money.

Bunga, an artisan chocolatier, captured this frustration:

“If I don’t boost my posts or run ads, I disappear from Instagram. The algorithm is not helping anyone. It’s like I don’t exist anymore.”

Unlike larger businesses that can delegate social media management, many participants described having to independently develop content creation skills or invest in professional support to produce high-quality visuals and videos for digital platforms. . As noted in the previous theme, artisans in this study were found to be self-directed learners, often enrolling in digital marketing courses that included content creation, an increasingly essential skill in today’s digital landscape.

This aligns with the findings of Elia et al. (2020), who argue that digital entrepreneurship demands continuous reinvestment in both skills and technology, posing significant challenges for micro-entrepreneurs with limited capital. Many artisans spoke about the additional costs of content production, which were often unaccounted for and gradually became a financial burden.

Huey, a handmade bag artisan, described the investment needed to maintain a professional online presence:

“I had to spend on ring lights, microphones, even a new camera and other props to ensure quality content for my digital platforms, for quality images and videos that will give a positive image for my brand.”

Despite the financial challenges they face, artisans in this study continue to pursue digital entrepreneurship with determination and creativity. Rather than abandoning the digital space, they actively adapt by self-learning new skills, experimenting with content creation, and seeking cost-effective ways to sustain their digital presence.

These efforts reflect not only the artisans’ resilience, but also their strong entrepreneurial mindset and determination to grow and sustain their businesses in an increasingly competitive digital landscape, reinforcing findings by Bouette and Magee (2015) and Rashid and Ratten (2021).

While structural constraints persist, artisans are not merely shaped by the pressures of the digital economy they are actively navigating and developing creative strategies to work within it on their own terms. This aligns with Luckman’s (2015) study, which highlights how craft entrepreneurs demonstrate flexibility and hybrid thinking to maintain their business identity in digital markets. While they benefit from the visibility and reach that platforms provide, they are also required to adapt their business models to fit the platforms’ rules, standards, and algorithms.

6.1.4.3 Navigating Financial Constraints with Strategic Adaptability

Despite facing ongoing financial pressures, artisans in this study are far from passive victims of platform capitalism. Instead, they actively navigate the digital space through strategic and resource-conscious decision-making. Many diversify revenue streams by combining marketplace exposure with direct-to-consumer channels such as personal websites, WhatsApp Business, and Instagram DMs to reduce their dependency on platforms that charge commission fees, such as Etsy or TikTok Shop.

Azfar, a candle artisan, explained how he initially started with an artisan platform like Etsy, but later shifted his focus to WhatsApp to reduce the costs he had to bear on Etsy:

“Etsy was a start for me, but it was very costly since it charges per listing, and the fees were in USD currency, which made it harder. I knew I couldn’t stay on that platform forever. So, I linked my Instagram account on my Etsy profile so people could find me there, and on Instagram, I put my WhatsApp number so they could contact me directly.”

These multilayered strategies demonstrate how artisans creatively build sales flows across different channels to maintain their digital visibility, ultimately linking that visibility to actual sales. Many use lower-cost platforms such as Instagram to list their products and WhatsApp for direct communication and transactions with customers. This aligns with Palmer et al. (2019), who suggest that entrepreneurs with multi-channel strategies are less vulnerable to digital platform dependency. Artisans also rely on community-driven marketing that foster word-of-mouth and maintaining close relationships through WhatsApp groups and Telegram channels.

This adaptive behaviour aligns with Sarasvathy's (2001) Effectuation Theory, which describes how entrepreneurs operating under resource constraints make iterative, means-driven decisions. Rather than committing to fixed budgets or predetermined platforms, artisans base their digital investments on what they can afford at a given time. This confirms Kwiatkowski et al.'s (2021) observation that post-COVID-19, artisans have become increasingly financially autonomous and literate, as many now rely on their businesses as their primary source of income. As a result, artisans carefully evaluate potential returns on investment before committing to or withdrawing from platforms that no longer align with their evolving goals.

6.1.4.4 Maintaining Artisanal Identity and Navigating Cultural Misrepresentation

This study reveals that while artisans are increasingly embracing digital entrepreneurship, the shift into digital marketplaces presents a double-edged reality. On one hand, these platforms enable artisans to expand their reach, connect with global consumers, and establish direct-to-consumer models that bypass traditional intermediaries. On the other, they impose aesthetic and commercial pressures that challenge the authenticity of artisan entrepreneurship and cultural identity. As a result, artisans must constantly negotiate between preserving creative integrity and adapting to the dominant visual trends of the online marketplace.

Nisa, a batik artisan, articulated this tension in the context of her creative process:

“My dilemma is how to keep the originality of my craft while adding modern elements that I know attract attention online. For instance, people are really into neutral colours these days, such as beige, soft tones, and that clean, classic aesthetic. But traditional batik is the complete opposite as it's all about bright, bold colours. So, I'm always trying to find a balance between staying true to the roots of batik and meeting the tastes of today's digital audience.”

Unlike traditional digital entrepreneurs who prioritise scalability, automation, and operational efficiency (Nambisan, 2017), artisans follow a different path. Their strategies are driven not only by market visibility, but by the desire to protect the values and traditions embedded in their craft. Findings indicate that artisans must strategically manage their identity in the digital economy, where success is often dictated by algorithms and trends, rather than cultural depth or artisanal expertise.

In earlier platforms such as Etsy, artisans could communicate the cultural significance of their products directly to niche consumers who valued originality and meaning. However, as many participants expanded into broader digital ecosystems such as Instagram, TikTok, and Shopee, they described increasingly competing alongside influencers, mass producers, and non-artisan sellers within highly saturated online environments. Several participants expressed concern that these platform structures often prioritised visual trends, speed, and algorithmic visibility, making it more difficult to communicate the cultural narratives, craftsmanship, and heritage embedded within their work.

Adam, a weave artisan, shared his frustration:

“I know that I need to be different and carefully curate my story for a larger audience, especially on Instagram and TikTok. To make an impact, I have to create content that’s relevant, like using trending sounds or following trends. Sometimes it’s frustrating because my craft isn’t about trends; it’s about tradition, culture, and art.”

This aligns with Ratten (2022), who argues that artisan entrepreneurs must actively perform and showcase their distinctive creative identity in order to differentiate themselves and remain competitive within increasingly saturated digital branding frameworks. It also builds on Fillis (2010), who highlights the challenges faced by entrepreneurs driven by cultural or social values in balancing authenticity with market visibility. However, this tension may be less pronounced for artisans, as their work is often deeply rooted in cultural heritage preservation (Bravi and Murmura, 2021; Lindbergh and Schwarts, 2021; Tregear, 2005).

Ultimately, this highlights the paradox artisans face: authenticity, once defined by craftsmanship and cultural heritage, is now partially dictated by how well artisans can perform their authenticity online (Beverland, 2005). Findings suggest that artisans do not preserve authenticity in a static way but rather reconstruct it by integrating digital elements that align with market demands, without compromising their identity.

Artisans in this study were found to engage in selective participation in digital trends. Many carefully align with platforms and strategies that do not distort their brand values. These findings support Ratten's (2022) argument that artisans increasingly prioritise narrative-driven branding, focusing on the craft process, heritage, and storytelling rather than solely meeting visual expectations.

Suri, a bespoke handbag artisan, shared:

“I don't religiously follow trends like some artisans feel they have to, because I'm trying to stay true to myself. Instead, I focus on the backstory of each bag I make—why it's special, the kind of materials used, and the thought behind every compartment, stitch, and design choice. I try to tell a different story every time, because no two of my bags are the same.”

However, this effort to maintain authenticity does not come without risks. As cultural products move across digital borders, they are often simplified or misinterpreted flattened into aesthetic appeal without context. This aligns with Cultural Distance Theory (Johanson and Vahlne, 2009), which suggests that when cultural products cross into unfamiliar markets, they are prone to distortion due to sociocultural differences. Digital platforms intensify this, as algorithmic visibility rewards content that is trendy, brief, and visually appealing, often at the expense of deeper cultural narratives.

Nailah, an indigenous artisan, described her concern:

“People buy my products because they look beautiful, but they don't really understand what they mean. They just see it as ‘exotic’ decoration. I wish I could passionately explain and tell them the story behind every creation like when I sell my things in-person.”

Similarly, Nisa, a batik artisan added:

“It's hard to make people understand the difference between Malaysian batik and Indonesian batik, especially through a few seconds of video. I always find it frustrating that I can't communicate this as clearly as I could face to face.”

These experiences reflect broader concerns about the commodification of culture. Marx's (1991) theory of commodification argues that cultural artefacts, once tied to specific traditions, lose their original context when transformed into mass-market goods. However, rather than viewing this process as a complete loss of authenticity, artisans in this study demonstrate strategic agency. Some selectively commercialise their designs, while others maintain protected product lines that preserve cultural specificity.

For example, Fatin, a beads artisan, embraced this blending:

“I was happy to modernise my traditional crafts. Some of my bags use traditional materials like songket, but I elevate them with modern shapes and trends—while still enhancing the cultural elements through storytelling. I think it helped evolve my crafts, and me as an artisan too.”

In contrast, Azlan, a rattan artisan, expressed discomfort with modifying his craft:

“I had to do it to stay relevant and meet what the market expects, but deep down I appreciate my craft more when it’s all original and authentic. However, I try not to mass-produce and limit my pieces to ensure that my crafts are one of a kind. I guess I’m just a traditional artisan at heart.”

Despite these tensions, findings show that artisans actively counter cultural misrepresentation. Many incorporate educational storytelling into their branding, providing historical and cultural context through their digital presence. Others limit production to maintain exclusivity and avoid commodifying their work.

This tension between commercial growth and artisanal authenticity was also materially visible within several artisan working environments and bazaar spaces. While many participants expressed strong ambitions for expansion, international visibility, and financial sustainability, traces of ongoing internal negotiation surrounding identity and authenticity were frequently present within their everyday business settings.

In several artisan booths and studio spaces, handwritten notes, personal reminders, and motivational phrases were visibly displayed near workstations, packaging areas, or behind sales counters. These messages often reflected efforts to preserve personal values and creative identity amidst increasing commercial and digital pressures. For example, one artisan displayed a handwritten reminder stating “Stay true to yourself,” while another had placed a note behind the counter reading “Mama says I’m special.” One participant specifically pointed to a personal note stating “Do not conform to mass pressure,” explaining during the interview that it served as a daily reminder to resist excessive standardisation and mass-market expectations despite recognising the financial temptations associated with scaling production.

These observations suggest that artisans’ negotiations with digital entrepreneurship were not purely strategic or economic, but also deeply emotional and identity-driven. Although participants actively pursued growth and digital visibility, many simultaneously demonstrated conscious efforts to protect perceptions of uniqueness, cultural meaning, originality, and creative autonomy. The findings

therefore indicate that artisan entrepreneurship within digital environments involves continuous negotiation between commercial sustainability and the preservation of artisanal self-identity.

These findings challenge dominant digital entrepreneurship theories (Nambisan, 2017; Palmer et al., 2019), which often equate success with growth, scalability, and market expansion. In contrast, this study demonstrates that artisans define success not only by financial growth, but by their ability to preserve cultural and creative integrity within digital constraints.

In conclusion, digital platforms do not simply replicate traditional market structures, but it actively reshapes how artisans construct their identity and operate their businesses. While digital tools such as social media pages and e-marketplaces offer wider reach, they also introduce new pressures that demand careful negotiation between visibility, commercial viability, and authenticity. Unlike mainstream digital entrepreneurs who optimise for automation and growth, artisans engage in selective digital adaptation, crafting digital strategies that align with their values and cultural roots.

Nonetheless, this ongoing tension between platform demands and digital market expectations creates emotional burdens that artisans must navigate. This emotional strain forms another key challenge in their journey through digital entrepreneurship, which will be explored in the following section.

6.1.4.5 The Emotional Burden of Artisan Entrepreneurs

While digital entrepreneurship is often celebrated for empowering small businesses to gain access into the global markets (Nambisan, 2017; Palmer et al., 2019), findings from this study reveal a less visible yet frequently discussed challenge during the interviews: the emotional and psychological toll it imposes on artisan entrepreneurs. In many Asian contexts, where mental health is still a relatively under-discussed and sensitive topic, this issue deserves more attention. Artisans in this study openly reflected on their emotional struggles, suggesting that future research should place greater focus on this area.

Findings revealed that the transition to digital entrepreneurship requires artisans to juggle multiple roles beyond their traditional responsibilities such as content creator, digital marketer, customer service agent, and financial manager, often without proper external support or prior knowledge. Unlike larger businesses that can delegate these functions to third parties, artisans, as small business owners, are usually left to manage everything themselves.

Luna, a beads artisan, captured this emotional strain:

“I used to just focus on creating, but now I feel like I am constantly switching between roles. One moment I’m a content creator, then I’m a customer service agent, then I’m handling my accounts. It’s too much.”

This reflects the old theory of Boyd and Gumpert’s (1983) Entrepreneurial Stress Model, which links heightened stress to the inability to delegate tasks. However, this study extends that framework by showing how stress for artisans in the digital world is not merely workload-based, but it is deeply embedded in the very structure of platform capitalism, as they have to keep up with the constant change of trends, virality, customers’ demands and expectations. Unlike traditional entrepreneurs who can scale or systematise operations, artisans are often locked into hyper-individualised, labour-intensive business models that demand continuous personal engagement for digital visibility, all of which they must do things by themselves to meet these demands and meet the expectations digitally.

According to the findings, these pressures go beyond self-management tasks, but could also be linked closely with Hochschild’s (1983) Emotional Labour Theory offers further insight of how artisans are expected to perform emotional engagement such as interacting with followers online, having close relationship with customers and maintaining the relationship by being available and consistently available to ensure trust and closeness, as well as creating new and consistent content, and remaining relevant and competitive. However, while Hochschild originally applied this theory to wage workers, this study demonstrates that digital artisans, despite being self-employed, are subjected to similar emotional demands under platform capitalism.

Unlike salaried workers who follow fixed hours, digital entrepreneurs are often expected to be constantly available. This blurs the line between work and personal life and directly challenges the autonomy that artisans value, such as choosing their own schedule and maintaining a balanced lifestyle (Ratten et al., 2019). These findings also question traditional ideas of entrepreneurial freedom (Cardon et al., 2009; Ratten and Jones, 2021), which often describe self-employment as empowering. While artisans value independence, this study shows that working alone in digital spaces can lead to isolation, mental fatigue, and reduced creative energy. Instead of feeling empowered, some artisans feel overwhelmed by the constant pressure to be productive and visible online.

A core tension that emerges is between artisans’ creative identity and commercial survival. Many entered digital entrepreneurship out of passion for their craft, yet the pressures of content production,

algorithmic visibility, and constant engagement have reduced their ability to focus on creativity. This aligns with Patzelt and Shepherd's (2011) research on entrepreneurial burnout, which suggests that prolonged commercial pressures often strip entrepreneurs of the very passion that motivated them to start their businesses. However, this study expands their findings by demonstrating that burnout in digital markets is not just psychological, but algorithmically structured.

The economic consequences of disengagement further reinforce this cycle. Some artisans in this study described their attempts to regain creative autonomy by reducing social media usage, taking breaks from online engagement and prioritising personal projects, such as developing new designs or focusing on craft innovation. Others scaled down their operations by shifting to smaller, more manageable business models, such as taking orders only from regular customers. These strategies were seen to manage burnout and regain a sense of control during emotionally taxing periods.

Julie, a paper craft artisan, shared her experience of burnout during the COVID-19 pandemic, when she was forced to transition her business from offline to online operations:

“During Covid, I felt super burnt out as the pressure of having to learn all these new digital tactics I'd never done before. Doing lives on TikTok and Instagram, managing my Instagram shop, trying to list products on Shopee, experimenting with Telegram and WhatsApp Business—it really took a toll on me.”

Observationally, signs of physical fatigue and emotional exhaustion were also highly visible throughout several bazaar environments and interview settings. Many artisans appeared physically drained during interviews, particularly those simultaneously managing active bazaar operations while participating in the study. Participants frequently described the demanding realities of mall-based artisan bazaars, where booth setup often began as early as 7am and had to be fully completed before malls opened to the public. Several artisans explained that delays in preparation could result in financial penalties imposed by event organisers or shopping malls, adding further pressure to already intensive working conditions.

Beyond digital responsibilities, artisans were also required to manage physically demanding labour, including transporting products, assembling booths, arranging visual merchandising displays, decorating spaces, preparing packaging materials, and maintaining customer engagement throughout long operating hours that often extended until 10pm. These routines frequently continued across consecutive multi-day bazaar events lasting between three to seven days.

During interviews, some participants displayed visible signs of exhaustion through slowed responses, physical fatigue, deep sighs, or discussions surrounding lack of rest and work-life imbalance. Several artisans described feeling mentally overwhelmed by the need to simultaneously sustain physical market presence while continuously managing online platforms, customer communication, digital content production, and algorithmic engagement. These observations reinforce the argument that the pressures of digital entrepreneurship for artisan entrepreneurs extend far beyond online activity alone and are deeply intertwined with physical, emotional, and operational labour within everyday entrepreneurial practice.

Institutional stakeholders were also aware of the emotional and operational strain experienced by many artisan entrepreneurs. Both Suraya and Khalil acknowledged that although support schemes, financial assistance, and development programmes were available, artisans frequently struggled to fully engage with these initiatives due to exhaustion, time pressures, and the overwhelming demands of managing their businesses independently.

Suraya explained:

“Sometimes they genuinely want help, but they are already too overwhelmed managing everything themselves. We’ve seen artisans start filling in application forms halfway and stop responding, or not return calls because they are too busy handling their businesses and daily operations.”

Similarly, Khalil noted that many artisans appeared caught between the desire for growth and the practical exhaustion of sustaining constant business activity:

“We understand that many artisans are exhausted. They are managing production, sales, social media, and bazaars all at once. Some of them want support, but by the time we follow up, they are already overwhelmed or have moved on to dealing with more urgent business matters.”

These perspectives suggest that barriers to institutional engagement may not stem solely from resistance or disinterest, but also from the emotional and operational fatigue embedded within contemporary artisan entrepreneurship. The findings therefore highlight how burnout and exhaustion can themselves become structural barriers, limiting artisans’ ability to access the very support systems designed to assist them.

This directly reflects findings by Fischer and Reuber (2014), who show that social media use can heighten stress and identity tensions for entrepreneurs. For artisan entrepreneurs who are already juggling multiple roles in production, marketing, and sales, this pressure is intensified. The demand for constant content creation can lead to emotional fatigue, suggesting that outsourcing digital tasks like social media management may be a necessary strategy to protect their well-being. As Srnicek (2017) argues, digital platforms reward algorithmic activity, frequency, relevance, and engagement, rather than authenticity or cultural integrity. For artisans rooted in tradition and craft, this structural pressure can create a cycle of performative visibility that undermines their creative autonomy.

This study thus challenges dominant narratives of digital entrepreneurship as liberating or scalable for all. For artisans, the digital economy offers visibility, but on terms that often extract more emotional labour than they support. The promise of autonomy is tempered by constant performativity, and the emotional burden becomes inseparable from the business itself.

In summary, this study highlights how many participants challenged long-standing stereotypes surrounding artisan entrepreneurship by positioning themselves as increasingly independent, digitally strategic, and growth-oriented entrepreneurs. At the same time, the findings also revealed important tensions within these entrepreneurial journeys. Participants' selective and intentional digital engagement did not necessarily shield them from emotional strain. Many described experiencing burnout, pressure, and exhaustion from balancing multiple responsibilities while maintaining a constant digital presence, often without sufficient external support. Therefore, while we celebrate their transformative journey and entrepreneurial resilience, future research and policy must also consider their emotional sustainability. Artisans need support systems that align with their values and working styles, not just frameworks driven by digital visibility or performance metrics.

While these findings illuminate the emotional weight artisans carry in managing their digital businesses, often alone and under pressure, they also reveal an important counterbalance: the presence of informal support systems and peer-led coping strategies. Rather than internalising stress or relying solely on personal resilience, artisans turned to their communities for strength. The following section explores how peer support and selective engagement became vital tools for managing entrepreneurial well-being in the digital world.

6.1.4.6 Peer Support and Strategic Selectivity in Entrepreneurial Well-Being

Despite the emotional and structural pressures of digital entrepreneurship, this study finds that artisans are not passive recipients of stress. Instead, they actively engaged in strategies to safeguard their mental well-being, most notably through community-building and peer support. This directly confirms the importance of peer support in artisan entrepreneurship, even when it comes from competitors themselves, as noted by Kuhn and Galloway (2015).

This finding challenge earlier studies that suggest the social consequences of entrepreneurship are primarily shaped by the quality of one's social life (Franceschi, 2020; Hill, 2020; Nayak et al., 2022). While artisans in this study did face mental health challenges, they did not rely solely on personal resilience. Rather, they mobilised social connections, particularly with fellow artisans for emotional support and practical problem-solving. In this way, social life was not merely a passive condition but an active coping mechanism, reaffirming the importance of community in artisan entrepreneurship, as highlighted by Bakas et al. (2019) and Pret and Cogan (2019). Findings highlight that artisans do not seek support solely from those in close geographical proximity, but from peers who share similar values, creative identities, and entrepreneurial experiences. This underscores the importance of relational proximity built on shared understanding and mutual support, over mere physical closeness in sustaining artisan entrepreneurship.

Many artisans in this study described turning to fellow artisans via WhatsApp groups, digital forums, and artisan collectives, where they exchange business advice, share emotional experiences, as well as offering one another informal mental health support. Although these spaces were not specifically created for emotional well-being, they have organically become spaces of encouragement, knowledge-sharing, and solidarity. This sense of community acts as a buffer against the isolating and algorithm-driven pressures of digital entrepreneurship.

Lana, a doll artisan, shared:

“I joined a group of local artisans online, and it really helps. We share tips, warn each other about scam customers, and remind each other to take breaks when it gets too much.”

Lana's reflection illustrates how peer support offers not just practical advice but emotional grounding that helps mitigate the pressures of digital entrepreneurship. Building on this, another recurring strategy observed was strategic selectivity. Rather than striving for growth at all costs, some artisans intentionally choose modest business models to avoid burnout. They limit their sales to manageable volumes, engage only with platforms they feel comfortable using, and reject the mainstream

entrepreneurial logic of “more is better.” This echoes previous findings in the study, where artisans expressed a preference for maintaining exclusivity and manageable workloads over chasing mass exposure or high-volume sales.

This selectivity serves two functions: (1) it preserves the authenticity and creative control of their work, (2) it also acts as a coping strategy to manage the emotional labour embedded in continuous digital engagement. Some artisans explained that they only promote new products when they are mentally ready or intentionally delay releases to avoid customer pressure.

These practices align with Uy et al.’s (2017) Self-Regulation Theory, which highlights the role of self-awareness, goal-setting, and adaptive behaviour in fostering psychological resilience. This resonates with a core trait often associated with artisan entrepreneurship, namely, the preference for lifestyle-driven business models that allow individuals to work at their own rhythm (Ratten et al., 2019). Rather than viewing this slower pace as a limitation, it reflects intentional self-regulation. Artisans in this study demonstrated an acute awareness of when to pause, recalibrate, or scale back, distinguishing themselves from the high-speed, growth-oriented culture that dominates conventional entrepreneurship. This deliberate pacing is not a weakness, but a strategic strength rooted in long-term sustainability and well-being.

However, the findings also suggest that not all artisans are equally able to self-regulate. For those dependent on daily engagement to drive sales, taking breaks or scaling down is not always financially viable. While self-regulation helps, it is ultimately a limited solution to what is a systemic challenge that continues to demand emotional labour while offering little in return.

In summary, this section highlights how artisans are developing community-based and strategy-led coping mechanisms to protect their emotional well-being. Rather than viewing resilience as an individual trait, it suggests the need to reframe how digital entrepreneurship is understood, centring sustainability, not just in financial terms, but also in emotional and creative dimensions.

6.1.4.7 Theme 4 Conclusion – The Challenges of Digital Entrepreneurship of Artisan Entrepreneurs

While previous themes in this chapter highlighted the ways artisans are becoming more ambitious, independent, and digitally strategic, this theme reveals the less visible realities that accompany these transformations. The findings suggest that participation in digital entrepreneurship is not experienced

by artisans as a smooth or uniformly empowering process, but rather as one characterised by continuous negotiation between opportunity and strain, visibility and exhaustion, commercial growth and personal sustainability.

Participants in this study frequently described digital entrepreneurship as emotionally, financially, and creatively demanding. Beyond managing the practical realities of running small businesses, artisans were also navigating platform dependency, rising operational costs, algorithmic pressures, and the expectation to remain constantly visible and responsive within digital spaces. At the same time, they carried the additional responsibility of protecting cultural meaning, maintaining authenticity, and preserving creative identity within increasingly commercialised and trend-driven online environments. These responsibilities often extended beyond business concerns alone and became deeply tied to personal values, emotional attachment, and self-identity.

Importantly, the findings indicate that artisans do not simply experience these tensions passively. Rather, they actively develop ways of coping, adapting, and protecting themselves within demanding digital environments. Participants demonstrated ongoing efforts to negotiate sustainable forms of entrepreneurship through selective platform engagement, manageable business pacing, emotional self-regulation, peer support networks, and intentional limitations on growth or visibility when necessary. In this sense, resilience within artisan entrepreneurship appeared not solely as individual toughness or perseverance, but as a relational and adaptive process grounded in community, shared understanding, and strategic self-preservation.

The findings also complicate dominant assumptions within digital entrepreneurship literature that often frame digital participation primarily through the lenses of innovation, scalability, flexibility, and market opportunity. While digital platforms undoubtedly provide artisans with expanded visibility and access to wider markets, the experiences described throughout this theme suggest that these opportunities are accompanied by hidden forms of labour, emotional fatigue, physical exhaustion, and ongoing identity negotiation that are often overlooked within more celebratory accounts of digital entrepreneurship.

Within the context of artisan entrepreneurship, sustainability therefore appears to extend far beyond financial survival or business growth alone. Participants in this study consistently demonstrated concerns surrounding emotional well-being, creative fulfilment, cultural representation, manageable workloads, and long-term personal sustainability. Rather than pursuing unlimited expansion, many artisans appeared more concerned with developing forms of entrepreneurship that remained

emotionally survivable, creatively meaningful, and personally manageable within the realities of everyday digital work.

Consequently, this theme suggests that understanding artisan entrepreneurship in the digital world requires greater attention to the emotional, embodied, and relational dimensions of entrepreneurial life that exist alongside technological adaptation and commercial activity. The findings ultimately reveal that while artisans are increasingly embracing digital entrepreneurship, they are simultaneously redefining what sustainable entrepreneurial success means on their own terms, not solely through growth, visibility, or profitability, but through their ability to preserve identity, creativity, community, and well-being within an increasingly demanding digital economy.

6.1.4.8 Interview Findings Conclusions (4 Key Themes)

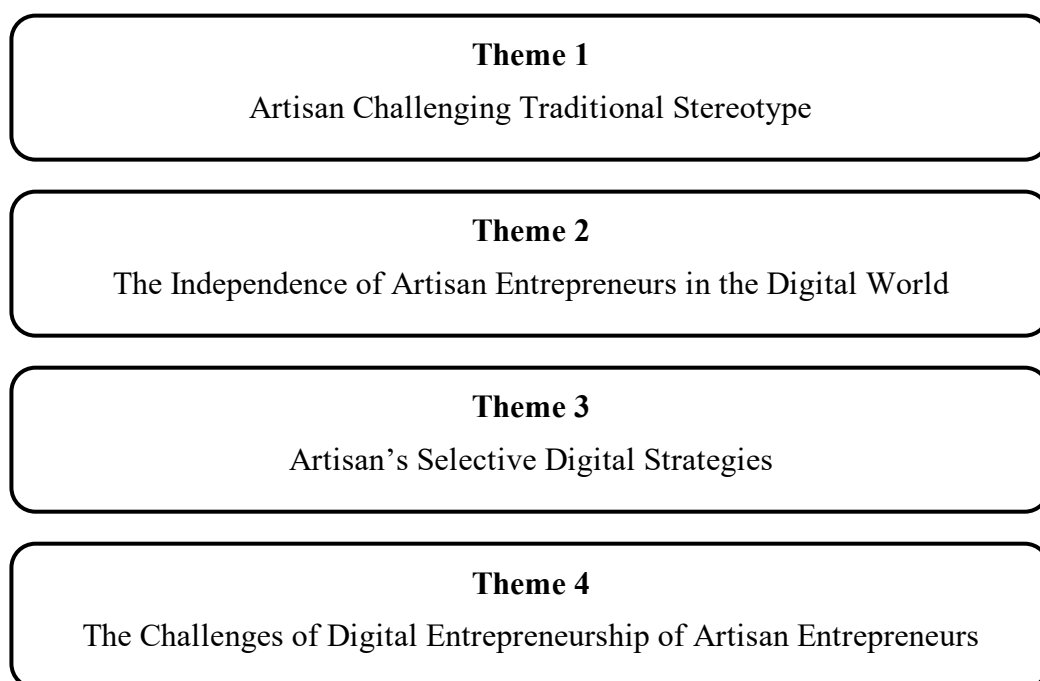


Figure 11: Interview Key Findings

Figure 11 outlines the four core themes developed from the interviews with artisan entrepreneurs as discussed extensively in this chapter. Collectively, these findings reveal how artisans are challenging outdated stereotypes, as they are no longer passive or tradition-bound, but strategic, independent,

and digitally engaged. They reject institutional dependence, selectively adopt digital tools, and carve out growth paths aligned with their values.

Yet, this transformation comes with emotional and structural costs. Rather than listing disconnected themes, these insights converge into a powerful narrative: artisan entrepreneurship in the digital world is not just evolving, it is being redefined. This study fills a critical gap in the literature by offering a human-centred, context-specific understanding of how artisans navigate modern entrepreneurship. It opens space for scholarly and policy debates on sustainability, support systems, and what truly defines entrepreneurial success and how it is artisans navigating / conducting their business in this digital world.

The following bonus section complements this view by incorporating key stakeholder perspectives, offering a comparative lens that deepens our understanding of both systemic challenges and future opportunities.

6.2 Tensions in the Artisan Entrepreneurship Industry

6.2.1 Introduction - Institutional vs. Artisan Perspectives

As outlined in Chapter 4 (Section 4.32), four additional interviews were conducted with key stakeholders involved in Malaysia's artisan entrepreneurship landscape. These included: (1) a director at a government agency supporting SME development, (2) a representative from a government-linked organisation focused on sustainable entrepreneurship, (3) a senior government officer responsible for evaluating SME funding applications, and (4) a member of an NGO working with digitally engaged SMEs, including artisans.

These interviews helped uncover the tensions between institutional perspectives and those of artisan entrepreneurs regarding challenges within the artisan sector. As discussed in earlier sections of this chapter, many artisans acknowledged the availability of institutional initiatives such as funding schemes and training programmes, but often perceived them as inaccessible, overly bureaucratic, or disconnected from their real-world needs. Artisans conducting the business in urban settings expressed a sense of exclusion, describing how they felt unsupported and compelled to grow their businesses independently and organically.

In contrast, the institutional stakeholders offered a different perspective, highlighting what they saw as substantial efforts to support artisans. This divergence reveals key tensions between policy

provision and artisan experience. The following section explores these dynamics in more detail, drawing on insights from both groups to highlight gaps between institutional intentions and artisan realities.

This section critically examines three key areas of tension that define the contrasting perspectives between artisans and institutional stakeholders.

- 1) Market Access & Visibility: A Mismatch Between Institutional Efforts and Artisan Needs -** Institutions have introduced structured market access programs, including government-backed digital platforms, retail collaborations, and business-matching initiatives.
- 2) Financial Support: Misaligned Criteria and Exclusion of Modern Artisans -** While institutions offer grants, subsidies, and loans, the bureaucratic eligibility criteria often favour traditional artisans, excluding growth-driven, digital-first entrepreneurs.
- 3) Craft Authenticity vs. Commercialization: Who is Recognized as an Artisan? -** Institutional support often favours artisans preserving cultural heritage, while those who modernize their craft to adapt to contemporary consumer trends struggle for recognition.

By dissecting these points of conflict, this section presents a critical analysis of how institutional policies, market structures, and support mechanisms intersect with artisans' experiences. These contradictions not only influence artisans' ability to compete and innovate but also highlight broader challenges in how cultural and creative industries are governed in the digital world. Examining these tensions is essential to understanding why many artisans feel disconnected from institutional support structures and how these systems must evolve to remain relevant in a changing economic landscape of a digital world.

6.2.2 Tension 1 - A Mismatch Between Institutional Efforts and Artisan Needs

Government agencies and institutions emphasize that they have established extensive initiatives to support artisan entrepreneurs in Malaysia, including business-matching programs, digital platforms, storefront collaborations, and artisan bazaars. These efforts aim to help artisans sustain and expand their businesses, particularly in an increasingly competitive market. However, institutional representatives have noticed a concerning trend: engagement remains limited to the same group of traditional artisans, while new entrants and those operating in modern digital markets are largely

absent. This raises questions about why broader participation is lacking and whether these initiatives effectively address the evolving needs of artisans.

Khalil, a director from a government institution supporting entrepreneurs expressed this concern:

"We have introduced multiple channels to help artisans sustain and expand their business, but we continue to see the same group of participants engaging with these initiatives. Perhaps we need to rethink how we structure our programs to attract a wider range of artisans, especially those more active in modern markets. However, these initiatives have been tested and studied in the past, and we believe they remain relevant for artisans today."

From the institution's perspective, the necessary support structures exist, and the materials remain relevant. However, artisans are not fully utilizing these opportunities, whether due to a lack of awareness, hesitation to engage with formal market structures, or a preference for independent branding and digital sales strategies. This raises concerns about whether the issue lies in program accessibility and outreach or in artisans' shifting priorities toward alternative business models.

Saiful, a stakeholder from a government-linked organisation suggested that artisans' strong sense of independence plays a role:

"We recognize that artisans are highly independent and prefer to manage their businesses in their own way, setting their own goals and strategies. However, I do wish they would take full advantage of the courses and platforms available, as these resources could further strengthen and expand their businesses."

As discussed earlier, the findings suggest that artisans prefer social media marketing and informal sales networks over government-backed platforms, viewing them as more flexible, profitable, and attuned to current consumer behaviour. This raises a critical question: are institutional platforms fundamentally ineffective, or are artisans intentionally shifting toward alternative models that better reflect their values, priorities, and business strategies?

Nonetheless, while institutions believe they have provided substantial support, artisans dispute the effectiveness of these efforts, arguing that they lack depth, strategic execution, and industry relevance. Many artisans view government initiatives as outdated and out of touch with real market conditions. Training programs, for instance, often recycle elementary business concepts without addressing critical strategies for pricing, branding, or market differentiation.

Josh, a fragrance artisan, expressed frustration over this disconnect:

"I've attended these workshops, but they always cover the same basic topics, how to start a business, how to sell, or, at times, they feel more like motivational sessions than practical training. What we truly need is advanced industry knowledge, market insights, and strategic guidance that can help us compete effectively in today's evolving marketplace."

Similarly, digital selling platforms such as MyCraft, designed to boost artisan visibility, are perceived as ineffective due to poor promotion and low consumer traffic. Many government-backed marketplaces struggle with low engagement, largely due to weak marketing strategies and limited buyer outreach. This reinforces artisans' concerns that these initiatives exist more as symbolic efforts rather than functional tools for business success.

At the core of this tension is a debate over responsibility. Artisans argue that institutional support must be more strategic, data-driven, and aligned with market realities, rather than following a top-down approach that excludes artisan voices. Government institutions, however, maintain that they have created ample opportunities and that it is ultimately up to artisans to engage and adapt.

This disconnect raises a critical challenge: Can institutional market access programs evolve alongside changing artisan business models? As artisans increasingly rely on digital entrepreneurship and self-driven initiatives, government-backed programs risk becoming obsolete unless they integrate these shifts into their strategies. Without meaningful adjustments, institutional support will continue to be seen as ineffective, leaving artisans to navigate market challenges independently, while policymakers struggle to prove the relevance of their interventions.

6.2.3 Tension 2 - Misaligned Financial Support and Exclusion of Modern Artisans

While institutions such as government agencies, banks, and private organizations offer funding, grants, and loans to support artisans, key stakeholders observe low engagement with these financial programs. Efforts to digitize applications and improve accessibility, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic were meant to encourage participation. However, officials note that most applicants continue to be traditional artisans, while younger, growth-driven artisans remain largely absent from these financial schemes.

Suraya, a government officer, expressed surprise at this pattern:

"We have increased the accessibility of financial aid, especially through digital applications, to ensure that more artisans can benefit. However, the applicants still largely come from rural, traditional artisans. It is surprising that younger or more business-driven artisans are not engaging with these opportunities as much as expected."

From the institutional perspective, financial support is available but remains underutilized. Some officials assume that modern artisans simply do not need financial assistance, believing they can sustain their businesses through self-generated capital and profit. Others speculate that artisans may be unaware of funding opportunities, hesitant about structured financing, or prefer alternative funding models such as crowdfunding and direct investment.

However, artisans argue that they are not avoiding financial aid, they simply do not qualify under rigid eligibility criteria. Farhan, a men's batik artisan, shared his frustration:

"After calling the person in charge of the fund, they made it very clear that I didn't qualify and needed to wait a few more years before I could apply. It was disappointing because my business was doing well, making a profit, and we needed extra financial help to grow further and take advantage of the market demand at the time."

Many grant and loan applications require physical studio addresses, official boutiques, or business registration older than six years, making it impossible for home-based or digital-first artisans to apply. Some also require bank statements proving profits for the past three years, favouring established, traditional artisans over emerging, high-growth businesses.

Syed, an NGO founder working with digital-savvy, modern artisans, highlighted this contradiction:

"These artisans seem independent, but they need help the most. They have barely anyone behind them, and the financial structures in place don't recognize their struggles."

This raises a critical question: Do financial institutions recognize modern, market-driven artisans as legitimate participants in the artisan economy? This misalignment between financial policies and modern artisan entrepreneurship suggests that institutions must adapt their funding models to reflect the evolving business structures of artisans in the digital age. Without reforms, many growth-driven artisans will continue to be excluded from financial support designed to sustain the industry.

Beyond financial access, this also raises a broader debate: If aggressive, innovative artisans are not seen as "authentic" enough for funding, do institutions still consider them artisans? This leads to the next discussion: the tension between authenticity and commercialization in the artisan economy.

6.2.4 Tension 3 - Institutional Definitions of Artisans in the Digital World

While institutions do not explicitly require artisans to focus on craft preservation, there is a strong preference for those linked to heritage traditions. Institutional representatives interviewed in this study acknowledged that artisans who incorporate modern elements into traditional crafts struggle to fit within conventional definitions of authenticity, making it harder for them to access institutional support. This creates a tension in artisan classification, as those preserving heritage crafts are easily recognized, while those modernizing traditions face uncertainty regarding their artisan status and eligibility for assistance.

Saiful, a stakeholder at a government link institution explained why institutions focus on artisans preserving cultural traditions:

"We aim to support artisans who bring cultural and heritage value because they align with our mission and values. We want to help keep local crafts alive, and naturally, those dedicated to preserving traditional craftsmanship fit more closely with that goal."

This perspective highlights an implicit institutional bias. Although there are no formal restrictions against modernised or contemporary crafts, artisans who incorporate new techniques or aesthetics are often reclassified as designers or commercial entrepreneurs rather than being recognised as artisans. Many institutional programs continue to favour those engaged in heritage-based practices, reinforcing rigid and traditionalist definitions of craftsmanship.

However, such narrow classifications risk excluding emerging forms of artisan entrepreneurship that are equally creative and culturally meaningful. As Kapp (2017) argues, artisan identity should be defined more broadly centred on originality, creative autonomy, and meaningful production within the cultural and creative industries, regardless of technological integration. This suggests that institutional frameworks urgently require revision to reflect the evolving realities of artisan work. Without such updates, there is a risk of overlooking or alienating a new generation of artisans, leading to missed opportunities for meaningful support, innovation, and impact.

For many artisans, innovation is not a departure from authenticity but a necessary adaptation. They argue that global markets demand newness, and to remain competitive, artisans must blend traditional techniques with modern materials, aesthetics, and digital platforms. Instead of erasing cultural heritage, modernization makes it relevant to contemporary buyers, ensuring that traditions continue to thrive in evolving market conditions.

Lim, a rattan artisan explained this frustration:

"I don't think it's fair for those of us who are trying to meet market demand, especially by incorporating new elements into traditional crafts. This doesn't mean we lose our identity or authenticity, nor does it take away from the essence of artisanship. It simply means we are evolving, innovating, and finding ways to keep traditional elements alive while adapting to modern trends."

Artisans who blend heritage techniques with modern design principles often demonstrate strong market performance and consumer appeal (Marquest et al., 2019). However, despite their success, they continue to face institutional barriers to recognition and support. Many of these artisans view their work as a continuation rather than a departure from traditional practices, innovating within the boundaries of cultural continuity. Yet institutional frameworks often fail to accommodate this evolving definition of craftsmanship, reinforcing rigid distinctions between 'authentic' tradition and modern adaptation.

This disconnect raises a deeper question: who has the authority to define what it means to be an artisan? Institutions argue that prioritizing traditional artisans ensures cultural knowledge is not lost. They fear that excessive modernization blurs the line between artisan products and mass-market goods, making it difficult to differentiate handmade craftsmanship from factory-produced replicas.

Institutional definitions of authenticity shape access to financial support. Artisans blending tradition with modern business strategies often find themselves excluded, viewed as too commercial for artisan grants but too craft-based for standard business funding. This financial bias reinforces a rigid authenticity model, limiting opportunities for artisans who successfully modernize their craft.

Craft authenticity must evolve beyond strict preservationist ideals. While cultural preservation is valuable, it should not exclude artisans who modernise their craft to meet market demands. Without a broader recognition framework that values both tradition and innovation, institutions risk sidelining the very artisans driving the industry forward. If heritage-based artisans remain the primary focus, modern artisans may be forced to choose between institutional recognition and commercial success, threatening the long-term sustainability of the craft economy.

6.3 Empirical Framework Mapping Codes, Subthemes, and Themes

This study's empirical framework emerged through an iterative thematic analysis process involving open coding, axial coding, observational memoing, and interpretive theme development across the interview and fieldwork data. Through repeated engagement with participants' narratives, emotional expressions, entrepreneurial practices, and contextual observations, the analysis progressively evolved from initial open codes into broader analytical categories, fifteen interrelated subthemes, and ultimately four overarching themes that collectively capture how artisan entrepreneurs negotiate and experience digital entrepreneurship within an emerging economy context.

The empirical framework demonstrates that the four final themes did not emerge in isolation, but were constructed through continuous interpretive movement between participants' lived experiences, observed entrepreneurial environments, and the broader conceptual concerns surrounding digital entrepreneurship and artisan entrepreneurship. For example, codes relating to business growth, profitability, global ambitions, and post-pandemic expansion were analytically grouped into Theme 1, which captured how artisans increasingly challenge traditional stereotypes surrounding passivity and limited entrepreneurial ambition. Similarly, recurring patterns surrounding autonomy, self-learning, platform exploration, and financial self-management contributed to Theme 2, highlighting the growing independence and self-directed nature of artisan entrepreneurship in digital environments.

The analysis also revealed how participants engaged selectively and strategically with digital technologies rather than adopting digital entrepreneurship uncritically or uniformly. Open codes relating to storytelling, trust-building, customer relationships, curated platform use, and digital authenticity were progressively interpreted into Theme 3, which reflected artisans' relational and value-driven digital strategies. In contrast, codes associated with burnout, platform dependency, financial pressures, emotional fatigue, cultural tensions, and peer support contributed to Theme 4, revealing the complex emotional, operational, and structural challenges embedded within contemporary digital entrepreneurship.

The framework incorporates not only interview-derived coding but also contextual observational memoing gathered throughout artisan studios, bazaar environments, and interview settings. These observations included visible entrepreneurial routines, digital work practices, material working environments, emotional atmosphere, physical exhaustion, interpersonal interactions, and symbolic reminders of artisan identity and authenticity within entrepreneurial spaces. Such observational

insights strengthened the interpretive depth of the analysis by allowing the researcher to contextualise participants' narratives within their embodied and everyday entrepreneurial realities, rather than relying solely on verbal interview accounts.

The empirical framework therefore provides a transparent analytical mapping between open codes, observational memoing, analytical categories, subthemes, and overarching themes, illustrating how the findings emerged inductively from the empirical data while remaining conceptually connected to the study's broader framework of digital entrepreneurship and artisan entrepreneurship. The full empirical framework mapping is presented in **Appendix K**.

6.4 Conclusion Chapter 6

6.4.1 Bridging Institutional Support and Artisan Realities

This chapter presented the findings from interviews with artisan entrepreneurs and key institutional stakeholders, offering a multifaceted view of artisan entrepreneurship in the digital world. Four key themes emerged from the artisan interviews: (1) the ways artisans challenge traditional stereotypes, (2) their emphasis on autonomy and independence, (3) their selective and strategic use of digital tools, and (4) the complex challenges they face in digital entrepreneurship. Together, these themes offer a rich, grounded understanding of the motivations, anxieties, practices, and aspirations of artisans navigating a rapidly evolving digital landscape in an emerging economy. They also reveal deeper, often unspoken issues such as burnout, platform fatigue, and the systemic barriers to financial or institutional support.

Complementing these insights, interviews with four institutional stakeholders revealed additional set of tensions that further illuminate the institutional dynamics shaping artisan entrepreneurship. These included: (1) a disconnect between government-led visibility and market access initiatives and the actual needs of artisans, (2) misaligned financial support criteria that exclude contemporary or digitally savvy artisans, and (3) divergent views of what constitutes 'authentic' craft and who qualifies as an artisan. While stakeholders assert that they have provided training, funding, and digital platforms, artisans consistently described these interventions as outdated or irrelevant to the current digital context, often designed for more traditional, rural artisans, and disconnected from the needs of younger or urban craft entrepreneurs.

This misalignment resonates with broader scholarly debates in the literature on how institutional logics shape the legitimacy of entrepreneurial actors (Thornton et al., 2012). Despite the government's provision of digital platforms and tools, this alone is insufficient as Nambisan (2017) argues, digital infrastructures must be actively promoted, supported, and embedded within the lived realities of entrepreneurs. In terms of financial aid, the findings confirm concerns raised by Bislimi (2022), who warns that poorly aligned or narrowly framed support mechanisms can result in missed opportunities and wasted resources. In this case, such criteria risk excluding highly capable artisans simply because they do not fit conventional definitions, for example, those who are not explicitly tied to cultural heritage. While Hoyte (2020) maintains that craft value is rooted in cultural preservation, others like Kapp (2017) argue for more inclusive definitions that embrace technological engagement as a legitimate and valuable evolution of artisan identity.

Together, these themes highlight a structural misalignment between top-down institutional logics and bottom-up entrepreneurial realities. What should be a complementary relationship, where institutional frameworks support, enable, and uplift artisan entrepreneurs has instead become a site of disconnection. This gap not only results in missed opportunities but also leads to underutilised programs, wasted resources, and artisan disengagement. From a scholarly perspective, this disjuncture offers fertile ground for future research and debate. It underscores the need to rethink how institutions define, support, and engage with artisan entrepreneurship in digital contexts, moving beyond one-size-fits-all models toward more responsive, inclusive, and adaptive frameworks.

For practice, this calls for greater dialogue, co-design, and partnership between artisans and institutions to ensure policies and programs genuinely reflect the needs of the communities they aim to serve. Ultimately, bridging this gap requires more than policy reform, it demands recognition of artisans as equal partners in shaping the future of the sector.

Building on these findings, the next chapter (Chapter 7) presents a synthesised conclusion to the thesis. It draws together the core insights developed throughout the study and offers a concise reflection on its contributions, while outlining key implications for theory, policy, and future research.

CHAPTER 7 – CONCLUSION

7.0 Conclusion

7.1 Introduction

This concluding chapter brings together the core insights and contributions of the study titled *Artisan Entrepreneurship in a Digital World*. It provides a comprehensive synthesis of the research findings, outlines the academic contributions, and presents best practices and practical implications for artisan entrepreneurs navigating the digital landscape. The chapter offers actionable guidelines for both artisans and institutional stakeholders, explores how the research bridges theory and practice, reflects on its limitations, and concludes with directions for future research.

This thesis affirms and answers the central research question: How do artisan entrepreneurs in an emerging economy negotiate and experience digital entrepreneurship? Drawing on Nambisan's (2017) digital entrepreneurship framework and employing a mixed-methods approach, the study reveals that artisan entrepreneurs, particularly in Malaysia, are actively challenging outdated stereotypes that cast them as passive, lifestyle-oriented, or resistant to digitalisation. Instead, they are ambitious, growth-oriented, and profit-conscious. They operate independently, often without institutional support, and adopt selective, intentional digital strategies aligned with their identities, values, and business visions. These artisans engage digital platforms not merely as tools for selling products, but as spaces for identity-making, cultural storytelling, and strategic visibility. In doing so, they reimagine what it means to be an artisan in the digital world, blending heritage with innovation in ways that are both purposeful and self-directed. The findings reveal that artisan entrepreneurship in emerging economies is not static or deficit-based, but rather a dynamic, resilient, and culturally grounded practice shaped through continuous negotiation with digital infrastructures.

A defining feature of this study is its dual emphasis on academic contribution and practical relevance. It advances scholarly discourse in artisan entrepreneurship by exploring its intersection with digital innovation in underexplored contexts, particularly within emerging economies, while offering actionable insights for artisan entrepreneurs, digital ecosystem stakeholders, and policymakers.

This chapter begins by summarising the study's major findings across four key interview themes, followed by a synthesis of these insights to present a more compact and impactful discussion of the research findings. It then details the research's academic contributions, followed by an exploration of industry best practices and practical recommendations drawn from the lived experiences of the

artisan entrepreneurs. It also bridges theory and practice, reflects on key limitations, and outlines directions for future research.

7.2 Revisiting the Research Question and Objectives

This study set out to answer the research question: *How do artisan entrepreneurs in an emerging economy negotiate and experience digital entrepreneurship?* Through a mixed-methods approach combining survey data, in-depth interviews with artisan entrepreneurs, and supplementary stakeholder interviews with key stakeholders in Malaysia, the findings demonstrate that artisan entrepreneurs engage with digital entrepreneurship in highly selective, contextual, and emotionally nuanced ways. Rather than passively adopting digital technologies or fully conforming to dominant platform-driven models of entrepreneurship, participants actively negotiated their digital engagement according to their own values, identities, creative priorities, business aspirations, and lived realities. The study revealed that artisan entrepreneurs are not static or tradition-bound actors, but increasingly independent, digitally capable, and strategically adaptive entrepreneurs who continuously balance commercial growth, cultural authenticity, emotional sustainability, and entrepreneurial autonomy within evolving digital environments.

The first research objective, “To explore how artisan entrepreneurs in an emerging economy experience and negotiate digital entrepreneurship through their lived realities and selective digital engagement,” was addressed primarily through Theme 1 - Artisans Challenging Traditional Stereotypes, Theme 2 - The Independence of Artisan Entrepreneurs, and Theme 3 - Artisan Entrepreneurs’ Selective Digital Strategies.

Collectively, these themes demonstrated how artisans are actively redefining traditional assumptions surrounding artisan entrepreneurship. The findings revealed that participants no longer viewed themselves solely as cultural custodians or small-scale lifestyle entrepreneurs, but increasingly embraced entrepreneurial ambition, business expansion, and digital visibility while remaining grounded in their artisanal identities and values. At the same time, artisans demonstrated strong independence and self-directedness in navigating digital entrepreneurship, particularly through continuous learning, selective platform use, and intentional digital strategies shaped by authenticity, relational trust, and creative control. Rather than pursuing digital growth uncritically, participants engaged with digital technologies strategically and selectively, reflecting forms of entrepreneurship that were adaptive, relational, and deeply embedded within their personal and cultural realities.

The second research objective, “To understand the opportunities, challenges, and contextual tensions experienced by artisan entrepreneurs in adapting to a digital world,” was addressed primarily through Theme 4 - The Challenges of Digital Entrepreneurship of Artisan Entrepreneurs. This theme revealed the complex emotional, financial, structural, and cultural challenges embedded within contemporary digital entrepreneurship. While digital technologies created opportunities for visibility, market access, and entrepreneurial independence, participants also experienced significant pressures associated with platform dependency, algorithmic visibility, emotional labour, financial instability, burnout, and tensions surrounding authenticity and cultural representation. Importantly, the findings demonstrated that artisans did not navigate these challenges passively or individually. Instead, many relied on peer support networks, strategic selectivity, and adaptive coping mechanisms to sustain both their businesses and emotional well-being within demanding digital environments. These findings highlight how digital entrepreneurship among artisan entrepreneurs is shaped not only by technological opportunities, but also by broader social, cultural, emotional, and institutional realities within emerging economy contexts.

Taken together, the findings of this study demonstrate that artisan entrepreneurship in the digital world is best understood as a dynamic and ongoing process of negotiation rather than a linear process of digital adoption or technological transformation. By foregrounding the lived experiences, emotional realities, selective digital strategies, and contextual tensions experienced by artisan entrepreneurs, this study provides a more grounded and interpretive understanding of how digital entrepreneurship is experienced within culturally embedded and creative entrepreneurial contexts.

7.3 Summary of Key Findings

This study provides an in-depth exploration of how artisan entrepreneurs in emerging economies, specifically within the Malaysian context, operate in the digital world. Drawing on qualitative data from interviews with 25 artisan entrepreneurs, the analysis, as discussed in detail in Chapter 6, identified four key themes that together offer a nuanced understanding of contemporary artisan entrepreneurship in digital contexts. These themes challenge traditional portrayals of artisans as passive cultural custodians and instead position them as active, growth-driven, and digitally engaged economic actors. The findings revealed patterns of independence from institutional support, the adoption of intentional digital entrepreneurship strategies, and the simultaneous navigation of critical challenges associated with digital engagements.

1) Artisans' Challenging Traditional Stereotypes

Participants contested dominant narratives that depict artisans as preservation-focused, non-growth-oriented, and embedded solely within local, community-based production systems (Fillis, 2004; Luckman, 2015). Instead, the artisans interviewed demonstrated a contemporary entrepreneurial identity; culturally grounded, yet economically ambitious and globally aware. Their actions and perspectives reflect a shift towards self-determined brand-building, market expansion, and redefined success that extends beyond survival or heritage preservation.

2) The Independence of Artisan Entrepreneurs

Artisan entrepreneurs emphasised their autonomy in navigating the digital space. They exercised control over how their businesses were presented and grown, without relying on intermediaries or institutional gatekeepers. This independence was particularly evident in their ability to make strategic decisions regarding branding, pricing, product direction, and customer interaction, all facilitated by digital tools. Digital engagement emerged as a means of asserting control and sustaining both creative and financial independence.

3) Artisans' Selective Digital Strategies

Rather than adopting every digital tool available, artisans were highly selective and purposeful in their digital practices. Choices around platform use such as Instagram, WhatsApp, TikTok were guided by relevance to the artisan's brand, audience, and values. Digital tools were seen as extensions of their creative identity, used to tell stories, express authenticity, and build emotional connections with customers. This strategic selectivity challenges the assumption that digitalisation necessitates full-scale technological immersion.

4) The Challenges of Digital Entrepreneurship of Artisan Entrepreneurs

Despite their strategic engagement, participants also encountered significant challenges in navigating digital entrepreneurship. These included platform algorithm constraints, limited time and resources, digital fatigue, and the pressure to maintain continuous online visibility. For many, the demands of digital entrepreneurship introduced tensions between creative work and the ongoing labour of content production. While digitalisation created new opportunities, it also brought emotional and operational burdens.

Together, these four themes reveal a reimagined profile of the artisan entrepreneur: culturally authentic yet commercially driven, digitally capable yet critically selective, and independent yet not without struggle. These findings lay the foundation for the next section, where they are synthesised into three overarching conceptual insights.

7.4 Synthesised Key Findings

While the four themes offered a detailed account of artisans' digital practices, they have been conceptually distilled into three integrated insights that illuminate the deeper dynamics shaping contemporary artisan entrepreneurship. These synthesised insights— (1) the independence of artisan entrepreneurs, (2) their strategic engagement with digital entrepreneurship, and (3) the emotional burdens and pressures of digital entrepreneurship, reflect the evolving nature of artisan entrepreneurship in the digital world. Although the original themes were presented separately (rejection of traditional stereotypes, digital independence, selective digital strategies, and the challenges of digital entrepreneurship), they are deeply interconnected in practice. This synthesis offers a more holistic and conceptually integrated understanding of how artisan entrepreneurs navigate the opportunities and tensions of the digital economy.

7.4.1 The Independence of Artisan Entrepreneurs

A strong sense of autonomy emerged across participants, many of whom actively distanced themselves from reliance on government funding or institutional support. While prior literature often characterises artisans as dependent on state infrastructure or NGO-led support mechanisms (UNESCO, 2013; McAuley and Fillis, 2005), the artisans in this study demonstrated a high level of entrepreneurial agency. They independently sourced growth opportunities, initiating collaborations, directly approaching buyers, managing supply chains, and navigating markets without external aid.

This independence was viewed as a form of empowerment, offering freedom over creative and business decisions. However, it also introduced significant challenges. Many artisans described the weight of managing every aspect of their business alone, such as dealing with product development, marketing, logistics, and customer service, resulting in emotional fatigue and blurred boundaries between personal and professional life. Thus, independence was both a strength and a strain, reflecting the dual nature of artisan-led entrepreneurship in digital environments.

7.4.2 Digital Entrepreneurship of Artisan Entrepreneurs

Artisans in this study engaged with digital platforms such as Instagram (social media), Shopee and Etsy (e-commerce marketplaces), and personal websites, not only to sell products but also to build

their brand narratives and form communities. Their digital presence extended beyond commercial transactions to encompass storytelling, cultural expression, and identity work. These insights echo broader trends in digital entrepreneurship, where value is co-created not only through commercial exchange but also through cultural connection, such as preserving heritage, sharing personal narratives, and fostering identity-based communities (Nambisan et al., 2019).

Participants demonstrated selective platform use, choosing platforms based on visual aesthetic, reach, and alignment with their brand identity. For instance, Instagram was often used for narrative content and audience engagement, while Shopee and Etsy were leveraged for logistics and broader market access. These findings contribute to platform economy literature by framing artisans not as passive users, but as strategic digital actors who actively navigate algorithmic participation and maintain brand authenticity.

7.4.3 The Emotional Burdens and Pressures of Digital Work

Despite the benefits of digital engagement, the study revealed substantial emotional, financial, and cultural challenges. Participants frequently expressed concerns over unstable income, rising production costs, and the pressure to constantly generate online content. These findings resonate with prior research on the precarity and emotional labour of creative work in digital economies (McRobbie, 2002; Gill and Pratt, 2008).

Solo artisans reported experiencing burnout and mental exhaustion from managing their businesses alone, juggling multiple responsibilities, and carrying financial burdens without adequate support. Although various government subsidies exist to alleviate financial hardship, these often introduced additional challenges, particularly when they were poorly distributed or difficult to access (Bislimi, 2022). There were significant concerns about cultural dilution when adapting traditional or culturally inspired crafts for broader, often international digital audiences. The tension between authenticity and marketability reflects broader debates on digital self-representation and commodification in online spaces. These challenges complicate the dominant narrative of digital entrepreneurship as inherently empowering, revealing a landscape marked by vulnerability and pressure.

In summary, these themes illustrate a significant transformation in the nature of artisan entrepreneurship. Far from being static, tradition-bound actors, the artisans in this study presented

themselves as agile, digitally enabled, and globally ambitious. They rejected outdated stereotypes, forged independent paths, and strategically leveraged digital tools to grow their businesses.

However, their journeys were also marked by contradiction and complexity. The push for visibility and growth often came at the expense of mental well-being, clarity, and work–life balance. Artisan entrepreneurship in the digital world should therefore be understood as a hybrid space, shaped by both opportunity and fatigue, freedom and constraint, tradition and innovation. This study positions digitally active artisans not only as participants in digital economies but as architects of a new, evolving form of creative entrepreneurship.

7.5 Contributions to the Literature

This study's contributions emerge through the relationship between the conceptual framework developed in Chapter 2 - Understanding Artisan Entrepreneurship and Chapter 3 – Digital Entrepreneurship in Artisan Entrepreneurship, and the empirical framework generated from the thematic analysis presented in Chapter 6 – Interview Findings and Discussion. Drawing on digital entrepreneurship theory (Nambisan, 2017), the Digital Entrepreneurial Ecosystem (DEE) framework (Sussan and Acs, 2017), and artisan entrepreneurship literature, the conceptual framework initially positioned artisan digital entrepreneurship as a process shaped by digital technologies, institutional conditions, identity, authenticity, and entrepreneurial adaptation within emerging economy contexts.

However, the empirical framework that emerged from the interview findings revealed a more complex and emotionally nuanced reality than existing literature often assumes. Rather than engaging with digital entrepreneurship through purely growth-driven, technologically deterministic, or platform-centred models, artisan entrepreneurs negotiated digital engagement selectively through relational practices, cultural values, emotional labour, entrepreneurial independence, and strategic adaptability. In doing so, the findings both affirm and extend existing theories while also challenging dominant assumptions surrounding artisan entrepreneurship, digital entrepreneurial behaviour, and entrepreneurial success within digital economies. Consequently, this study contributes theoretically, empirically, and contextually by reconceptualising artisan entrepreneurship in the digital world as a negotiated, relational, emotionally embedded, and culturally grounded form of digital entrepreneurship.

In Chapter One, this thesis outlined several anticipated contributions. The findings presented here not only fulfil those aims but, in many respects, go beyond them. Through the richness and nuance of the data, this study offers deeper theoretical and empirical insights than initially expected. It contributes to entrepreneurship research across three intersecting domains: artisan entrepreneurship, digital entrepreneurship, and emerging economies. Specifically, it addresses three key gaps in the literature: (1) the need to reconceptualise artisan entrepreneurship beyond traditional stereotypes; (2) the underrepresentation of small-scale, identity-driven entrepreneurs in digital entrepreneurship theory; (3) the lack of empirical research grounded in emerging economy contexts, particularly within emerging economies.

This thesis contributes both conceptually and contextually to underexplored areas of entrepreneurship scholarship. It provides a more inclusive, grounded, and globally relevant understanding of what entrepreneurship looks like in cultural, creative, and craft-based sectors, particularly in digital spaces.

First, this research advances the literature on artisan entrepreneurship, which has historically portrayed artisans as lifestyle-driven, growth-averse, preservation-focused, and reliant on institutional or community support (Fillis, 2004; Luckman, 2015; Bakas et al., 2019; Pret and Cogan, 2019). This study challenges those static portrayals by presenting a more dynamic and ambitious profile of artisan entrepreneurs who are independent, globally minded, digitally fluent, and strategically entrepreneurial. The participants actively redefined their roles as brand-builders and cultural entrepreneurs, navigating digital tools not just for survival but for growth, creative agency, and cultural expression. In doing so, the study contributes to the reconceptualisation of artisan entrepreneurship by extending how scholars understand the intersection of creativity, growth, and identity in small-scale, culturally embedded enterprises.

Second, this study broadens the scope of digital entrepreneurship literature by introducing urban artisan entrepreneurs as a distinct subset of creative micro-entrepreneurs. While much of the digital entrepreneurship discourse focuses on tech start-ups, influencers, or SMEs operating within formal innovation systems (Nambisan et al., 2019), this research shifts attention to small-scale, identity-driven entrepreneurs who work alone or in very small teams.

These artisans engage with digital platforms strategically for storytelling, community-building, visibility, and sales, while navigating algorithmic systems, aesthetic norms, and cultural tensions. The application of Nambisan's (2017) framework of digital artefacts, platforms, and infrastructure

to the context of artisan entrepreneurs in Malaysia illustrates how digital entrepreneurship manifests differently in informal, resource-constrained, and culturally rooted settings. This offers a more diverse and humanised understanding of digital entrepreneurship shaped by craft, personal identity, and creative resilience.

Third, the study contributes to the literature on the Digital Entrepreneurial Ecosystem (DEE) by situating artisans as active, though often overlooked, participants in broader socio-cultural and technological systems. Existing DEE literature tends to emphasise innovation infrastructure, government policy, and institutional support (Sussan and Acs, 2017), often overlooking informal or creative-sector entrepreneurs like artisans. This research reframes artisans as meaningful contributors to the digital ecosystem, creating niche value, fostering online communities, and participating in economic flows despite limited access to formal structures such as innovation funding or targeted policy support. In doing so, the study offers a more inclusive and pluralistic view of who participates in the digital economy and how.

Fourth, this thesis makes a valuable contextual contribution by focusing on Malaysia, a setting still underrepresented in both artisan and digital entrepreneurship research. Much of the existing literature is grounded in Western or developed economies, where assumptions about infrastructure, policy, and digital access may not hold in emerging markets. By foregrounding the experiences of Malaysian artisans, many of whom are young, urban, and digitally active, the study provides insight into how creative entrepreneurs in emerging economies navigate platform economies while balancing cultural expression and economic survival under distinct local constraints. It responds directly to ongoing calls for more place-based and decolonised perspectives in entrepreneurship studies (Zahra et al., 2014; Welter et al., 2019; Ratten et al., 2022).

Fifth, this study also offers a methodological contribution through its mixed-methods research design. The use of a screening survey to guide purposive sampling for in-depth interviews provided a robust and contextually relevant approach for studying micro-entrepreneurs and creative practitioners. This two-stage design enhanced the richness and validity of the findings and presents a practical and replicable model for future research on similar groups. While few studies in artisan entrepreneurship adopt this approach, this thesis shows how a mixed-method framework can be adapted to study hybrid, informal, and culturally embedded forms of entrepreneurship (see Hamid et al., 2022).

Together, these contributions reframe artisan entrepreneurs not as marginal figures at the periphery of the digital economy but as strategic, adaptive, and culturally expressive actors who are shaping digital entrepreneurial landscapes in their own terms. By doing so, the study contributes to a more inclusive and critically reflective body of knowledge at the intersection of entrepreneurship, culture, and digital transformation, especially in emerging economy settings.

7.6 Industry Best Practices & Practical Implications

Drawing from the lived experiences of Malaysian artisan entrepreneurs, this study identifies several industry-relevant insights that may inform more effective strategies for creative micro-entrepreneurs, ecosystem stakeholders, and policymakers operating within the digital craft economy. These implications are grounded in the everyday realities faced by artisans who must simultaneously uphold cultural authenticity, manage digital presence, and build sustainable livelihoods. As the global creative economy becomes increasingly digitised (UNCTAD, 2022), artisan entrepreneurs occupy a pivotal role in merging heritage and innovation. This section proposes best practices and recommendations that are not only contextually grounded but aligned with emerging international discourse around cultural entrepreneurship in the digital world (Ratten 2022; Luckman, 2015).

7.6.1 Best Practices for Artisan Entrepreneurs

Artisans need not spread themselves thin across every available platform. Findings show that those who strategically focused on one or two platforms such as Instagram for branding and WhatsApp for client communication were more able to maintain creative coherence, manage time, and communicate authenticity. This aligns with Ratten and Ferreira's (2017) work on digital micro-entrepreneurs who use digital tools not for mass scale but for niche visibility. Digital presence is most effective when it supports artisans' individuality and reinforces their core values. As each handmade craft is inherently unique, maintaining a focused digital approach preserves the exclusivity of their brand and deepens customer intimacy, particularly within niche or slow-consumption markets (Cruz and Teixeira, 2021).

7.6.1.1 Position Branding as Cultural Storytelling

Storytelling emerged as one of the most powerful branding strategies for artisan entrepreneurs. Artisans who shared the inspiration, cultural context, and making process behind their products reported stronger customer engagement and differentiation from mass-produced alternatives. Narrative branding is central to the emotional value of handmade goods. Yet storytelling requires more than time, it often involves investment in photography, visual editing tools, and digital literacy. For artisans unable to outsource content creation, the pressure to produce high-quality visuals while maintaining creative integrity can be intense. Nevertheless, digital storytelling has enabled artisans to cross geographic boundaries, strengthen cultural transmission, and access new audiences, a phenomenon increasingly documented in research on digital craft markets.

7.6.1.2 Balance Independence with Sustainable Support Systems

Autonomy remains a central feature of artisan identity, but total independence without institutional or peer support, proves unsustainable. Participants spoke of burnout, decision fatigue, and loneliness. While government-led initiatives were largely absent or ineffective in building artisan support ecosystems, many effective artisans took matters into their own hands: they sought peer collaborations, outsourced select tasks, or joined maker communities. These behaviours reflect what Leadbeater and Oakley (2021) call “*collaborative individualism*”, which acknowledges that solo entrepreneurs thrive best when anchored in supportive networks. In the context of creative work, such networks do not diminish autonomy but reinforce it, enabling artisans to focus on high-value creative tasks while sharing burdens related to logistics, marketing, and administration.

7.6.1.3 Stay Financially Aware and Adaptable

Many artisans demonstrated agility in diversifying their income streams, combining online sales with workshops, bespoke commissions, and in-person markets. Such hybrid models were not only financially strategic but emotionally stabilising. This supports Luckman’s (2020) findings that digital artisans often engage in “patchwork livelihoods” to remain economically viable. In a fast-changing platform economy, artisans who continuously adjusted pricing, sourcing, and content use were better able to buffer against instability and remain sustainable.

7.6.1.4 Protect Cultural Identity While Adapting to Market Demands

Artisans who thrived in this study were those who negotiated with, rather than surrendered to market demands. They modernised traditional motifs and techniques with intentionality and cultural sensitivity. This form of conscious innovation aligns with Bakas et al. (2019), who describe artisans as cultural negotiators and networking agents, linking rural traditions with urban and tourism economies. Rather than merely replicating trends, successful artisans incorporated personal and local narratives into the evolution of their designs, producing work that was both commercially viable and culturally grounded, what Marquest et al. (2018) define as unique and innovative crafts.

7.6.2 Practical Implications for Stakeholders and Policymakers

7.6.2.1 Redefine Artisan Categories in Funding and Policy

Contemporary artisans, especially those who operate digitally often fall outside traditional definitions used in government grants or cultural classifications. Existing policy tends to prioritise rural, heritage-based artisans, while overlooking digitally active, urban makers. Funding bodies and government initiatives must adapt their definitions to ensure inclusive support for modern artisans who still carry cultural value but do so in new ways.

7.6.2.2 Design Targeted, Artisan-Specific Digital Upskilling Programmes

Generic digital training is often too broad or irrelevant to artisan needs. Findings from this study support the need for customised programmes that address platform-specific strategies, advanced-level visual storytelling, pricing in handmade economies, and financial management for creative entrepreneurs. Such programs should be co-designed with artisans and embedded within local creative hubs, client advisory services, or national entrepreneurship support initiatives such as Malaysia's Teraju, *MyCreative Ventures* and *CENDANA*, which aim to provide enhance growth of creative industry's businesses through funding access and industry guidance for creative entrepreneurs.

7.6.2.3 Address Mental Health and Creative Sustainability

Emotional resilience was a major concern among artisans in this study, particularly in relation to visibility fatigue and the pressure to be constantly “present” online. Creative entrepreneurship blends personal identity with business, making artisans vulnerable to overwork and self-doubt (Oakley et al., 2017). Policymakers and support organisations should integrate mental wellness resources, offer flexible grants or downtime funds, and promote work-life balance within their programming.

During periods of downtime, such as post-Eid or after Christmas seasons, where the market is slow, artisan entrepreneurs would benefit from additional support mechanisms tailored to their well-being. Many solo artisans experience burnout from managing every aspect of their business alone (Wei, Cang, and Hisrich, 2015), and structured interventions during these quieter times could offer meaningful relief. For example, having internship placements or peer-assist schemes could temporarily lessen artisans’ workload, while also offering skill-sharing and collaborative learning. In addition, mentorship programmes with successful artisans and other small-scale entrepreneurs could provide inspiration, practical advice, and a sense of connection that reduces emotional isolation.

These initiatives serve not only to distract and de-stress the artisan, but to help artisans revive their entrepreneurial motivation. Finally, the introduction of creative breaks or scheduled sabbaticals during low seasons could offer artisans the chance to rest, reflect, and re-energise. As sole or small business owners, many artisans struggle to take intentional rest, often associating downtime with guilt or lost income. A supported, institutionalised approach to rest, could help normalise care and recovery as essential aspects of sustainable creative entrepreneurship.

7.6.2.4 Encourage Peer-Led Communities and Maker Networks

Informal peer support such as through WhatsApp groups, digital collectives, or physical co-working spaces, was crucial in reducing isolation. Policy interventions that support these bottom-up, community-based initiatives are more effective than top-down solutions. Research by Luckman and Andrew (2020) shows that artisan networks foster not only knowledge-sharing but also emotional solidarity, which in turn enhances retention and resilience within the sector.

7.6.2.5 Facilitate Access to Digital Infrastructure and Services

Artisans often struggle with barriers related to content production, shipping logistics, and payment systems. Government agencies, platform providers, or NGOs should offer bundled services or subsidies that cover basics such as mobile-friendly websites, integrated e-commerce, photography training, or digital payment support. In emerging economies especially, these interventions can determine whether artisans participate meaningfully in digital markets or remain excluded (OECD, 2020).

In summary, artisan entrepreneurship is no longer confined to heritage zones or physical marketplaces. It now exists within a global, digitised creative economy that demands new strategies, new tools, and new forms of support. This study highlights that artisans can succeed when they operate with intention, by being selective in platform use, strategic in branding, adaptable in income generation, and grounded in cultural identity.

In order for artisan entrepreneurs to preserve their authenticity, they must embrace digital tools that enhance the development of their craft while protecting the uniqueness that gives it meaning. For policymakers and industry actors supporting artisan entrepreneurship, the challenge lies in modernising assumptions, updating institutional frameworks, and expanding access not just to digital strategies, but also to emotional well-being. Government bodies and private organisations need to provide support systems that are holistic and specifically tailored to the needs of artisans, rather than grouping them together with general small business owners or entrepreneurs. They should:

- 1) **Provide tailored support** – including mentoring to guide artisans, advisory programs for clearer business decision-making, and mental health resources to support artisan well-being.
- 2) **Update policies** – by formally recognising that artisan businesses are unique and cannot be addressed through a one-size-fits-all approach. More flexible, responsive policies are needed that account for the cultural significance of artisan work, while also acknowledging its commercial potential.
- 3) **Offer inclusive modern programmes** – artisans are often excluded due to the traditional nature of their craft and production methods. They should be actively included in accessible creative hubs, incubators, and training programmes that contribute to broader economic development.
- 4) **Ensure access to grants and digital upskilling** – programmes for digital capacity-building should be more accessible, with specific allocations for artisans. Artisans hold great potential to contribute to economic development, especially in the digital world. When properly supported,

they can act as cultural guardians, reviving traditional crafts through innovation and reaching both local and global markets.

7.7 Bridging Theory and Practice

One of the central goals of this study was not only to contribute to scholarly understanding, but also to generate insights that are practically relevant for artisan entrepreneurs and ecosystem stakeholders. This section explores the interface between theoretical concepts and the lived realities of artisan entrepreneurship in a digital context. It considers how the findings both align with, and challenge established academic frameworks, particularly those related to Artisan Entrepreneurship, Digital Entrepreneurship, and the Digital Entrepreneurial Ecosystem (DEE). It offers suggestions for how theory and practice can better inform one another in future research and policy work. The following two uncovers how this study bridges theory and practice.

7.7.1 Key Theoretical Findings

This study offers empirical affirmation and conceptual extension to key frameworks in digital entrepreneurship by demonstrating how artisan entrepreneurs in Malaysia are reshaping traditional business logics through intentional, values-driven digital engagement. Central to this is the confirmation of Nambisan's (2017) conceptualisation of digital entrepreneurship, which highlights how digital technologies transform entrepreneurial agency, identity construction, and value creation. The artisans in this study did not simply adopt digital tools for visibility or sales; rather, they used digital platforms selectively such as Instagram, WhatsApp, and personal websites to curate entrepreneurial identity, foster trust, and sustain intimate, values-aligned customer relationships.

These findings also align with the lens of lifestyle entrepreneurship, a framework commonly used by artisan scholars to describe entrepreneurs whose motivations extend beyond profit to include autonomy, purpose, and well-being. This study affirms that identity but adds an important twist: for these artisans, lifestyle is not a limitation, but a source of strength. Rather than holding them back, their values inspire and sustain their new transformative digital entrepreneurial journeys. Despite being digitally active and globally oriented, participants prioritised freedom, craft integrity, and emotional sustainability. Their rejection of algorithm-driven growth models in favour of self-defined

success reflects a lifestyle-led approach to digital entrepreneurship, explaining their preference for independence in navigating online business environments.

Finally, this study lends empirical support to the Digital Entrepreneurial Ecosystem (DEE) framework (Sussan and Acs, 2017), particularly when applied from a bottom-up, practitioner-led perspective. While DEE literature often emphasises top-down infrastructures such as policy support, accelerators, and institutions, artisans in this study built micro-ecosystems through selective digital engagement, peer learning, and community-based strategies. Their practices show how small, identity-driven entrepreneurs in emerging economies do not merely participate in digital ecosystems; they actively shape them according to their own values and needs. In sum, this study bridges digital entrepreneurship theory with the lived realities of artisan entrepreneurs. It affirms that entrepreneurship in the digital world is not a one-size-fits-all model. It is fluid, layered, and emotionally complex, especially for small-scale entrepreneurs working at the intersection of culture, creativity, and autonomy.

7.7.2 Where Practice Challenges or Extends Theory

While Section 7.6.1 demonstrated how existing theories are affirmed and extended through the lived experiences of artisan entrepreneurs, this section focuses on how those same practices reveal blind spots in current theoretical models, particularly when viewed from the ground up in emerging economy contexts.

First, much of the artisan entrepreneurship literature continues to reinforce outdated stereotypes, framing artisans as growth-averse, profit-indifferent, resistant to change, and confined to traditional or rural contexts (Fillis, 2004; McAuley and Fillis, 2005). This has shaped a deficit narrative that often overlooks artisans' strengths, portraying them as incompatible with modern entrepreneurship. This study directly challenges that view by offering a more empowering and up-to-date portrayal: one that admires artisans' resilience, creativity, and strategic thinking. Rather than resisting change, participants embraced digital tools and global outlooks while remaining grounded in their craft values. Many were urban based, digitally savvy, and internationally ambitious, actively using platforms like e-commerce and social media to reach wider markets. These findings call for a reform of current frameworks to reflect a more accurate, strength-based understanding of artisan entrepreneurs today.

Second, while the Digital Entrepreneurial Ecosystem (DEE) framework offers valuable insights into institutional dynamics, it disproportionately emphasises formal institutional actors (such as government support, accelerators), leaving little room for informal, small-scale entrepreneurs whose work is shaped by cultural values and emotional labour. The lived experiences of artisans in this study revealed how digital entrepreneurship is not only a technical or economic process, but also an emotional and cultural one. Stress, burnout, identity tensions, and digital fatigue were prominent themes, underscoring a need to integrate emotional sustainability into how we conceptualise ecosystems and entrepreneurial outcomes.

Third, this study challenges the default assumption in much of the literature that digital tools are uniformly empowering. Instead, artisans used these tools strategically and carefully prioritising authenticity and relationality over virality or scale. This intentional selectivity challenges the dominant ‘growth-equals-success’ logic that underpins much of digital entrepreneurship discourse.

To advance theory, scholars must develop frameworks that accommodate hybrid, emotionally complex, and value-driven models of entrepreneurship. These models should acknowledge that many entrepreneurs, particularly in emerging economies, may prioritise cultural continuity, well-being, and self-defined success over conventional growth trajectories.

Additionally, future research should broaden the definition of entrepreneurial impact. This includes considering community contribution, cultural preservation, and emotional resilience as equally valuable dimensions of success, especially for small-scale creative entrepreneurs. Investigating these aspects across diverse contexts will help illuminate a wider spectrum of entrepreneurial logic and experience.

On a practical level, policymakers and support institutions must rethink how they define and assist entrepreneurs. Recognising the fluid and layered nature of artisan entrepreneurship means creating support systems that are not only financially accessible, but also culturally attuned and emotionally supportive. Moving beyond binary classifications such as traditional versus modern, or commercial versus cultural will allow for more inclusive and effective interventions.

Ultimately, the lived realities of artisan entrepreneurs demand that we rethink dominant theoretical assumptions by foregrounding creativity, identity, and care as core dimensions of entrepreneurial life in digitally mediated economies. These findings call for new theoretical and policy approaches that reflect the plural, often paradoxical nature of entrepreneurship in a changing digital world.

7.8 Study Boundaries and Limitations

As with all qualitative and interpretive research, this study was shaped by methodological, contextual, and conceptual choices that defined the scope and depth of its findings. These limitations do not undermine the value of the insights generated but instead clarify the situated nature of the research and open space for further exploration. Acknowledging these boundaries is part of maintaining transparency, reflexivity, and methodological rigour (Tracy, 2010).

7.8.1 Methodological Scope

The study employed a two-stage mixed-method approach, beginning with a screening survey to identify artisan entrepreneurs with varying levels of digital engagement, followed by in-depth, semi-structured interviews. While this design allowed for rich, context-sensitive data, it also introduced selectivity bias inherent in purposeful sampling. Participants were selected based on specific inclusion criteria, particularly their digital engagement, while appropriate for the study's aims (Patton, 2002), may have excluded artisan entrepreneurs who are digitally hesitant, marginalised, or less visible in online spaces (Mason, 2008; Creswell and Poth, 2018). As such, the sample reflects a subset of artisan entrepreneurs who are already negotiating the digital landscape, rather than the full spectrum of artisanal engagement.

Although the sample reached qualitative saturation (Guest et al., 2006), it was small and purposive rather than statistically representative. As such, the findings are not generalisable in a quantitative sense but are transferable to similar contexts, in line with the aims of interpretivist research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Furthermore, interviews were conducted in English and Malay languages. While appropriate for the participants' linguistic preferences, this may have limited the depth of culturally embedded narratives, especially from indigenous or multi-ethnic communities who speak local dialects. This echoes broader concerns about linguistic inclusivity in qualitative research (Smith, 1999).

It is also important to note that the study did not include artisans who have chosen to remain entirely offline. Their perspectives on resisting digitalisation, maintaining traditional business models, or navigating structural exclusion, remain absent. Including these voices in future work could deepen understanding of how artisans position themselves in relation to digital change.

7.8.2 Contextual and Geographic Boundaries

This research focused exclusively on urban artisans based in the Klang Valley (Kuala Lumpur and Selangor), where digital infrastructure, public marketplaces, and craft visibility are relatively well-developed. While this setting reflects the reality of many digitally active artisans in Malaysia, it excludes rural or semi-rural voices, which may differ in their access, values, or infrastructural constraints.

Research by Luckman (2015) and Bryant and Wilcox (2021) highlights how rural artisans face distinct challenges in accessing digital platforms, market networks, and support systems. By centring urban experience, this study also did not capture the politics of craft embedded in land, ecology, or indigenous cosmologies—areas increasingly important in postcolonial and heritage literature (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2009; Graburn, 2001).

7.8.3 Thematic and Conceptual Boundaries

This study focused primarily on entrepreneurial identity, digital engagement, and business strategies. While aesthetic and cultural aspects occasionally emerged in interviews, the research did not adopt a material culture approach. As such, the craft objects themselves, their design histories, symbolic meanings, or political expressions were not analysed in depth. Future studies might draw from visual ethnography or anthropology of craft to explore how artisans encode innovation, identity, or resistance through the objects they produce (Ingold, 2013).

Additionally, the study prioritised the voices of individual artisans. Although references were made to platforms, buyers, and institutions, these ecosystem actors were not interviewed directly. As a result, the structural and policy dynamics influencing artisan entrepreneurship were considered from a single vantage point. A more systemic understanding would benefit from engaging with institutions, funders, and platform providers (Kenney and Zysman, 2016).

7.8.4 Temporal and Environmental Factors

Data collection occurred during the post-pandemic recovery period, a time when artisans were still adapting to recent disruptions, evolving consumer behaviours, and broader uncertainties in the creative economy. As noted by Pratt et al. (2020), the pandemic accelerated shifts in how creative

work is produced, distributed, and consumed, prompting many artisans to adopt digital platforms, diversify income sources, and engage new audiences online.

While some of these practices may reflect short-term adaptations to crisis conditions, emerging evidence suggests that many of these behavioural shifts have become more embedded and enduring. For example, digital selling, hybrid craft-business models, and social media engagement now form core parts of artisans' strategies rather than temporary solutions. Therefore, while interpreting the data, it is important to distinguish between transitional responses and longer-term transformations that signal a redefinition of artisan entrepreneurship in a post-pandemic digital landscape.

7.8.5 Reflexivity and Researcher Positionality

The researcher's positionality shaped this study in important ways. As a Malaysian with prior experience in the artisan industry, the researcher brought an insider perspective that offered cultural familiarity and contextual depth. This background enriched the study, especially in understanding the values, language, and practices of artisan entrepreneurs. However, this closeness also required careful reflexivity. Transitioning into academic research involved recognising and managing the potential for bias, particularly the risk of over-identifying with participants or projecting personal experiences. Reflexive strategies such as journaling, along with regular consultation with academic supervisors, helped critically reflect on emerging interpretations. These strategies helped maintain reflexive distance while staying grounded in the lived realities of the artisans' entrepreneurs.

While the research centred artisan narratives through in-depth interviews, it did not adopt participatory or decolonial methods approaches increasingly viewed as important when working with cultural communities (Escobar, 2018). Future research could build on this work by involving artisans more directly in shaping research design and interpretation, fostering more equitable and co-produced knowledge. By acknowledging these positional dynamics, this thesis offers a transparent account of its boundaries, while affirming the value of situated, culturally engaged inquiry in understanding artisan entrepreneurship in the digital world.

7.9 Future Research Directions

This study has offered new insights into the digital strategies and entrepreneurial identities of artisan entrepreneurs. Yet, it also reveals a set of underexplored areas that merit deeper investigation. As digital economies and artisan practices continue to evolve, future research must build on these findings to sharpen theoretical contributions, inform more responsive policy, and support creative micro-entrepreneurs in complex socio-cultural landscapes.

A critical area for further inquiry is the persistent misalignment between artisan needs and institutional frameworks. This thesis highlighted tensions between top-down support mechanisms and the lived realities of digitally active artisans, particularly those outside conventional definitions of “authentic” or heritage-based craft. Future studies could examine how funding criteria, training programmes, and recognition schemes might be restructured to accommodate hybrid, contemporary, and digitally engaged artisan practices. Comparative, cross-regional research may also help surface inclusive institutional models across Southeast Asia.

Equally important is the emotional well-being of artisan entrepreneurs. Interviews underscored the psychological toll of digital entrepreneurship, such as burnout, pressure to stay visible, and the exhaustion of solo business management. Artisans also expressed deep pride in their independence and creative autonomy. This tension between empowerment and emotional fatigue calls for future research that centres mental health, emotional labour, and resilience as core dimensions of entrepreneurship.

These dynamics are not merely personal, but shaped by platform capitalism, precarious economies, and narrow success metrics. Research is needed on how artisans cultivate emotional resilience, community-based coping, or conscious digital disengagement and how these experiences vary across gender, geography, and craft traditions.

Finally, the creativity and adaptability displayed by artisans in this study challenge dominant models of entrepreneurship that prioritise speed, scale, and growth. Future scholarship should reframe artisan entrepreneurship as a form of cultural entrepreneurship that is equally valid and innovative. Artisan-led definitions of fulfilment, sustainability, and success may offer fresh directions for more human-centred, pluralistic entrepreneurship theory.

To help operationalise these directions, the following sub-sections identify three strategic research areas: (1) expanding contextual diversity, (2) exploring new craft forms and digital platforms, and

(3) aligning practice with policy, each reflecting the conceptual gaps and practitioner concerns surfaced in this thesis and offering pathways to more inclusive and grounded research in the years ahead.

7.9.1 Expanding Contextual Diversity

This research focused on urban artisans in Malaysia, primarily within the Klang Valley. Future studies could extend this inquiry to include rural artisans, indigenous communities, and those working in semi-formal or informal economies, who may face different challenges related to infrastructure, cultural transmission, or market access (Luckman, 2015; Bryant and Wilcox, 2021). Comparative studies across rural–urban divides or cross-national contexts in Southeast Asia could uncover how geography, policy, and tradition intersect with digital entrepreneurship.

There is also room to study artisan entrepreneurs in post-conflict or marginalised zones, where creative work may be linked not only to income generation but to social resilience, recovery, and identity rebuilding.

7.9.2 Exploring New Craft Forms and Emerging Platforms

Much of the current literature focuses on physical craft products, but future studies could examine how artisans engage with digital-native craft (e.g. digital embroidery, 3D-printed ceramics, or NFT-based craft works). These new intersections of craft and technology raise questions about authenticity, originality, and digital materiality.

Similarly, emerging platforms like TikTok, Lemon8, or region-specific e-commerce ecosystems (e.g. TouchNGo Digital in Malaysia, ShopeeX) deserve closer investigation to understand how artisans strategically adapt to new affordances, constraints, and audience expectations.

7.9.3 Practice-Focused and Policy-Relevant Research

Many artisan practices are shaped by national and international cultural heritage frameworks, which aim to preserve traditional knowledge, crafts, and expressions of identity (UNESCO, 2003). These frameworks often emphasize authenticity, heritage protection, and the intergenerational transmission

of skills. However, they may not fully accommodate the dynamic, hybrid, and digitally engaged identities emerging among contemporary artisans.

In Malaysia, for example, institutions such as Kraftangan Malaysia focus heavily on the preservation of heritage crafts, often through traditional means of training and promotion. While such initiatives are valuable, they can sometimes lack alignment with the digitally enabled practices and entrepreneurial needs of younger artisans. Similarly, programs by MyCreative Ventures and other creative economy bodies increasingly support innovation, yet there remains a gap in integrating cultural preservation mandates with digital business models.

Future studies should:

- 1) Collaborate with cultural agencies to co-develop impact assessments of grants or platform partnerships,
- 2) Explore the effectiveness of digital storytelling workshops, branding clinics, or mental health support schemes for artisan entrepreneurs,
- 3) Examine the policy gap between traditional cultural heritage frameworks and emerging digital artisan identities (UNESCO, 2022; Lavanga, 2022).

Research that combines academic rigour with practitioner engagement will be vital in informing responsive, inclusive, and future-oriented support systems for artisan entrepreneurs. In sum, future research should move towards more interdisciplinary, participatory, and globally attentive frameworks that reflect the complexity of contemporary artisan entrepreneurship. As digital ecosystems evolve and artisans continue to navigate their place within them, ongoing inquiry must remain attuned to the plural, uneven, and creative realities of craft-based enterprise in the 21st century.

7.10 Final Reflections

This research journey began with a deep personal and academic curiosity about how artisans, often seen as tradition-bound and place-rooted entrepreneurs, are now navigating their businesses in a digital world defined by speed, visibility, and constant online presence.

The researcher, who values artisanal craftsmanship, cultural expression, creativity, and entrepreneurship, this study became more than a project. It served as a lens through which to observe the evolving nature of artisan entrepreneurs as they shifted their dynamics of work, identity, and innovation to sustain and grow their businesses.

What emerged through the voices of the artisans was not a singular story, but a diverse and honest sharing, full of motivation, entrepreneurial resilience, contradictions, and ambitious energy. These are not passive artisans waiting to be “discovered” or heavily supported by outdated institutional systems. Instead, they are actively designing their own paths, often with limited resources but clear ambition and determination, aiming not just to sustain a business, but to expand globally and act as cultural ambassadors. Their stories challenge assumptions about what it means to be an entrepreneur, what counts as success, and how cultural practices can evolve without losing artisanal identity.

Doing this research was also a lesson in humility. It required not only theoretical analysis, but deep listening, emotional presence, and approaching each interview with respect and openness. The process revealed the emotional labour behind creative independence, the strategy behind every decision, and the vulnerability of building a business through artisanship. Being an entrepreneur in today’s fast-moving digital world is already difficult — even more so for artisans whose markets are niche, rooted in craftsmanship and cultural connection, and often shaped by limited resources.

In closing, this thesis affirms that artisan entrepreneurs are not relics of the past, nor simply products of a digital future. They are evolving into something new: combining traditional artisanal crafts with digital tools, preserving their heritage while working hard to grow, and staying independent while finding strength in their communities. Their stories are not only relevant, but important to be heard and studied. They help us imagine economies that are more inclusive, creative, and human. Therefore, artisans must be recognised not only for their crafts, but as legitimate and significant contributors to global economic development.

7.11 Personal Reflection

This thesis began with Julia, in her sunny room, crafting a handmade bag, shaping butterflies from traditional Malaysian batik cloth. Her story stayed with me throughout this journey, not only as an example of digital artisan entrepreneurship, but as a quiet reminder of resilience, identity, and purpose. Like Julia's craft process of stitching tradition into something new, this thesis became a way of piecing together what it means to grow, evolve, and adapt without losing one's identity.

As I studied how artisans navigate digital entrepreneurship, I began to see echoes of my own path, not just as a researcher, but as a person in motion. Like Julia, I too have changed. Writing this thesis from a foreign land, I found myself adapting to an unfamiliar environment while still trying to hold on to my Malaysian identity, just as many artisans do through their work. Julia's handmade bag travelled farther than she imagined, and in many ways, so did this thesis and so did I. Shaped by passion, grounded in culture, and crafted to connect across distant yet intertwined worlds. Like a final stitch, this reflection binds my journey to Julia's and hers to mine.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Ethics Approval Letter



College of Social
Sciences

09 December 2022

Dear Noor Syerie Rahayu Binti Zulkifli

College of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Project Title: Artisan Entrepreneurship in a Digital World

Application No: 400220081

The College Research Ethics Committee has reviewed your application and has agreed that there is no objection on ethical grounds to the proposed study. It is happy therefore to approve the project, subject to the following conditions:

- Start date of ethical approval: 09/12/2022
- Project end date: 31/12/2024
- Any outstanding permissions needed from third parties in order to recruit research participants or to access facilities or venues for research purposes must be obtained in writing and submitted to the CoSS Research Ethics Administrator before research commences: socsci-ethics@glasgow.ac.uk
- The research should be carried out only on the sites, and/or with the groups and using the methods defined in the application.
- The data should be held securely for a period of ten years after the completion of the research project, or for longer if specified by the research funder or sponsor, in accordance with the University's Code of Good Practice in Research: (https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media_490311_en.pdf)
- Any proposed changes in the protocol should be submitted for reassessment as an amendment to the original application. The **Request for Amendments to an Approved Application** form should be used: <https://www.gla.ac.uk/colleges/socialsciences/students/ethics/forms/staffandpostgraduateresearchstudents/>

Yours sincerely,

A black rectangular box redacting the signature of Dr Susan A. Batchelor.

Dr Susan A. Batchelor
College Ethics Lead

Susan A. Batchelor, Senior Lecturer
College of Social Sciences Ethics Lead
University of Glasgow
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Appendix B: Participant Consent Form



College of Social
Sciences

Consent Form

Title of Project: Artisan Entrepreneurship in a Digital World

Name of Researcher: Noor Syerie Rahayu Binti Zulkifli

Supervisors: Prof. Margaret Fletcher and Prof. Colin Mason

I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.

I acknowledge that participants will be referred to by pseudonym.

- All information and responses collected will be kept strictly confidential.
- All names and other material likely to identify individuals will be anonymised.
- The material will be treated as confidential and always kept in secure storage.
- Personal data will be destroyed after the end of the project.
- The research data will be retained for 10 years after the completion of the project, as expected by the University of Glasgow Research Guidelines.
- Please note that data may be shared/archived or reused in accordance with Data Sharing Guidance.
- The material may be used in future publications, both print and online.

I acknowledge the provision of a Privacy Notice in relation to this research project.

I consent to interviews being audio-recorded.

I agree to take part in this research study ☐

I do not agree to take part in this research study ☐

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

Name of Researcher: Noor Syerie Rahayu Binti Zulkifli

Signature: 

Date:

Appendix C: Sample Thematic Coding Framework

The table below presents a sample of the thematic coding framework developed from the interview data. It illustrates how core themes were constructed through axial and open coding, based on participants' responses. This approach allowed the researcher to trace patterns, meanings, and relationships grounded in real experiences of artisan entrepreneurs.

Theme	Sub-Categories / Axial Codes	Examples Of Open Codes (Participant Quotes)
Motivations	Pursuing passion for the crafts	"Passion", "ambition", "craft business", "business idea"
	Not working for others	"Quit corporate jobs", "freedom", "be my own boss", "work from home"
	Financial motivations	"Generate more income", "survive COVID", "savings", "dream holiday", "improve life"
Marketing Strategies	Email Marketing	"Close relationship", "loyal customers", "heartfelt", "closed community", "alerts"
	Online live sessions	"Closer with customers", "engagement", "lead to sales", "brand presence", "confidence"
	Digital Storytelling	"Unique selling point", "special positioning", "transparent", "honest", "creative"
Digitalisation Challenges	Digital literacy	"Takes time to learn", "platforms are complicated", "confusing trends", "no knowledge", "costly to keep up"
	Emotional fatigue	"Burnout", "stressful", "tiredness", "crying", "alone", "lonely", "too many things to do"
	Risks	"Doesn't always translate to sales", "investment", "ROI", "seasonal", "misinterpreted"

Table 10: Thematic Coding Framework

Appendix D: Interview Guide (Artisans)

This semi-structured interview guide was used to explore the experiences of artisan entrepreneurs in Malaysia. The aim was to understand their motivations, engagement with digital tools and platforms, entrepreneurial practices, and the broader challenges they face. The guide was designed to allow flexibility, enabling participants to share their experiences in their own words, with follow-up questions as needed.

Note: While the interview followed a semi-structured format, the flow of questions was adapted to suit the natural progression of each conversation. The researcher ensured that all key themes were covered during the interview while allowing participants the space to shape the dialogue based on their lived experiences.

Interview Opening Script

“Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. I’m interested in learning more about your journey as an artisan entrepreneur, particularly how you use digital platforms and tools in your business. There are no right or wrong answers, please feel free to speak openly about your thoughts and experiences.

Your participation is entirely voluntary. You may skip any question or stop the interview at any point. Everything you share will be treated in confidence and anonymised in the final thesis.

This study has received ethical approval from the College of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at the University of Glasgow (Application No: 400220081). If you have any questions at any time, you are welcome to contact me at XXXXXXXXX@student.gla.ac.uk.

If you're happy to proceed, we can begin the interview.”

Interview Question	Purpose / Rationale
1. Can you please share a bit about yourself as an artisan entrepreneur?	To explore the participant's background, identity, and personal narrative.
a) What motivated you to start this entrepreneurial journey?	To understand personal and cultural motivations behind becoming an artisan entrepreneur.
2. What are your thoughts on the shift toward digital approaches in artisan entrepreneurship?	To explore attitudes toward digitalisation and its perceived impact on the craft sector.
3. Would you say your business is shifting toward more digital practices?	To assess the level and direction of digital transformation.
a) What have been the benefits and challenges of this shift?	To identify perceived value and barriers in adopting digital tools.
4. How has digitalisation changed the way you run your business?	To understand operational or strategic shifts due to digital technologies.
a) What were your initial goals when you first started using digital tools?	To uncover expectations and intentions around digital adoption.
5. What kinds of opportunities has adopting digital technologies brought to your business?	To explore perceived benefits such as reach, branding, or sales.
6. What influenced your decision to choose specific platforms as part of your digital strategies, and why?	To understand platform selection, strategic preferences, and values.
7. How do your digital and non-digital channels contribute to your business growth or development?	To explore the balance and integration between digital and traditional methods.
8. Can you describe any changes you've made in how you create or manage your craft due to digital tools?	To identify digital impact on creative processes and workflows.
9. How are you using digital marketing tools to enhance your business and reach your audience?	To assess marketing practices and the role of branding in digital spaces.
a) What have been the most valuable benefits of using these tools?	To highlight perceived returns on digital marketing investment.
10. What kinds of challenges have you encountered while conducting your business in the digital world?	To identify barriers, frustrations, or systemic constraints in digital entrepreneurship.
11. How did the COVID-19 pandemic change your business?	To examine the pandemic as a turning point for digital adoption.
a) How did it influence your use of digital tools or platforms?	To track changes in digital practices before and after COVID-19.
12. How are your current digital strategies helping you plan for future growth?	To understand forward-looking strategies and digital vision.

a) What’s driving your interest in these strategies?	To explore entrepreneurial ambition, adaptability, and resilience.
13. What are your thoughts on financial support available to artisan entrepreneurs — such as grants, loans, or government initiatives?	To understand perceptions and experiences with institutional or state support.
a) Have you ever applied for any of these? What was that experience like?	To evaluate accessibility and relevance of available support.
b) Do you feel this kind of support is suitable for artisan businesses like yours?	To assess the perceived inclusivity and appropriateness of existing policies.

Table 11: Interview Questions and Purpose 1

Interview Closing Script

“That brings us to the end of the interview. Thank you so much for your time and for sharing your experiences. Your insights are incredibly valuable to this research. If you have any questions, concerns, or would like to add anything else after today, please feel free to contact me at any time via email. I deeply appreciate your voluntary participation.”

Appendix E: Survey Instrument Artisan Entrepreneurship in a Digital World

Participant Information and Consent

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this survey. This study is part of a PhD research project on *Artisan Entrepreneurship in a Digital World*, conducted at the University of Glasgow.

Your participation is entirely voluntary. You may choose to skip any question or exit the survey at any time. All responses will be kept strictly confidential, and no identifying information will be disclosed in any publications or reports. The data will be used solely for academic research purposes. By continuing with this survey, you are confirming that you understand your rights as a participant and that you consent to take part in the study. This study has received ethical approval from the College of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, University of Glasgow (Application No: 400220081). If you have any questions about the survey or your participation, you may contact the researcher at: XXXXXXXXX@student.gla.ac.uk

The survey was divided into the following sections:

- a. Section A: Profile
- b. Section B: Target Markets and Business Orientation
- c. Section C: Involvement of Digital Technologies in Artisan Entrepreneurship

Note: Respondents could select multiple answers where indicated. The full list of survey questions is provided below.

Section A: Profile

1. Are you an artisan entrepreneur who is based in Malaysia?
 - ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
2. What is your gender?
 - ☐ Below 18 years old
 - ☐ 18-28 years old

3. How old are you?
- ☐ Below 18 years old
 - ☐ 18-28 years old
 - ☐ 29-39 years old
 - ☐ 40-49 years old
 - ☐ 50-59 years old
 - ☐ Above 60 years old
4. What is the nature of your business?
- ☐ Arts and crafts
 - ☐ Beauty and health
 - ☐ Fashion and accessories
 - ☐ Food and beverages
 - ☐ Home and living crafts
 - ☐ Indigenous crafts
 - ☐ Other (please specify) _____
5. How many years has your business been in operation?
- ☐ Less than 2 years
 - ☐ 2-5 years
 - ☐ 6-10 years
 - ☐ More than 10 years
6. What was your motivation for starting the business?
- *Please select all that apply.
- ☐ Passion
 - ☐ Lifestyle choices
 - ☐ Preserving local cultural values and traditional artistry
 - ☐ Profitability
7. Where do you operate your business?
- *Please select all that apply.
- ☐ Home studio
 - ☐ Retail premises (eg. boutique, departmental stores)
 - ☐ Temporary premises (eg. weekend bazaars, pop-up events)
 - ☐ Co-working space (eg. WORQ, Common Ground, WeWork)
 - ☐ Other (please specify) _____
8. Do you run your business on a full-time or part-time basis?
- ☐ Full-time
 - ☐ Part-time

9. In addition to yourself, do you employ anyone?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

If yes, how many people do you employ?

- ☐ One person
- ☐ 2-5 people
- ☐ 6-10 people
- ☐ More than 10 people

10. Are any of your family members involved in the business?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

If yes, how many people in the family are involved?

- ☐ One person
- ☐ 2-5 people
- ☐ 6-10 people
- ☐ More than 10

11. Do you outsource certain tasks in your business?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

If yes, which of the following tasks did you outsource?

*Please select all that apply.

- ☐ Social media management
- ☐ Advertising and promotion
- ☐ Website design and maintenance
- ☐ Operation management
- ☐ Financial management
- ☐ Production
- ☐ Other (please specify) _____

Section B: Target Markets and Business Orientation

12. Who is your target market?

*Please select all that apply.

- ☐ Local residents
- ☐ Expatriates
- ☐ Tourists
- ☐ Corporate organisations

13. What is your customers age group?

*Please select all that apply.

- ☐ Under 20 years old
- ☐ 20-29 years old
- ☐ 30-39 years old
- ☐ 40-49 years old
- ☐ 50-56 years old
- ☐ Above 65 years old

14. What is your customers income classification?

*Please select all that apply.

- ☐ T20 (Top)
- ☐ M40 (Middle)
- ☐ B40 (Bottom)

15. Where are your customers located?

*Please select all that apply.

- ☐ Klang Valley
- ☐ Peninsular Malaysia
- ☐ Sabah / Sarawak
- ☐ Outside of Malaysia

If outside of Malaysia, which continents are the customers located?

- ☐ Asia (eg. Japan, India)
- ☐ Europe (eg. United Kingdom, Germany)
- ☐ North America (eg. USA, Canada)
- ☐ The rest of the world

16. Do you target international markets?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

If yes, when did you start to internationalise?

*Please select only ONE answer.

- ☐ From the beginning of business establishment
- ☐ Within the first year of business establishment
- ☐ After one year of business establishment
- ☐ After 3 years of business establishment
- ☐ After 5 years of business establishment
- ☐ After 10 years of business establishment

17. Why do you target international markets?

*Please select all that apply.

- ☐ Business growth and expansion
- ☐ Brand awareness
- ☐ Compete internationally
- ☐ Diversify sales channels
- ☐ Generate more revenue
- ☐ Introduce local crafts to international markets
- ☐ Export crafts
- ☐ Reach new target audience

Section C: The involvement of Digital Technologies in Artisan Entrepreneurship

NOTE: Digital technologies are electronic tools that generate, store or process data. It deals with the creation and practical use of digital devices, systems and resources. Examples of digital technologies include websites, social media platforms, mobile applications.

This section consists of questions about the involvement of digital technologies in artisan entrepreneurship.

18. Do you use any of the following digital platforms in your business?

*Please select all that apply.

- ☐ Social media platforms
- ☐ E-commerce websites
- ☐ E-marketplaces
- ☐ Mobile applications
- ☐ Service oriented platforms
- ☐ Knowledge platform websites
- ☐ Online forums
- ☐ Other (please specify) _____

19. What are the digital platforms used for?

*Please select all that apply.

- ☐ Communication
- ☐ Marketing
- ☐ Production
- ☐ Sales channels
- ☐ Business management
- ☐ Business sourcing
- ☐ Customer experience
- ☐ Other (please specify): _____

20. When did you start using digital technology in your business?

*Please select only ONE answer.

- ☐ From the beginning of business establishment
- ☐ Within the first year of business establishment
- ☐ After one year of business establishment
- ☐ After 3 years of business establishment
- ☐ After 5 years of business establishment
- ☐ After 10 years of business establishment

Sales Channels

21. What are the sales channels of your business?

*Please select all that apply.

- ☐ Brick and mortar store (eg. physical store)
- ☐ Retail consignment (eg. departmental stores)
- ☐ E-commerce website (eg. own website)
- ☐ E-marketplaces (eg. Zalora, Shopee)
- ☐ Social media platforms (eg. Instagram, Facebook)
- ☐ Mobile applications (eg. Whatsapp, Telegram)
- ☐ Other (please specify): _____

22. What is the main sales channel for your business?

*Please select only ONE answer.

- ☐ Offline
- ☐ Online

23. Do you have your own website for your business?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

24. If yes, why do you have a website for your business?

*Please select all that apply.

- ☐ Provide brand information
- ☐ Build digital presence
- ☐ Increase selling opportunity
- ☐ Establish business credibility
- ☐ Get brand awareness
- ☐ Market expansion
- ☐ Collect customer data

E-Marketplaces

25. Do you list your products on e-marketplaces?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

26. Which of the following e-marketplaces do you use for your business?

*Please select all that apply.

- ☐ Shopee
- ☐ LAZADA
- ☐ PGMall
- ☐ Carousell
- ☐ ZALORA
- ☐ Instagram shopping
- ☐ Facebook marketplace
- ☐ Tiktok shop
- ☐ None of the above

27. Do you list your products on platforms created specifically for artisans?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

If yes, which of the following platforms do you use?

*Please select all that apply.

- ☐ ETSY
- ☐ The Artisans Haven
- ☐ Poptron
- ☐ Dia Guild
- ☐ Craftla

28. Why do you list your products on e-marketplaces?

*Please select all that apply.

- ☐ Sales and profit
- ☐ Trusted platforms
- ☐ Competitive and relevant
- ☐ Reach more people
- ☐ Brand awareness
- ☐ Low setup cost
- ☐ Easy to manage

Marketing

29. What type of marketing do you use for your business?

*Please select all that apply.

- ☐ Traditional marketing (eg. flyers, catalogues)
- ☐ Digital marketing (eg. Facebook ads, email marketing)

30. If digital, what types of digital marketing tools do you use in your business?

*Please select all that apply.

- ☐ Search Engine Optimisations (SEOs)
- ☐ Pay-per-click (PPC)
- ☐ Email marketing
- ☐ Social media marketing
- ☐ Content marketing
- ☐ Mobile marketing
- ☐ Influencer marketing
- ☐ Affiliate marketing (commission-based)

31. If any, which of the following social media platforms do you use for your business?

*Please select all that apply.

- ☐ Instagram
- ☐ Facebook
- ☐ TikTok
- ☐ Youtube
- ☐ Twitter
- ☐ Whatsapp
- ☐ Telegram
- ☐ Pinterest
- ☐ None of the above

32. If yes, why do you use social media platforms for your business?

*Please select all that apply.

- ☐ Connects with customers
- ☐ Conduct market research
- ☐ Generate brand awareness
- ☐ Increase website traffic
- ☐ To sell products
- ☐ Reach more customers

Production

33. Does digital technology influence the production of your products?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

If yes, how does it change the production process?

*Please select all that apply.

- ☐ Innovative creation
- ☐ New trend identification
- ☐ Mechanised tools
- ☐ Modern craft techniques
- ☐ Production efficiency
- ☐ Reduced production costs
- ☐ Sustainable raw materials
- ☐ Global supplier sourcing

COVID-19

34. Did COVID-19 pandemic accelerate digital adoption in your business?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

If YES, what kind of digital tools did you adopt?

*Please select all that apply.

- ☐ Digital marketing strategies (eg. Content creation, video marketing)
- ☐ Digital sales channels (eg. Tiktok Shop, Shopee)
- ☐ Communication channels (eg. WhatsApp, Telegram)
- ☐ Electronic point of sales (eg. POS, Shopify)
- ☐ Digital payment methods (eg. E-wallets, Boost)
- ☐ Digital delivery services (eg. Lalamoves, Grab)
- ☐ Digital suppliers (eg. Alibaba, PandaHall)

35. How do you plan on using digital strategy for your business in the next 2-5 years?

*Please select all that apply.

- ☐ Use digital marketing strategies to internationalise
- ☐ Utilise more social media features to maximise digital presence
- ☐ Use variety of digital sales channels to increase profit
- ☐ Accept more digital payment methods to improve business operations
- ☐ Have easy-accessible, user-friendly website to increase digital performance
- ☐ Use more digital tools for production efficiency

36. Are you willing to be contacted for further research participation?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

If YES, please provide your details below:

Name:

Brand name:

Email or phone number:

Appendix F: Member Checking Summary

This appendix presents a summary of the member checking process conducted to support the credibility and trustworthiness of the qualitative findings. Participants were each presented with a key theme that was most prominent or relevant in their interview data. They were invited to reflect on the accuracy and resonance of these interpretations. Feedback was incorporated to refine the final analysis.

Participant Code	Summary Of Themes Shared	Participant Feedback	Changes Made Based On Feedback
P6	Digital Utilisation of Artisan Entrepreneurs	Confirmed the digital utilisation of platform varies, each for different purposes. Informed that risks utilising certain platforms are main concerns	Added “risks considerations” as a subtheme under <i>Social Media Platform Strategies</i> .
P07	Institutional assistance	Suggested that “connections” are also important in getting considered for funds / grants	Integrated “networking influence” as a factor within financial assistance theme analysis
P21	Artisans’ well-being	Validated theme relevance; asked to emphasise more on the emotional burnout and loneliness that comes from conducting independent artisan business	Expanded analysis and included as key findings from the interview based on the depth on the data

Table 12: Member Checking Summary

Appendix G: Triangulation Matrix - Integration of Survey and Interview Findings

This matrix presents the key themes identified in the study and compares evidence drawn from the survey responses and the in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The use of triangulation strengthened the study's validity by confirming the consistency of findings across different data sources. It also helped the researcher highlight how the interview findings provided deeper context to the patterns identified through the survey responses.

Theme	Evidence from Survey	Evidence from Interviews
Artisans' Motivations	The top motivation is for them not to work for others	Artisans discussed that they want freedom and not work for someone else but themselves, at their own time and pace
Marketing Strategies	Used digital marketing as main marketing initiative rather than traditional offline marketing	Artisans confirmed that they allocated budget for digital marketing such as Facebook Ads
Sales Channels	Majority identified traditional sales method as main sales channels rather than selling digitally	Face-to-face selling such as at artisan bazaars have more satisfaction and engagement with customers
COVID-19	The pandemic accelerated artisans' digital adoption	Artisans described it as a survival strategy during a crisis in order to survive, stay relevant and make money
Future Digital Plans	In 2-5 years, artisans plan to still utilise digital technologies to enhance their business strategies	Artisans explained that they hope they can expand, grow more in future with the help of digital technologies.

Table 13: Triangulation Matrix

Appendix H: Thematic Matrix – Sample of Final Themes, Sub-Themes, and Supporting Quotes

This matrix presents selected final themes and sub-themes developed through thematic analysis of the interview data, supported by anonymised participant quotes. This sample is provided to illustrate the coding and interpretation process. The full thematic matrix is available upon request.

Theme	Sub-Theme	Participant Code	Illustrative Quote
Business Expansion Plans	Internationalisation	P03	“I wish in future we can go beyond Southeast Asia.”
Cultural Association	Cultural Preservations	P09	“I want to keep Batik alive but also modernise it with new sustainable materials.”
Marketing Strategies	Digital Engagement	P21	“TikTok Live is great but views are better when I’m the one on camera, not my staff.”
Digitalisation Challenges	Inaccessible financial assistance	P15	“Criteria given doesn’t make sense and so hard to get in touch with them.”
COVID-19 Pandemic	Forced digital adoption	P24	“It changed the way we do business and I’m very grateful for that period of time.”

Table 14: Thematic Matrix

Appendix I: Interview Guide (Key Stakeholders)

This interview guide was developed for key stakeholders involved in supporting the development of artisan entrepreneurs in Malaysia. Participants included government officials, representatives of cultural and entrepreneurship agencies, and artisan-focused organisations.

The aim of this guide was to explore how institutional actors perceive, engage with, and support artisan entrepreneurship in Malaysia, particularly in the context of digital transformation. Questions were selectively applied depending on the interviewee's role, expertise, and organisational context.

Note: This interview guide was designed for a semi-structured approach. Not all questions were asked to every participant. The interviewer adapted the conversation based on each participant's role, expertise, and responses. Probing and follow-up questions were used as needed to explore emerging themes.

Interview Opening Script

“Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. I’m interested in learning more about your role in supporting artisan entrepreneurship in Malaysia, particularly how institutional actors engage with digital transformation in this sector. There are no right or wrong answers, I’m interested in your professional insights, perspectives, and experiences. Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you may skip any question or end the interview at any time. Everything you share will be treated confidentially and anonymised in the final thesis.

This study has received ethical approval from the College of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at the University of Glasgow (Application No: 400220081). If you have any questions at any time, you’re welcome to contact me at XXXXXXXXX@student.gla.ac.uk.

If you're happy to proceed, we can begin the interview.”

Interview Questions and Purpose

Interview Question	Purpose / Rationale
1. Can you tell me about your role and how it contributes to the development or support of artisan entrepreneurs in Malaysia?	To understand the participant's organisational context and their specific involvement with artisans.
a) What kinds of initiatives, programmes, or decisions are you directly involved in?	To map concrete interventions or activities relevant to artisan development.
2. What is your overall view on the current state and development of artisan entrepreneurship in Malaysia?	To gather informed insights on the sector's condition and trajectory.
a) How has the artisan sector evolved compared to a decade ago?	To explore perceptions of historical change or shifts in the industry.
b) What types of artisan entrepreneurs do you see emerging more recently?	To identify demographic or behavioural trends among new artisan entrepreneurs.
3. From your perspective, what are the key challenges that artisan entrepreneurs in Malaysia face today?	To gain an institutional view on the core issues artisans encounter.
a) Are there particular structural or policy-related barriers that concern you?	To uncover systemic constraints or policy gaps within the ecosystem.
4. In today's digital world, how important do you think it is for artisan entrepreneurs to adopt digital strategies?	To understand institutional perspectives on the role of digitalisation.
a) What kinds of digital support or training do they typically need most?	To assess training gaps and capacity-building needs.
b) Do you observe variation in how urban vs. rural artisans approach digitalisation?	To explore geographical disparities in digital engagement.
5. What types of financial support or incentives are currently available for artisan entrepreneurs (e.g., grants, loans, incubation programmes)?	To document institutional offerings and funding schemes.
a) Are these forms of support accessible and relevant to artisans?	To assess effectiveness, reach, and fit for the artisan community.
b) What could be improved to better serve this community?	To gather recommendations for enhancing support frameworks.
6. How do your organisation's programmes or events help artisans with visibility, market access, or business development?	To understand how non-financial interventions contribute to artisan growth.
a) For event organisers: How do you select vendors for your bazaars, and what role does digital readiness play in that process?	To explore how market access is mediated and whether digital fluency is considered a criterion.

Table 15: Interview Questions and Purpose 2

Interview Closing Script

“That concludes our questions. Thank you very much for your time and valuable insights. Your input contributes to building a more nuanced understanding of artisan entrepreneurship in Malaysia, particularly from institutional and stakeholder perspectives. If you have any further thoughts or concerns, or would like to follow up after this interview, please feel free to contact me at any time via email. Thank you once again for your voluntary participation.”

Q2. What is your gender?

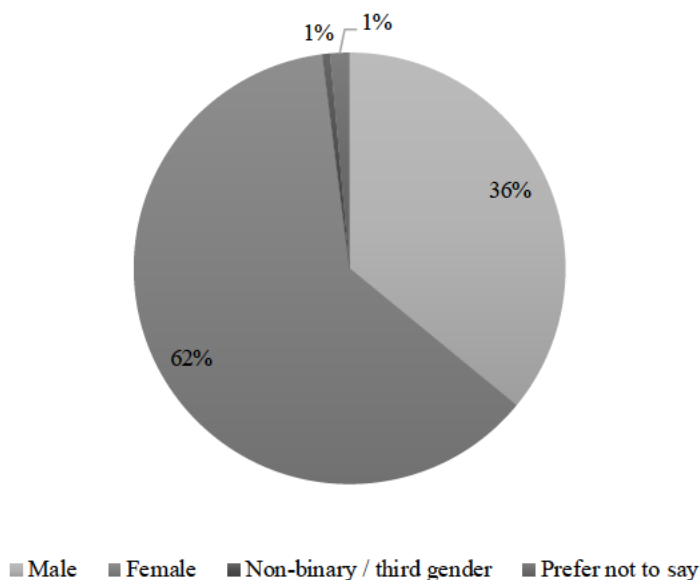


Chart 1: What is your gender?

Q11. Are any of your family members involved in the business?

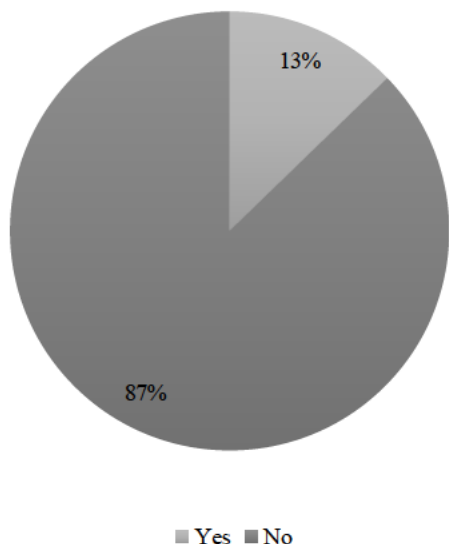


Chart 2: Are any of your family members involved in the business?

Q3. How old are you?

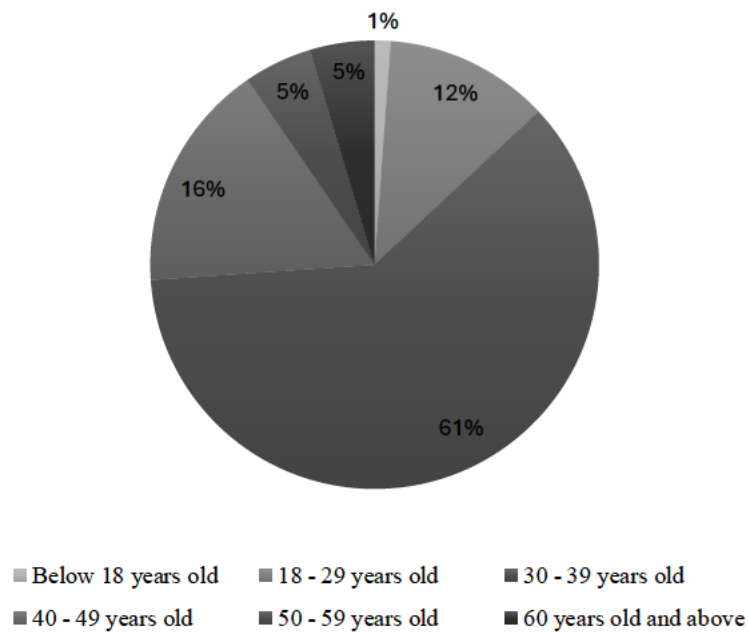


Chart 3: How old age you?

Q5. How many years has your business been in operation?

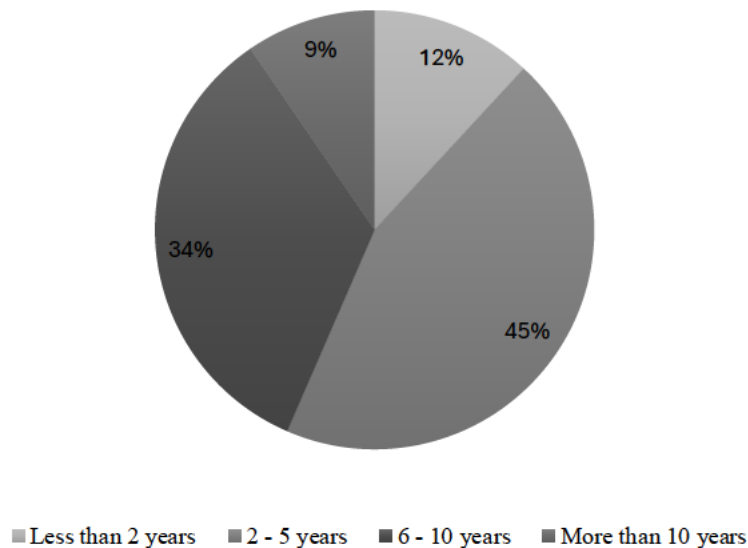


Chart 4: How many years has your business been in operation?

Q4. What is the nature of your business?

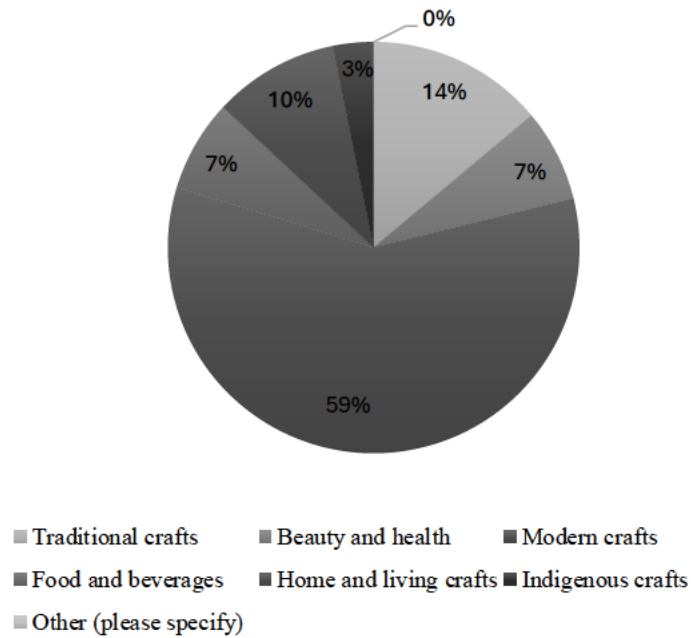


Chart 5: What is the nature of your business?

Q13. Who is your target market? Please select all that apply.

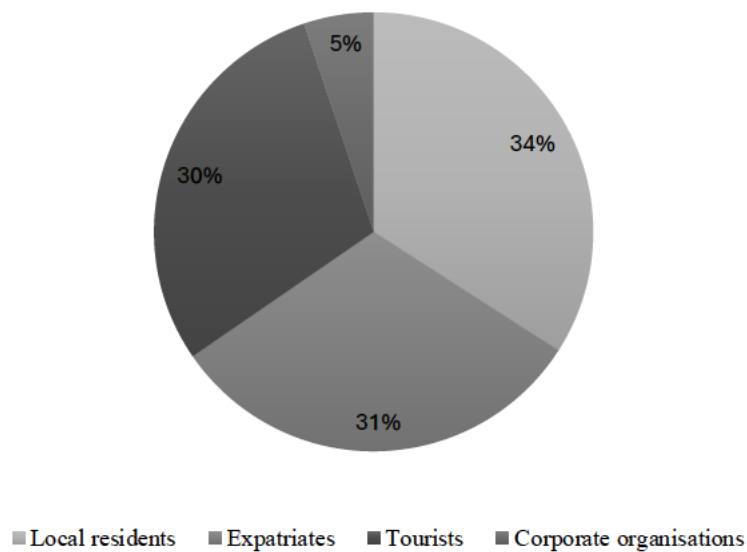


Chart 6: Who is your target market? Please select all that apply.

Q17. Do you target international markets?

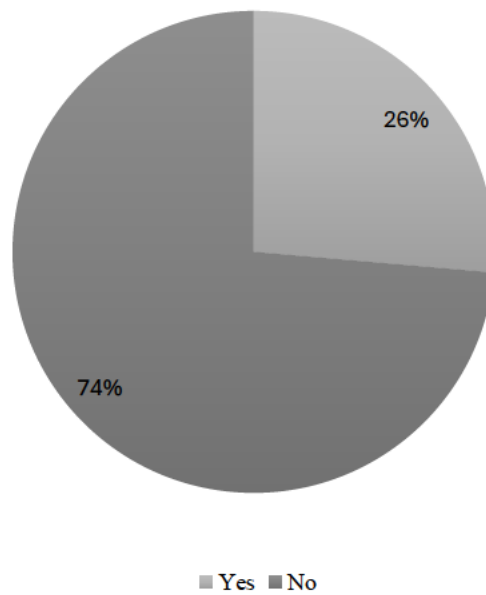


Chart 7: Do you target international markets?

Q22. What is the main sales channel for your business? Please select only ONE answer.

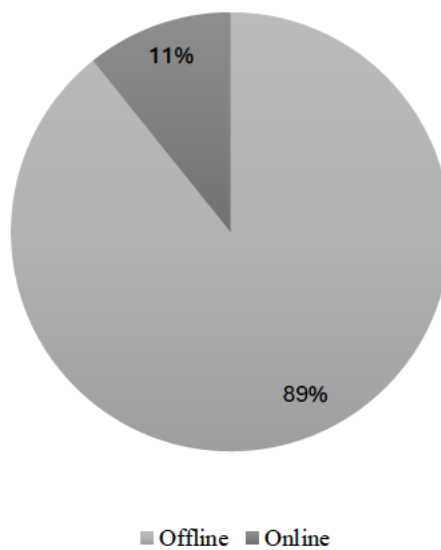


Chart 8: What is the main sales channel for your business?

Q28. What type of marketing do you use for your business? Please select all that apply.

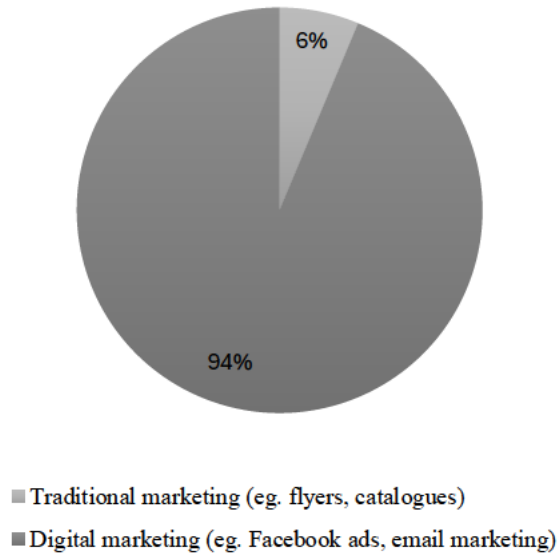


Chart 9: What type of marketing do you use for your business?

Q33. Did COVID-19 pandemic accelerate digital adoption in your business?

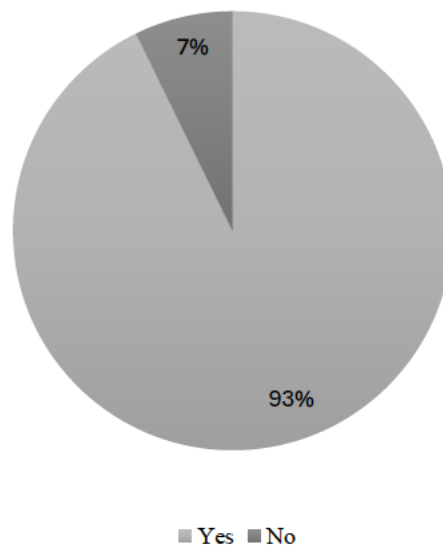


Chart 10: Did COVID-19 pandemic accelerate digital adoption in your business?

Appendix K: Empirical Framework Mapping

Open Codes & Observational Memoing	Axial / Analytical Category	Sub-theme	Main Theme
“Generate more income”; “grow big”; “expand globally”; “export”; benchmarking successful brands; participants spoke passionately about future expansion plans and displayed visible pride and excitement when discussing business growth	Entrepreneurial ambition and growth orientation	Ambition and Business Expansion of Artisan Entrepreneurs	Theme 1 – Artisans Challenging Traditional Stereotypes
Financial motivations; “extra income”; “financial stability”; “COVID recovery”; increasing emphasis on profitability and sustainability	Financial reorientation and commercial motivation	Financial Motivation as Primary Priority	Theme 1 – Artisans Challenging Traditional Stereotypes
COVID recovery plans; accelerated digital adoption; shift towards online business strategies; increased urgency surrounding survival and expansion after the pandemic	Crisis-driven entrepreneurial transformation	COVID-19 as a Catalyst for Financial Reorientation	Theme 1 – Artisans Challenging Traditional Stereotypes
Responsibility; patriotism; “love for crafts”; preserving batik and Malaysian identity; emotional attachment to local culture; participants reflected emotionally on childhood memories and cultural connections to artisan practices	Cultural responsibility and identity-driven entrepreneurship	Artisans’ Sense of Responsibility in Globalising Local Crafts	Theme 1 – Artisans Challenging Traditional Stereotypes
Participants vividly recalled their first creations, showed archived photographs of early products, and frequently incorporated personal entrepreneurial stories into customer engagement and interview discussions	Emotional attachment, entrepreneurial identity, and artisan self-construction	Observational Memoing Across Theme 1	Theme 1 – Artisans Challenging Traditional Stereotypes

Open Codes & Observational Memoing	Axial / Analytical Category	Sub-theme	Main Theme
Financial freedom; modern business strategies; business expansion; exporting; internationalisation; entrepreneurial ambition; participants expressed strong motivation to grow beyond traditional artisan business models and pursue larger market opportunities	Entrepreneurial autonomy and growth-oriented business repositioning	Redefining business expansion	Theme 2 – The Independence of Artisan Entrepreneurs
Digital exploration; social media marketing; online sales; Etsy; Shopee; Canva; influencer marketing; website management; participants actively experimented with digital tools to expand visibility and market access	Strategic digital exploration and platform-enabled independence	Digital platforms as the new gateway	Theme 2 – The Independence of Artisan Entrepreneurs
Tutorials; online classes; business mentorship; digital literacy courses; Pinterest and TikTok inspirations; observations of ring lights, tripods, content planning tools, and artisans watching tutorials during quiet bazaar hours	Self-directed entrepreneurial learning and continuous adaptive capability	The rise of self-directed learning	Theme 2 – The Independence of Artisan Entrepreneurs
Financial literacy; grants; alternative funding strategies; investors; contingency planning; disappointment with institutional support; participants discussed balancing independence with ongoing financial uncertainty and limited access to formal support systems	Financial self-reliance and adaptive resource management	Funding artisans' growth	Theme 2 – The Independence of Artisan Entrepreneurs
Heartfelt content; storytelling; founder narratives; brand authenticity; digital personality; content creation; reflections on	Intentional and platform-specific	Selective use of digital tools and channels	Theme 3 – Artisan Entrepreneurs'

Open Codes & Observational Memoing	Axial / Analytical Category	Sub-theme	Main Theme
personal entrepreneurial journeys; observations of artisans carefully curating different digital platforms for different purposes, including the use of ring lights, flash equipment, and professionally styled product photography for Instagram portfolios	digital engagement strategies		Selective Digital Strategies
Instagram as visual portfolio; sales and marketing channels; WhatsApp for customer communication; relationship-building; trust; customer loyalty; personalised engagement; participants expressed strong emotional attachment toward maintaining close and sincere customer relationships beyond purely transactional interactions	Relational digital entrepreneurship and trust-based customer engagement	Digital strategies for sales, engagement, and credibility	Theme 3 – Artisan Entrepreneurs' Selective Digital Strategies
Platform difficulties; algorithmic challenges; advertising costs; SEO; influencer/KOL marketing; FYP visibility; ongoing digital investments; financial sustainability concerns; participants described the increasing pressure to continuously invest in visibility and digital competitiveness	Financial pressures and structural dependency within platform-based entrepreneurship	Financial Constraints and Platform Dependency	Theme 4 – The Challenges of Digital Entrepreneurship of Artisan Entrepreneurs
Digital fees; platform commissions; budgeting; marketing expenditure; contingency planning; alternative sales strategies; participants demonstrated active financial planning and adaptive efforts to reduce platform dependency and sustain business operations	Strategic financial adaptability and resource-conscious entrepreneurial navigation	Navigating Financial Constraints with Strategic Adaptability	Theme 4 – The Challenges of Digital Entrepreneurship of Artisan Entrepreneurs

Open Codes & Observational Memoing	Axial / Analytical Category	Sub-theme	Main Theme
Patriotism; originality; staying true to artisan values; cultural heritage; indigenous identity; traditional crafts; digital adaptation; worries surrounding authenticity; dilemmas regarding commercialisation; participants frequently expressed emotional tension between preserving cultural meaning and adapting to market expectations	Identity negotiation and authenticity preservation within digital entrepreneurial environments	Maintaining Artisanal Identity and Navigating Cultural Misrepresentation	Theme 4 – The Challenges of Digital Entrepreneurship of Artisan Entrepreneurs
Burnout; emotional exhaustion; loneliness; pressure; self-management; blurred personal and professional boundaries; disengagement; lack of support; observations of visible fatigue, emotional sensitivity during interviews, slowed responses, deep sighs, and one participant becoming emotional while discussing entrepreneurial struggles	Emotional labour, isolation, and the embodied realities of digital entrepreneurship	The Emotional Burden of Artisan Entrepreneurs	Theme 4 – The Challenges of Digital Entrepreneurship of Artisan Entrepreneurs
Seeking help; peer support; artisan communities; WhatsApp groups; emotional encouragement; positivity; shared struggles; community-based learning; observations of strong interpersonal bonds and frequent informal support networks among artisans across digital and physical spaces	Collective resilience and relational coping mechanisms within artisan entrepreneurial communities	Peer Support and Strategic Selectivity in Entrepreneurial Well-Being	Theme 4 – The Challenges of Digital Entrepreneurship of Artisan Entrepreneurs