

Small Enterprises Characteristics, Growth and Performance: A Profile of Small Handicraft Entrepreneurs in Sabah

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ABSTRACT

In many countries, two common criteria have been widely used in a firm's classification as small or larger enterprises, namely the number of employees and annual sales turnover. Studies in enterprise development considered all types of firms to pass through three stages of development, from start-up stage to early growth, and the later growth stage. Many studies on the profile of the small business sector argue for a need to treat the small business sector as heterogeneous. It is believed that due to differences level in capital and resources, not all entrepreneurs follow the theorized pattern of growth from initial start-up to exponential growth to mature enterprise. In Sabah, most handicraft producers modestly make handicrafts, on a part-time basis or at home, and only very small numbers operate their production full-time in dedicated workshops. Based on literature reviews, this study postulated that the handicraft sector might not follow the logic of the development and growth as portrayed in the general entrepreneurship literature. Therefore, face-to-face structured interviews were conducted with 210 small handicraft entrepreneurs in Kota Belud, Sabah, in which the sampling list was randomly selected from the Malaysian Handicraft Producer Census. Within this, sales, profit, operation status (part-time/full-time) and premise type were used as sampling criteria. Through cluster analysis, three groups of handicraft entrepreneurs were identified: (i) high-performance full-timers, (ii) part-time professionals and (iii) part-time

home workers. By identifying the different profiles of handicraft producers in Sabah, this research may help the Malaysian government to develop effective support policies for different types of handicraft producers, including how to encourage more individuals to become high performing full-timers.

INTRODUCTION

Small handicraft entrepreneurs are always described as slow-growth firms as many do not expand even after a long period of operation. Hassan, Tan, Rahman, and Sade (2017) and Berma (2001) contend that intrinsic satisfaction like personal happiness, cultural preservation and to be independent some of the important reasons to stay small, rather than extrinsic enjoyment. Besides, practical challenges may also prevent the growth of this type of business, namely lack access to market, finance, quality raw materials and skilled labour (Jamir & Sridharan, 2017; Redzuan & Aref, 2011). In terms of the theories relating to the growth of a small enterprise, it is postulated that small enterprises in the handicraft sector might not follow the traditional pace of growth as portrayed in the general entrepreneurship literature. For example, Marshal's theory that suggests economic expansion is possible through generating economies of scale that cannot be applied to handicraft firms because part of the value of handicraft products is the use of manual labour rather than mechanisation. Although modern machines for mass production can reduce the cost of production and increase efficiency, these come at the expense of the quality of the handicraft products. In a similar way, Schumpeter's theory of innovation as important for small enterprise growth may not be suitable for handicraft firms as mechanisation may cause loss of quality of handicraft products. In fact, some studies on small enterprises contend that small entrepreneurs in the rural area managed to achieve a competitive advantage without having advanced technology in production. They gain competitive advantage

by making good use of social networks for access to resources and markets (Soldressen, Fiorito, & He, 1998; Bhagavathula et al., 2010). Berma (2001) also found that the importance of handicraft production is not limited to income maximisation, but also to sociocultural development aspects like better-educated communities, and the creation of employment. Therefore, it can be argued that the characteristics, growth, and performance of handicraft entrepreneurs may be different from the classic theories.

In the context of the handicraft sector in Sabah, most of the handicraft production in Sabah is operated from home, mainly on a part-time basis, and very few entrepreneurs undertake in a dedicated premise or workshop (MHDC Handicraft Survey, 2014). In addition, the MHDC Handicraft Survey (2014) reveals that workshop-based producers are overwhelmingly full-time status, a bit younger in profile and have more employees than domestic producers. On average, they also have higher income levels than domestic producers. Furthermore, within these handicraft entrepreneurs, there is a special type of craftsman called master crafts-persons (*Adiguru*) or craft artisans (*karyawan kraf*). These entrepreneurs have been honoured by the government for their high-quality craftworks. They are traditional artisans, highly skilled, who produce their products in a traditional and time-intensive way, therefore their products are highly-priced. Therefore, it is not adequate to simply classify handicraft entrepreneurs based on traditional SME definition as they may not follow the logic of the development and growth as portrayed in the general entrepreneurship literature. These anomalies suggest a need to study the Malaysian handicraft entrepreneurs on their own terms, to identify their appropriate profile. Research is needed to understand better the choices of handicraft entrepreneurs regarding the operation status and type of premises that they choose for production, and their performance levels. Therefore, this paper aims to explore

the profile of handicraft entrepreneurs based on their business operation, i.e. status (full-time/ part-time), types of premises (workshop-based / home-based) and performance levels (income and profit).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definition and Characteristics of Small Enterprise

The interpretations of small enterprises tend to vary between countries and are revised from time to time based on particular criteria influenced by the economic development of a country. Existing common definitions include quantitative categorizations, for example, to benchmark small enterprises against certain volumes of sales and numbers of full-time paid employees (Hashim, 2007; Holmes & Zimmer, 1994) or shareholders' funds (Hashim, 2007). In addition, small enterprises have also been categorised by many scholars based on qualitative characteristics, for instance, level of business activity and the area of operation (ESCAP, 2007), the characteristics of the owners (Hosmer, Cooper, & Vesper 1997), and the degree of ownership of the firm and the size of its market share (Stanworth & Curran, 1976).

In Malaysia, small enterprises are dominantly populated by micro-sized enterprises, having less than five full-time workers, with annual sales revenues of less than RM300,000. This involves about three-quarters are sole proprietors, and they are mainly in the distributive service and agriculture sectors (Census of Establishments and Enterprises, 2016; NESDC, 2015; Yusoff, Yaacob, & Ibrahim, 2010). Generally, two common criteria have been widely used to classify a firm as a small enterprise or larger enterprise, i.e. number of full-time employees and annual sales turnover. It is crucial to acknowledge that other than these two performance-related criteria, enterprises may also vary from each other in many ways, for instance, the characteristics of an individual (Smith & Miner, 1983) and

the new venture process they go through (Schumpeter, 1934). Many studies on the profile of the small business sector argue for a need to treat the sector as heterogeneous. Beyond the basic definition, small enterprises may have very different characteristics in levels of operation, e.g. levels of resources and capabilities acquired into the business (Chan, 2005; Honig, 1998), and patterns of growth or levels of performance (Holmes & Zimmer, 1994; Chaganti & Chaganti, 1983).

It is often contended by many scholars that smaller firms face a greater challenge compared with larger firms. Hall and Wahab (2007) contend that the size of an enterprise correlates positively with its survival rates, i.e. smaller firms encounter higher rates of discontinuance or failure compared with larger firms. Due to its smaller size and limited resources, the small enterprise needs highly organised and resourceful owner-managers, even more than larger enterprises (Drucker, 1985). It is argued that since small enterprises hire fewer employees, the owner-manager often is obliged to undertake a range of tasks, not all which are within their competence. Consequently, the owner-manager becomes a generalist, who knows all aspects of management such as finance, marketing, and production. Nevertheless, being a generalist may contribute to challenges to small enterprise in terms of the effectiveness of the management as the entrepreneur has to perform many aspects of tasks which might result in a less efficient enterprise.

Small Enterprise Growth and Performance

Studies on the entrepreneurial process contend that starting an enterprise is not an abrupt event, rather, the process takes many years to evolve (Churchill & Lewis, 1983; Low & McMillan, 1988). Rationally, all types of firms go through different growth paths, with varying periods of stagnation or transition to another performance level. Previous research in the field of entrepreneurship found that entrepreneurs'

decisions and various environmental factors may influence the growth and performance of small firms (Cooper, 1981; Naffziger, Hornsby, & Kuratko, 1994; Yusoff et al., 2010). Studies in enterprise development suggest that the evolution of an enterprise can be divided into three phases, first phase starts with one or more persons having a desire to venture a business (start-up intention), the second phase involves sustained active engagement in the business (start-up realisation) and the third phase called business success, involves extension to a greater growth stage.

Cooper (1981) defines each growth phase based on the changes in the role of entrepreneurs, the action and decision they exhibit in the enterprise, i.e. from 'doer' in the early stage of development to 'manager' in the later growth stage. This is parallel to Stanworth and Curran (1976) who suggested three types of entrepreneur's role or action may occur through a sequence of growth stages of a firm, 'artisan' identity, 'classical entrepreneur' and 'manager' identity. Another example of the enterprise growth stage in the literature is focused on personality traits in the course of 'start-up intention' through 'start-up realisation' and to 'business success' stage (Frank, Lueger, & Korunka, 2007). Nonetheless, Stanworth and Curran (1976) argue that not all small firms evolve through the same sequence of growth which dominantly stated in 'stage model of growth', with one or more stages may be missed out or discontinued. Carter, Gartner, and Reynolds (1996) suggest a more differentiated view on start-up event sequences, which leads to three possible outcomes after the start-up intention of nascent entrepreneurs, i.e. 'started a business', 'gave up' and 'still trying'.

It is found that most studies on the development stage of a firm are limited to high technology manufacturing companies, which involved managers or directors and based on western developed regions. It is believed that due to differences level in capital and resources, small firms based in the rural developed region

may not progress the same as growth-oriented firms mentioned by Cooper (1981) and Frank et al. (2007). It has long been recognised that very few entrepreneurs follow the theorised pattern of growth, i.e. from initial start-up to exponential growth to mature enterprise. One reason for this is that economic outcomes are not always the primary goal when engaging in the entrepreneurial process. For example, Douglas and Shepherd (2002) find that income maximisation is not a significant predictor of entrepreneurial intention, meaning that prospective entrepreneurs do not always expect to get richer from entrepreneurial activity. Likewise, other studies of business start-up have found that non-financial motives like personal satisfaction (Shabbir & Gregorio, 1996), flexible lifestyle (Walker & Brown, 2004; Lerner, Brush, & Hisrich, 1997), and passion for work (Baum & Locke, 2004) are more important reasons for getting involved in entrepreneurial activity than financial ones. Therefore, many entrepreneurs might stay with the size or level of business activity that they are comfortable with rather than continuing to a greater level of operation. It is also found in the literature that small enterprises transition and grow based on the decisions entrepreneurs make in terms of their preferred level of entrepreneurial activity, for example, their preferred amount of time or hours spent on their business (Cooper, Cascon, & Woo, 1994; Kessler & Frank, 2009), or types of premises to operate their business (Roberts & Robinson, 2010).

The studies mentioned above give some ideas of types of handicraft entrepreneurs as small enterprises based on business characteristics, growth, and performance. Many studies on the profile of the small business sector argue for a need to treat the small business sector as heterogeneous. It is believed that due to differences level in capital and resources, not all entrepreneurs follow the theorized pattern of growth from initial start-up to exponential growth to mature enterprise. This implies a need for primary research to explore different types of entrepreneurs exist

in the small-scale enterprise, particularly in this study, the handicraft sector.

METHODOLOGY

This study involves a large-scale survey of 210 handicraft entrepreneurs in Kota Belud, Sabah, which conducted over a period of four months, to investigate the handicraft entrepreneur's levels of commercialization, i.e. production status, premises and performance. The sample for the survey was drawn from the census list of handicraft producers published by the Malaysian Handicraft Development Corporation in Sabah (MHDC, 2014), which contains the names of 2,200 handicraft producers, their contact details (home/workshop address and phone number) as well details about the operation of their enterprise (full-time/part-time, domestic/workshop-based, number of workers hired, annual sales). Kota Belud district was chosen as the geographical area for this study as the district contains the largest number of handicraft producers in Sabah, thus, it was a suitable and convenient site in terms of getting access to a large number of respondents. Within this, operation status (full-time/part-time), premise type (workshop/ home-based), annual income and profit were used as further sampling criteria. The questionnaire involves dichotomous question relating to respondents' demographic background and their business profile. Open-ended questions were used to gather respondent's annual income and profit. Two-step cluster analysis was performed to analyses the result. This technique allows relationships between variables to be explored simultaneously. It was intended to predict groups or clusters of respondents according to key variables of status, premises and performance that were analysed together. The accuracy of the cluster membership produced by Cluster Analysis was tested using discriminant analysis, based on the original four key variables of status, premises, sales turnover and profit percentage that were inputted for the Quick Cluster Analysis.

RESULTS

Profile of Respondents and Enterprises

Table 1 shows the respondents are mainly middle aged, nearly half are 30 to 49 years, and only 16 per cent are 29 years and below. Three quarters are female, while half of the sample had completed secondary education. More than half of the respondents make handicraft as part-time (61 per cent), while 39 per cent of them were full-time. More than three quarters respondents have no workers, followed by 19 per cent with 1 to 2 workers. The largest proportion of survey respondents produced handicrafts from their home (53 per cent), followed by 21 per cent of them produced in a government-assisted workshop and only 18 per cent produced in own workshop. In relating to performance, almost half of all respondents earned less than RM 5,000 (46 per cent), followed by 30 per cent of them earned between RM5,000 to RM9,999, and 16 per cent earned RM10,000 to RM19,999. Only a small proportion of respondents earned higher sales, i.e. RM20,000 and above. In terms of profit, almost two thirds of all respondents earned 41 – 60% profit, followed by 35 per cent of them earned profit more than 61% of their sales.

Over half of respondents produced forest-based handicrafts (woven baskets, bags, mats, blowpipe), followed by textile-based (woven cloth, rib shawl, table runner), metal or mineral based (machetes, gongs, ceramic plates) and beadwork. Two thirds of respondents sold most of their products in their local village, with 30 per cent selling to other districts in Sabah. Only a very small proportion (two per cent) sold the bulk of products outside Sabah. The vast majority of respondents (80 per cent) had registered their enterprises as formal business entities, i.e. they have a trading license permitting them legally to produce and sell their handicrafts, and majority respondents operated their enterprises as sole-proprietors (91 per cent).

Table 1 Profile of respondents and enterprises (n = 210)

Profile of Respondents		n	%
Age	29 and below	33	16
	30 to 49	100	48
	50 to 69	71	34
	70 and above	6	3
Gender	Female	162	77
	Male	48	23
Education level	No formal schooling	24	11
	Finished primary school	67	32
	Finished secondary school	105	50
	Certificate/ diploma	14	7
Profile of Respondents' Enterprises		n	%
Operation Status	Full-time	82	39
	Part-time	128	61
No. of employees	No workers	160	76
	1 – 2 workers	40	19
	3 – 4 workers	10	5
Production Premises	Own home	112	53
	Government workshop	45	21
	Own workshop	38	18
	Neighbour's house	15	7
Annual Sales	Less than RM 2,000	54	26
	RM 2,000 – RM 4,999	42	20
	RM 5,000 – RM 9,999	64	30
	RM 10,000 – RM 19,999	32	16
	RM 20,000 – RM 29,999	9	4
	RM 30,000 and more	9	4
Profit (Percentage of Sales)	40% and less	7	3
	41% - 50%	45	21
	51% - 60%	86	41
	61% - 70%	58	28
	More than 70%	14	7
Type of handicraft produced	Forest-based	116	55
	Textile-based	66	31
	Metal/mineral based	16	8
	Beadwork	12	6
Main Sales Channel	Local village	140	67
	Other districts in Sabah	67	32
	Outside Sabah	3	1
Legal Status	Registered business	167	80
	Non-registered business	43	21
Business ownership	Sole-proprietorship	192	91
	Partnership	18	9

Cluster Analysis of Respondents

The results of two-step cluster identified three clusters of handicraft entrepreneurs based on the four inputted variables, (i) annual sales, (ii) profit, (iii) operation status and (iv) types of premises. Table 2 shows the results.

Table 2 Cluster profile summary (n = 210)

Key Variables	Cluster 1 (n = 80)	Cluster 2 (n = 55)	Cluster 3 (n = 75)
Annual sales	RM11,053	RM7,685	RM4,285
Profit	64%	58%	60%
Status			
1. Part-time	0	53	75
1. Full-time	80	2	0
Premises			
1. Own home	36 (45%)	1 (1%)	75
1. Own workshop	27 (34%)	11 (20%)	0
1. Government workshop	17 (21%)	28 (51%)	0
1. Neighbour's house	0	15 (28%)	0

Cluster 1 consists of 80 members, the biggest of the three clusters. This cluster consists entirely of full-time handicraft-makers, and quite equally split between domestic premises and own workshop, followed by 21% in a government-assisted workshop. In terms of performance, Cluster 1 members show the highest annual sales and the highest profits among the three clusters. Cluster 2 consists almost entirely of part-time respondents. Majority of them have premises outside their home, with half produce in government workshops, a quarter in their workshops, and the rest in neighbours' houses. In this cluster, respondents earn lower sales than Cluster 1 but higher than Cluster 3. However, they have the lowest profit of all the clusters. Cluster 3 consists entirely of part-time, and home-based handicraft makers. This cluster earned the lowest sales of the three clusters. However, in term of profit, Cluster 3 members earn profit lower than Cluster 1, but higher than Cluster 2. The result of discriminant analysis in Table 3 supports the validity of the cluster analysis. The three-cluster solution of types of producer is optimal, with acceptable level of accuracy.

of the predicted group membership. The result shows respondents were 100% properly assigned to Cluster 1 (80/80) and Cluster

3 (75/75), while 76% of respondents were correctly assigned to Cluster 2 (42/55).

Table 3 Classification results derived from discriminant analysis ($n = 210$)

Actual Cluster	No. of Respondents in each Actual Cluster	Predicted Group Membership			Percent of Respondents Correctly Classified in each Cluster
		1	2	3	
Cluster 1	80	80 (100%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	80 (100%)
Cluster 2	55	2 (4%)	42 (76%)	11 (20%)	42 (76%)
Cluster 3	75	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	75 (100%)	75 (100%)

Profile of Small Handicraft Entrepreneurs

To understand better the profile of handicraft entrepreneurs, each cluster was explained based on the key characteristics of sales, profit, operation status and premises, and logic descriptive labels were applied to each of the clusters. Figure 1 summarized the cluster characteristics. Cluster 1 is labelled 'high-performance full-timers', since they are all engaged in full-time operation and earn the highest sales and profits of all clusters. Cluster 3 respondents are labelled 'part-time home

workers', as they are entirely part-time and home-based. Cluster 3 profile is perhaps most similar to the stereotype of the rural Malaysian handicraft makers who makes part-time at home and achieves modest income. Cluster 2 is labelled 'part-time professionals', as these handicraft makers are almost all part-time and are entirely make handicraft outside their home, whether in a workshop or others' home. As the choice to produce outside the home in dedicated premises requires commitment and determination, so these entrepreneurs have been labelled as 'professionals'.

Cluster 1 "High-performance full-timers"	Cluster 2 "Part-time professionals"	Cluster 3 "Part-time home workers"
All full-time producers	All part-time producers	All part-time producers
45% at own home, 55% workshop (greater proportion in own workshop)	Almost all outside home (half in government workshop)	All home-based (own home)
Highest sales turnover	Medium sales turnover	Lowest sales turnover
Highest profit	Lowest profit	Medium profit

Figure 1 Cluster Characteristics ($n = 210$)

Overall, the profiles of the clusters are quite rational except for their profit levels. It is quite surprising to see Cluster 3 show higher profit levels than Cluster 2 although they earn higher sales than Cluster 3. In fact, with their

dedicated premises outside the home, Cluster 2 respondents could be expected to have a proper management that would make them better at managing their profit levels. Two possible reasons were explored to explain this

surprising result. First, it was hypothesised that Cluster 2 respondents might have higher operating costs (e.g. remuneration, utility costs) as almost all of them produced in workshop. Secondly, it was postulated that

Cluster 3 respondents could rely more on domestic market compared to Cluster 2, thus enjoy lower transportation costs, with positive impacts on profit levels. Bivariate analyses were conducted to test these propositions. Table 4 shows the results.

Table 4 Results of bivariate analysis to explain the profit level of clusters

Variables Tested	Cluster 2 (part-time professionals)		Cluster 3 (part-time home workers)		Chi-Squared Test
	n=55	%	n=75	%	
Sales outlets					
Local village in Kota Belud	36	26	60	43	$\chi^2=12.754$, $p<0.05$
Other districts in Sabah	18	27	15	22	
Outside Sabah	1	33	0	0	
No. of employees					
No workers	42	30	67	48	$\chi^2=48.457$, $p<0.001$
1 to 2 workers	12	19	8	13	
3 to 4 workers	1	20	0	0	

The results show support for both the propositions. It can be seen that a greater proportion of entrepreneurs in Cluster 3 sold their handicrafts to customers in their local area (43 per cent) compared to Cluster 2, while a larger proportion of entrepreneurs in Cluster 2 sold their handicrafts outside Sabah. In such, Cluster 2 entrepreneurs may have incurred greater transportation costs, therefore reducing their profit levels. In terms of employment costs, the result shows that more entrepreneurs in Cluster 3 had no or fewer employees than Cluster 2 entrepreneurs, which may involve higher operating costs, with negative impact on profit levels.

CONCLUSION

The study explains that handicraft entrepreneurs in Sabah are not homogenous, and they should not be described based on the conventional definition of small enterprise as mentioned in the literature. The assumptions that handicraft sector might not follow the logic of the development and growth as portrayed in the general entrepreneurship literature is supported by three different types of handicraft entrepreneurs based on their characteristics, growth and performance level.

This study is congruent with Mwila (2018) who found that South African small handicraft entrepreneurs possess a spiritually motivated profile that does not allow them to be neatly characterized in the profiles of the literature. This paper suggests three identified clusters of handicraft entrepreneurs with distinct characteristics based on their operation status, premises type, sales and profit. It can be contended that Cluster 1 entrepreneurs (high performance full-timers) is most like the small rural entrepreneur stereotype. They showed confidence, skills and commitment to make and sell handicraft full-time, mainly in a dedicated workshop. Cluster 2 entrepreneurs (part-time professionals) had a unique profile, who earn moderate sales but the lowest profit levels of all clusters due to higher operating costs. Cluster 3 entrepreneurs (part-time home workers) is most like the rural handicraft stereotype, although they operated on the smallest scale, they did not earn the lowest profits, and juggled with other responsibilities, it seems they were efficient and could keep their costs low. This study contributes to the literature on small enterprise profile, for craft-related enterprises. Most studies on small enterprises are predominantly based in western, developed countries, where handicraft firms

are always regarded as 'art-based businesses' and viewed as homogenous. The current research reveals handicraft entrepreneurs in Sabah as a distinct and heterogeneous group, which can be classified into three types. The exploration for reasons behind this surprise result between clusters revealed that sales outlets and number of employees contribute to these entrepreneurs' performance. This paper suggests that handicraft making can generate decent income, in fact the entrepreneurs can receive incomes comparable to production operators in the manufacturing sector or clerical workers in the government sector in Malaysia. Nevertheless, there is a proportion of handicraft entrepreneurs who generate very low incomes, thus the government needs to identify such type of entrepreneurs and develop effective support initiatives to encourage more handicraft makers to become successful handicraft entrepreneurs.

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