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Art-identity founders, venturing processes, and entrepreneurship: Implications for policy

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ABSTRACT

A growing body of literature in entrepreneurship argues that extant conceptualizations of the venture journey are not representative of the broad forms that entrepreneurship may take. This results in ill-informed policy that, in turn, feeds into support programs that work for ventures with certain profiles but are unsuitable for many other forms of enterprise. In this article, we seek to explore how this selective form of theorizing and related policy intervention plays out in *art-identity ventures*, being those that defy commercial priorities and pursue creative practice. We engage in this debate with a view to framing the status quo from the perspective of art-identity ventures, diagnosing the problems represented by this, and proposing some ways forward through which policy could resolve apparent tensions.

KEYWORDS

Art entrepreneurship; art identity; creative enterprise; venture process; public policy

Art identity ventures

When individuals from arts backgrounds found ventures, they may or may not embrace the commercial ethos typically associated with entrepreneurship (Knox & Casulli, 2021; Schediwy et al., 2018). Some even see entrepreneurial endeavors as antithetical to authentic arts practice (Coulson, 2012; Gangi, 2015). Knox and Casulli (2021) found that these identity tensions are particularly apparent when founders from art backgrounds interact within business support communities, where promoting commercial practice is a priority (for example, customer service, accounting, profitability, growth). While some founders from art backgrounds consciously reconcile their artistic and commercial identities, others do not feel able to do so. The latter experience identity tensions, which they resolve by defying commercial practices, focusing instead on art practice solely as a means of artistic expression: “art for art’s sake.” We define such ventures as “art-identity ventures” (AIVs):

Ventures or sole trading art endeavours founded by individuals who defy commercial priorities and are reluctant to adopt an “entrepreneurial” identity.¹

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¹Whereby “entrepreneurial” means directly aiming for economic value creation and a commercial orientation.

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AIVs utilize their creative skills in a range of ventures and practices in the creative and cultural industries (de Bruin & Noyes, 2014). These include designers, performers, and musicians, as well as artisanal workers utilizing craft-based practices to create esthetic products (for example, fashion or food; Biraglia & Kadile, 2017; Dodd, Wilson et al. 2021). For AIVs, the priority is to explore the opportunities created by the pursuit of their practices, as opposed to exploiting commercial opportunities (Albinsson, 2018; Nielsen et al., 2018).

Existing research establishes that tension develops when founders feel unable to reconcile seemingly discordant practices in two different worlds: the arts and commerce (Eikhof & Haunschild, 2007). Although “individuals from creative backgrounds may not always feel that they are sacrificing their artistic ideals when they embrace commercial practices” (Knox & Casulli, 2021, p. 25), we also see that commerce-defying AIVs often *do* achieve commercial value and *do* have tangible impact. However, their motives, aims, and strategies may differ from those promoted by commercial support organizations. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that AIVs achieve commercial value *because of*, rather than *despite*, their rejection of a commercial entrepreneurial identity (Knox & Casulli, 2021). Thus, the question for policy makers is not, *How can more arts ventures be supported to integrate toward the commercial world?* It is instead: *How can the commercial world be more sensitive to the arts in order to offer effective support?* In order to attend to this question, we need to consider how entrepreneurship as a form of “orthodoxy” currently frames the arts and their associated ventures.

Entrepreneurial journey research: Status quo

The entrepreneurial journeys of artists who do not identify as entrepreneurs are seldom captured within theoretical perspectives on the early entrepreneurial process in the mainstream entrepreneurship literature (Casulli & MacLaren, 2020). This results in a theorizing that is skewed toward capturing the entrepreneurial processes of those who meet certain characteristics (entrepreneurial self-identity, entrepreneurial intentions, or prioritization of pursuit of commercially viable activities with the promise of high growth). Recent research argues that this focus in theorizing means that entrepreneurship research is narrowed in scope and disconnected from practice across different contexts and processes (Dimov et al., 2020; S. Dodd, Anderson, et al., 2021; Welter et al., 2017). In turn, this creates an exclusionary feedback loop whereby, in our case, AIVs are judged in relation to a profile that never considered their characteristics in the first place. We call this the *AIV gap*: artists are missed either because they do not self-identify as entrepreneurs or because a narrow scope of selection criteria discourages researchers from identifying them as entrepreneurs.

One of the criteria for recruiting entrepreneurs into studies of the venturing process is that they self-identify as entrepreneurs (for example, by declaring an intention to start a business, as in the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor or the Panel Study of Entrepreneurial Dynamics). Those who do not self-identify as entrepreneurs would therefore not meet this sampling criterion (Casulli & MacLaren, 2020). Another criterion for recruitment into studies of the venturing process is that the person, while perhaps not self-identifying as an entrepreneur, is identified as one by association with a community that is widely recognized as “entrepreneurial.” That is, a community whose ultimate aim is to create (economic) value and growth or one where actions taken are classed as “entrepreneurial” by virtue of the context (Uy et al., 2017). Examples of communities identified as entrepreneurial are business incubators, start-ups networks, and the public register of patents (Casulli & MacLaren, 2020). Examples of individuals who may enter those mainstream “entrepreneurial” communities, despite the fact that they may not see themselves as entrepreneurs, are engineers and other science, technology, engineering, and math innovators, likely to be referred into incubators by commercialization divisions of universities.

However, AIVs are unlikely to engage with mainstream commercialization intermediaries (Knox & Casulli, 2021) and are unlikely to engage in communities that are primarily commercially oriented (that is, striving for economic value creation; Knox et al., 2021). Thus, they are also excluded from studies that sample early entrepreneurial activity through the criterion of “belonging to an entrepreneurial community.” Taken together, this means that certain assumptions about what the venturing process looks like and how it should be supported are baked-in to research, policy, and practice, often to the detriment of entrepreneurship at the periphery (S. Dodd, Anderson, et al., 2021).

Policy is, in part, informed by research with a narrow perception of entrepreneurship as young, high-growth, high-tech, and backed by external investment (Brown et al. 2017). If this misperception is left unaddressed then it risks creating a two-tier system, whereby the further AIVs distance themselves from entrepreneurial identities, the more their value-added and modus operandi become confined to an obscure, second-class form of entrepreneurship. As such, we note a self-perpetuating cycle of underrepresentation, undertheorization, underacknowledgment, and delegitimization of AIVs, which is a diverse but equally valuable form of entrepreneurship.

UK policy: Status quo

In the UK context, enterprise policy has a history of prioritizing ventures that can demonstrate growth regardless of whether SME owners would identify with the idea of growth (Wapshott & Mallett, 2018). This is against a backdrop of

enterprise policy research emphasizing the importance of high-growth firms in creating new jobs (Brown & Mason, 2012; Mason & Brown, 2013), and stressing the need to focus public resources on the “vital six percent” who show potential to grow (Brown et al., 2014; Mole et al., 2011). This has contributed to misconceptions around who can grow a business, leading policy makers to apply restrictive criteria to eligibility for support (Brown et al., 2017, p. 2).

The creative and cultural industries have been firmly positioned at the heart of economic strategies in the United Kingdom since the “New Labour” government acknowledged the innovation and growth potential of creative workers in 1997 (Garnham, 2005). This has generated misconceptions about the nature of creative work, casting artists and cultural workers as economic assets, resulting in policy interventions directed to maximize economic and innovation potential, such as research and development credits (Bakhshi et al., 2015; Banks & Hesmondhalgh, 2009). The result for some AIVs is that their support needs are not represented in policy and acknowledgment of their cultural and social value is diminished. AIVs may add social and esthetic value directly (Eikhof & Haunschild, 2007), although value is often indirect, intangible, unquantifiable, yet unquestionable (Belfiore & Bennett, 2008).

The sudden and unexpected collapse of much of the arts sector during the coronavirus pandemic has reintensified debate around the value of creative and cultural work (Banks & O’Connor, 2021; Comunian & England, 2020). While the academic literature questions the validity of quantifying the economic value of culture and creativity (Belfiore, 2020; Bille et al., 2016), government policy and funding decisions are increasingly reliant on such articulations (Bazalgette, 2017; Sagger et al., 2021). Recent valuations in the United Kingdom show that the real-terms substantive economic footprint of the creative arts is significant and far-reaching (Bazalgette, 2017; Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2021), yet the work itself is often precarious, fragmentary, opaque, and solitary (Eikhof, 2020).

AIVs may generate economic value in indirect ways. For example, by pursuing art as an end in itself, they may develop art forms that the market values highly in economic terms. Examples are street artist Banksy and digital artist Beeple.

Also, while art ventures may not generate “employment” directly, their practice often requires calling on a range of freelancers and sole traders for specific projects. Thus, their activities still generate economic value-added and employment in novel forms. We could say that many art ventures are job creation adjacent as opposed to directly creating proprietary jobs.

AIVs: Status quo

AIVs identify with their communities of arts practice rather than with their commercially oriented networks (that is, business advisors, economic

development agencies). Those communities of art practice place emphasis on mutual engagement and support, sharing ideas, and discussing issues toward achieving closeness rather than instrumental, esteem-driven benefits (Knox et al., 2021).

AIVs can find the approach of commercial support entities “off-putting” due to the language that is used, the attitudes that are demonstrated, and the way in which success is measured. This means they are potentially forced to choose between pursuing art for art’s sake and fitting in with an environment where they can find support. On one hand, artists do not feel like support agencies speak their language, therefore they are not interested in getting their help. On the other hand, if support agencies do not find a way of engaging with AIVs then they are unjustly limiting the scope of their support.

Many AIV founders carry inaccurate and dated assumptions about what entrepreneurship is and is not (Knox & Casulli, 2021). An assumption often made is that entrepreneurship is solely about economic value creation: quite simply, it is about making money. It does not help that entrepreneurship carries historical and conceptual links to free-market economies and capitalism, which many artists reject. While those assumptions may have been considered accurate in the past, they are worthy of a revisit under current global policy thinking. Notwithstanding the fact that large global corporations continue to inspire mistrust in the power dynamics created by the “invisible hand,” entrepreneurship is changing following the lessons learned from the corporate scandals of the 1990s and early 2000s (for example, Enron, Parmalat) and the introduction of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Academics and enlightened start-ups are reshaping the notion of enterprise into a force for good in the world, while at the same time encouraging ventures to become sustainable in the broadest sense of the word (Hansen & Wyman, 2021; Terán-Yépez et al., 2020).

In the post-COVID-19 economic crisis, help in the form of grants from art councils is set to become simultaneously scarcer and in greater demand (Eikhof, 2020). AIVs need to become self-sustainable and be able to demonstrate the generation of sufficient revenues to keep themselves afloat. This will require a shift in thinking, which must begin with an adjustment of founders’ identity work. While there is no need for AIV founders to fully embrace the commercial ethos of economic-value-added entrepreneurship, there is a need for them to develop an awareness of the kind of value they are generating and its impact on society. Such a need can be attended to by acknowledging that entrepreneurship—as it is commonly understood—is flawed in its representation of certain groups and, therefore, the work of AIVs can be seen as entrepreneurial without being antithetical to their artistic identities and values.

Suggested ways forward: Research inclusivity, policy adaptation, and collaborative learning initiatives

To begin to address these shortcomings, we make several recommendations for academics, policy makers, and practitioners to acknowledge the value of AIVs.

Research inclusivity

We see the way ahead starting with research that better understands the diversity of AIV processes in context for achieving different forms of value. Academia needs to be more inclusive in how the venturing process works in different creative sectors. Specifically, more research is needed to understand the dynamics through which the commerce-defiant practices of AIVs achieve value creation. Anecdotal evidence suggests that such ventures capture the hearts, minds, and wallets of their audience (“customers”) *because of*, rather than *despite*, them not being customer-oriented and commercially driven. For example, craft beer ventures create cultural and symbolic value that their audiences value (Dodd, Wilson et al., 2021).

Cross-disciplinary and integrative research approaches should be adopted to understand more about AIVs, their behaviors, and their routes to value creation. An extensive body of research knowledge exists beyond mainstream entrepreneurship and management journals, which can shed light on new value-creating processes and practices (Callander & Cummings, 2020). Such research should be leveraged into more interdisciplinary exchanges aimed at demonstrating the economic, social, and cultural value-generating activities of AIVs.

Policy adaptation

Policy makers should consider adjusting expectations in regard to the return on investment for the resources that are directed toward the arts. Specifically, they should consider allowing for indirect links between investment made in AIVs and the return on investment, particularly in the form of economic impact and venture growth. By allowing for a more “oblique” (Kay, 2011), looser approach to the link between financial input and return on investment, policy makers would empower AIVs to continue to prioritize their artistic endeavor without feeling at odds with business support communities.

Also, mainstream enterprise policy support programs and business incubators with a focus on commercialization are unlikely to work for many AIV individuals and alternatives are needed. Support programs will require adaptation to cater for the points in the process where grants, training, and advice are needed in order for AIVs to reach self-sustainability. In these programs,

artists should be encouraged to grow and develop *through* the pursuit of their artistic priorities while helping them to:

- Create value for their community so that they can become self-sustainable. (For instance, by creating social enterprises rather than continuing to depend on government grants.)
- Develop an awareness of and claim the value they are already generating through their activities. (For instance, by recruiting freelancers, creating art that the market will value highly.)
- Adapt their existing communication skills to enable them to showcase their value-added to stakeholders.

Policy makers and enterprise support organizations would benefit from receiving special training on how to engage with AIVs from a communication viewpoint. Part of this training should acknowledge the need to connect with and understand the worldview of AIV founders, and communicate in a way that will resonate with them. An example stemming from the work of Knox and Casulli (2021) is that the use of economics-based terminology, such as “return on investment,” “growth,” “capital,” and so on may be alienating for AIV communities, or even perceived as antithetical to their practice.

Collaborative learning initiatives

Events run by enterprise support organizations could be led or co-led by artists who have successfully negotiated the tensions faced by AIVs, functioning partially as showcases of what other AIVs have achieved without compromising their artistic identities. Such events should not be exclusively for AIVs or others who self-identify primarily as artists; rather, they should be open to those self-identifying as entrepreneurs and to those directly pursuing commercial objectives, such as growth. This is an approach akin to Pratt’s (1991) heterogenous “contact zones” and it is intended for mutual learning (p. 37). For instance, the collaborative, community-orientated exchanges of AIVs can offer examples of true teamwork to other, more transactional forms of organizations found in the orthodox venturing environment, where competitive individualist agendas (Knox et al., 2021) often simultaneously champion and corrupt teamwork.

Place and space are also important. Traditional seminars and networking events run by enterprise support organizations in office buildings and meeting rooms may reinforce spatially the perceived identity tensions between commercial and artistic priorities. Arranging practitioner-led workshops, practice-sharing sessions, and open discussions around AIVs within larger studio spaces, art schools, and buildings already used by AIVs would bring support into a trusted environment and encourage communities of artists to attend together.

Engagement in these events could be enhanced through a loose, exploratory, and collaborative structure. This way, the event would allow for assumptions, concerns, tensions, and cynicism to be aired, explored, talked through, and demystified. For example, the art founders' identity tension theme could be explored by inviting responses to visual or textual "provocations" about the relationship between art and money and their perceived meaning in contemporary society.

Conclusion: The mutual benefits of inclusion

In developing new ways of understanding, reaching, including, and supporting "peripheral" entrepreneurial activity, such as that of AIVs, researchers, policy makers, and support organizations must recognize the significance of AIVs not simply as outliers or curiosities, but as established, fully realized orientations, from which original, innovative, and creative practices may be learned. This is to say that engaging with the "periphery" should not involve a one-way flow of information, but rather be a discursive, collaborative, and genuinely open and inclusive approach toward exploring different worldviews. This recognition of the wider utility of potentially radical AIV approaches may not occur without a sincere perspectival shift on the part of those working within the established entrepreneurial ecosystem. That shift, though, may inspire new forms of working for both entirely commercial and defiantly noncommercial communities.

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