Unconventional entrepreneurs: the non-economic motives of souvenir sellers

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine souvenir sellers as unconventional micro-entrepreneurs, focusing on non-economic motives for selling.

Design/methodology/approach – A qualitative methodology was used. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 20 souvenir sellers in the Romanian city of Timișoara. These were analysed using thematic analysis which identified four non-economic motives for selling souvenirs.

Findings – Souvenir selling was a matter of choice rather than economic necessity. While these sellers were entrepreneurs who were seeking to generate income, non-economic motives were also important. These included passion, hobbyism and interpersonal interactions with customers. Some sellers considered themselves as cultural intermediaries, representing place and tradition to their customers.

Research limitations/implications – In a European context, selling souvenirs can be a matter of lifestyle choice rather than economic necessity. Micro-entrepreneurs are frequently motivated by passion, hobbyism and interpersonal rewards as much as financial profit. This represents a particular form of unconventional or lifestyle entrepreneurship.

Practical implications – The encouragement of on-street souvenir sellers by urban managers can add vibrancy to a city, enhancing the experiences of local communities and visitors. This can also encourage the development of an artisan class to enhance a city’s reputation as a creative place.

Originality/value – Souvenir sellers are little researched, and this is one of few studies that has investigated this group outside Developing World contexts. This study emphasises the importance of unconventional entrepreneurship and non-economic motives for selling souvenirs in a European context.

Keywords Souvenir sellers, Micro-entrepreneurs, Unconventional entrepreneurship, Passion, Hobby, Interpersonal benefits, Romania

Paper type Research paper

非传统企业家：纪念品销售商的非经济动机

摘要

目的：本研究将纪念品销售商这类非传统微型企业家群体作为研究对象，重点关注其销售纪念品的非经济动。设计方法途径：本研究采用定性的研究方法，对20位罗马尼亚蒂米什瓦拉市的纪念品销售商进行了半结构访谈。通过对访谈结果的主体分析，本研究发现并提炼出了纪念品销售商的4种非经济动机。发现：纪念品销售并非经济上的必然选择，更多地体现为一种个体的自主决策。尽管这些销售商本质上仍是追求经济回报的企业家，其销售活动背后的非经济动机同样重要。这些动机包括对事业的激情、业余爱好、以及与顾客之间的人际互动等。一些销售商视自己为文化传播的中介，在销售活动中向顾客展示地域与传统的象征。

研究限制/启示：在欧洲的语境下，纪念品销售通常被视为一种生活方式的选择而非经济的迫切需要。微型企业家的销售行为通常受到对事业的激情、业余爱好以及人际关系的多重因素的推动，而非单纯由经济利益驱动。这呈现出一种独特的非传统生活方式创业形态。

实际应用启示：城市管理者可以通过鼓励纪念品销售商在市区进行销售活动的方式为城市注入活力，提升当地社区和游客的体验，同时有助于培养手工艺艺术家阶层，进一步增强城市作为创意之地的声誉。

研究独创性/价值：纪念品销售商的相关研究相对较少。本研究在探讨这一群体时提供了发展中国家的框架，同时强调了在欧洲环境下非传统创业和销售纪念品的非经济动机的重要性。

关键词 关键词：纪念品销售商，微型企业家，非传统创业，激情，业余爱好，人际收益

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Emprendedores no convencionales: Los motivos no económicos de los comerciantes de souvenirs

Resumen

Diseño/metodología/enfoque: Se utilizó una metodología cualitativa. Se realizaron entrevistas semiestructuradas a 20 minoristas de recuerdos (souvenirs) de la ciudad rumana de Timisoara. Las entrevistas se analizaron mediante un análisis temático que permitió identificar cuatro motivos no económicos para la comercialización de recuerdos.

Objetivo: Este artículo examina a los comerciantes de souvenirs como micro emprendedores no convencionales, centrándose en los motivos no económicos para su venta.

Conclusiones: La venta de souvenirs es una cuestión de elección más que de necesidad económica. Aunque estos vendedores eran emprendedores que buscaban generar ingresos, los motivos no económicos también eran importantes. Entre ellos, la pasión, la afición y las interacciones interpersonales con los clientes. Algunos vendedores se consideraban intermediarios culturales que representaban el lugar y la tradición ante sus clientes.

Limitaciones/implicaciones de la investigación: En un contexto europeo, la venta de recuerdos puede ser una cuestión de elección de estilo de vida más que de necesidad económica. Los micro emprendedores suelen estar motivados por la pasión, la afición y las recompensas interpersonales tanto como por el beneficio económico. Esto representa una forma particular de espíritu empresarial no convencional o de estilo de vida.

Implicaciones prácticas: El fomento de los vendedores ambulantes de souvenirs por parte de los gestores urbanos puede aportar dinamismo a una ciudad, mejorando las experiencias de las comunidades locales y de los visitantes. Esto también puede fomentar el desarrollo de una clase artesanal para mejorar la reputación de una ciudad como lugar creativo.

Originalidad/valor: Los comerciantes de souvenirs están poco investigados, y éste es uno de los pocos estudios que ha investigado este grupo fuera de los contextos del mundo en desarrollo. Destaca la importancia del espíritu empresarial no convencional y de los motivos no económicos para la venta de recuerdos en un contexto europeo.

Palabras clave: comerciantes de souvenirs, micro emprendedores, emprendedor no convencional, pasión, afición, beneficios interpersonales

Tipo de papel: Trabajo de investigación

Introduction

Souvenirs are a core element of the holiday experience. Almost every tourist destination offers them, and most tourists purchase some form of memento during their travels. Souvenirs take many forms, ranging from locally made handicrafts expressing local culture and traditions, to standardised mass-produced items. They are purchased for a wide range of reasons, but their most important role is to facilitate remembrance of the holiday experience (Swanson and Timothy, 2012). Souvenirs represent an attempt to capture and preserve an intangible holiday experience through a tangible object which is brought home and incorporated into everyday life (Swanson and Timothy, 2012). The production and sale of souvenirs is a major economic activity, involving global networks of trade, production and consumption (Hitchcock, 2000), and the sale of souvenirs can contribute significantly to destination economies (Timothy, 2005).

Souvenirs have attracted considerable academic attention (Swanson and Timothy, 2012; Li, 2023) although most research has focused on souvenir purchase (Amaro et al., 2020; Sthapit et al., 2022; Guo and Zhu, 2023). However, within souvenir research, one important group has been neglected: the sellers (Swanson and Timothy, 2012; Schlar and Kesktalo, 2018). Selling souvenirs is an important economic activity in many destinations and a popular form of micro-entrepreneurship. Sellers themselves are a heterogeneous group (Swanson and Timothy, 2012). Some offer items which they have made themselves, but others purchase the items they sell and, as such, are intermediaries (Soukhathammavong and Park, 2019) within an (often global) supply chain. Sellers operate through a range of outlets (Healy, 1994; Swanson and Timothy, 2012) including shops and hotels, but in many cases, souvenirs are sold informally, from stalls or tables set up by vendors in popular tourist areas. Furthermore, most tourists will encounter souvenir sellers during their holidays, and in some cases, they will be the only local person with whom the tourist interacts.
(Hitchcock, 2000; Steel, 2012). Indeed, encounters with souvenir sellers can be an enjoyable component of the holiday experience (Henderson and Smith, 2009).

Although souvenir sellers are important (and often influential) actors within tourism, their activities as entrepreneurs are poorly understood. Little is known about why people choose to sell souvenirs (or the nature of this occupation), and the limited research into this issue has mostly been undertaken in Developing World contexts (Trinh et al., 2014; Trupp and Sunanta, 2017; Widiastini et al., 2018; Soukhathammavong and Park, 2019; Kumar et al., 2022). Therefore, to advance the debate, this study focuses on sellers in a European setting. In particular, we focus on micro-entrepreneurs who sell souvenirs from small stalls and tables within a city centre in East-Central Europe. These sellers were organised as micro-enterprises (mostly employing only family members) and most were selling items that they had produced themselves. As they were selling “on the street”, they can also be considered as street vendors. The aim of this paper is to understand this particular form of micro-entrepreneurship, focusing on why people choose to sell souvenirs. This study examines souvenir selling as a form of “unconventional entrepreneurship” (Guercini and Cova, 2018, p. 385), something that has been little researched in the context of tourism.

**Literature review**

There has been limited academic scrutiny of souvenir sellers and even less attention to their motives for selling souvenirs. Furthermore, the research that has examined this issue has mostly been undertaken in Developing World contexts. Previous research into souvenir sellers has focussed on two broad themes. The first examines sellers as micro-entrepreneurs working within the informal economy of tourism (here a wider literature about street vendors is also relevant). The informal tourism economy is characterised by ease of entry; small-scale, labour-intensive operations; part-time work; family ownership; and unregulated and competitive markets (Timothy and Wall, 1997; Henderson and Smith, 2009). This sector is dominated by micro-enterprises, often run by a sole trader, or employing only family members (Timothy and Wall, 1997; Henderson and Smith, 2009; Soukhathammavong and Park, 2019; Kumar et al., 2022). This is frequently a “necessity-based” form of entrepreneurship, undertaken because of limited or unsatisfactory options to earn a living, rather than a response to a particular business opportunity (Wongtada, 2014, p. 56). Nevertheless, as entrepreneurs, the owners of tourism micro-enterprises are motivated by financial gain.

In this context, selling souvenirs frequently represents a necessity-based form of entrepreneurship. Studies of sellers have reported that earning money and improving living conditions are important motivators (Trinh et al., 2014; Soukhathammavong and Park, 2019), along with a desire to escape poverty, particularly where selling souvenirs represents a more viable and attractive livelihood than agricultural work (Truong, 2018; Widiastini et al., 2018; Soukhathammavong and Park, 2019). As such, selling souvenirs (or working in a tourism micro-enterprise more broadly) has the potential to contribute to both economic development (Guo et al., 2023) and poverty alleviation (Kirsten and Rogerson, 2002; Henderson and Smith, 2009; Truong, 2018). Furthermore, selling souvenirs can also be an important source of non-agricultural employment for women (Trupp and Sunanta, 2017), allowing them to care for their children’s needs without being dependent upon the income of a partner or spouse (Katongole et al., 2014). Selling souvenirs can be a primary occupation but can also be undertaken to supplement other employment (Cukier and Wall, 1994; Soukhathammavong and Park, 2019). However, the benefits from selling souvenirs can be about more than economic gain: sellers may enjoy the opportunity to develop new skills in interacting with customers and improving their foreign language abilities (Cukier and Wall, 1994; Steel, 2012; Kumar et al., 2022).

Like much work in the informal economy, selling souvenirs can be a precarious activity. Souvenir sellers, like tourism micro-enterprises more broadly, “occupy the bottom rung of
the ladder of entrepreneurship” (Kirsten and Rogerson, 2002, p. 32). Because of seasonality, selling souvenirs may not provide permanent employment (Swanson and Timothy, 2012). Furthermore, this sector is highly competitive (Hitchcock, 2000), as many vendors gather in locations where tourists are most numerous (Henderson and Smith, 2009), often selling very similar products. There are limited opportunities for sellers to differentiate themselves (Swanson, 2004) and profit margins may be small (Healy, 1994). Consequently, the income generated through selling may be limited, and such enterprises have few opportunities to expand (Katongole et al., 2014). Moreover, many souvenir vendors within the informal economy often operate without the necessary permits to trade (Henderson and Smith, 2009) and may be subject to harassment or enforcement activities (Wongtada, 2014; Truong, 2018).

A second theme focuses on the role of souvenir sellers in the commodification of destination cultures. The impact of tourism development on destinations is, of course, a long-standing theme in tourism research and consequently the role of souvenir sellers as agents of change has come under scrutiny. Sellers can be considered as a form of cultural intermediary through their choices about what to offer to tourists (Cave and Buda, 2013). They need to offer products that tourists want to purchase (Swanson, 2004; Timothy, 2005) so that traditional products may be modified (and new ones created) to match tourists’ expectations (Popelka and Littrell, 1991). Furthermore, where local producers cannot meet tourists’ demand, sellers often source souvenirs from outside the destination (Soukhathammavong and Park, 2019; Pu et al., 2023). Consequently, a well-developed industry has developed in which souvenirs are mass-produced in one country for sale in another (Hitchcock, 2000; Timothy, 2005). Such souvenirs can be produced in high quantities but at low cost (Swanson and Timothy, 2012), making them an attractive and profitable option for sellers. Such mass-produced souvenirs can, without difficulty, imitate those made by local craftspeople, raising questions of cultural change and authenticity (Timothy, 2005; Swanson and Timothy, 2012).

In this context, some research has examined the perceptions of souvenir sellers regarding authenticity. In some cases, sellers were adamant that the souvenirs that they made and sold were authentic, and that selling enabled them to sustain their skills and cultural identity (Kumar et al., 2022). In other cases, sellers had a more flexible conception of authenticity. Trinh et al. (2014) reported that many sellers at a World Heritage Site in Vietnam were offering products that were not made locally. Yet while such products were not “objectively” authentic, the sellers considered that their souvenirs contributed to giving tourists an authentic experience of Vietnam. Another study at a World Heritage Site in Laos (Soukhathammavong and Park, 2019) identified that sellers had a clear conception of what constituted an authentic souvenir but had few qualms about selling mass-produced and imported items to tourists because they generated more profits (Kumar et al., 2022). Nevertheless, they considered that such souvenirs could give tourists an authentic representation of the World Heritage Site. Such cases have been interpreted in terms of glocalisation, in which the interactions between global forces (such as tourism or the mass-production of souvenirs) and the local (the actions of producers and sellers) produce hybrid forms and understandings of souvenirs (Jolliffe et al., 2013; Schilar and Kesktalo, 2018).

In summary, souvenir sellers, as a form of tourism micro-entrepreneur, are poorly understood. Furthermore, the limited research which has examined this group has mostly done so in the Developing World where motives for selling souvenirs are frequently driven by economic necessity and are underpinned by an economic imperative. Therefore, this paper seeks to broaden the debate by focusing on the entrepreneurial practices of souvenir sellers in a European context to explore their motivations for selling, and the benefits of their activities.

**Methodology**

This study was inductive in conception and was underpinned by an interpretivist epistemology which seeks insider perspectives and understandings of human behaviour.
and experience (Killion and Fisher, 2018). Accordingly, a qualitative approach to data collection was used to facilitate understanding of the reasons for selling souvenirs. Data collection was through face-to-face interviews, a flexible method that allows issues to be explored in detail. The interviews were undertaken in the Romanian city of Timișoara. Romania is classed as a “Developed Economy” by the UN (United Nations, 2023) and as a “High-income Economy” by the World Bank (World Bank, 2023). Interviewing took place between December 2022 and March 2023: although this period does not correspond with the conventional tourist season, it represents the busiest time for souvenir sellers in Romania. December is marked by a Christmas market, while early March corresponds to a traditional spring festival (known as Mărțișor) and International Women’s Day on 8th March (celebrated as Mother’s Day in Romania). At the start of data collection, an inventory of sellers was compiled which identified 55 stalls selling souvenirs in the city centre and in a nearby mall. Items on sale included jewellery, fridge magnets, postcards, keyrings, bottles of wine, religious icons, glasses and mugs, along with Mărțișoare (broaches and pins with red and white coloured string). Many sellers offered handicrafts that they had created themselves; some offered more standardised souvenirs made in Romania and elsewhere; and some offered both. Stallholders paid a fee to the city council for the right to sell in the city centre. The purchasers were not exclusively staying tourists, but also included residents and day visitors to the city from the surrounding region who had travelled specifically for the souvenir market (although the sellers themselves usually referred to their customers as “tourists”).

The interviews were undertaken by two of the authors (both native Romanian speakers and residents of Timișoara). To enhance the credibility of the data collection (Nowell et al., 2017), the initial interviews were undertaken jointly, and the interviewers then held regular debriefing sessions to discuss the interview process. The interviews were semi-structured in nature, but to reduce the time burden on participants, the number of follow-up questions was limited. The interviews comprised 20 questions focussing on the products sold; the nature of earning a living from selling souvenirs; the busiest and least busy periods of selling; the place of origin of the items sold; and perceptions of their authenticity. A non-probability (purposive/convenience) sampling frame was adopted. Stalls staffed by a single seller (17 in total) were excluded (as stallholders would probably be unwilling to leave their customers). Stalls staffed by more than one person were approached and one of the sellers invited to participate in an interview. In total, 38 stalls were approached: 18 stallholders declined to participate, resulting in a sample of 20 sellers. Although data saturation was not a guiding principle in data collection, a sample of 20 is likely to have achieved saturation (Hennink and Kaiser, 2022). The interviews on average lasted 15 min and, although short, were able to produce rich data. Indeed, participants appeared very willing to spare the time to talk to the interviewer, knowing that their stall was staffed by other family members. The study was given ethical approval by West University of Timișoara. Before each interview, the nature and purpose of the study were explained to the interviewees and all gave their verbal consent to participate. Interviews were recorded using a smartphone, again with the consent of participants. The characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1.

The interviews were transcribed in Romanian, and data analysis was also undertaken in Romanian (which three of the authors understand). The data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017) involving three of the authors. This is a six-stage process which begins with repeated reading of the transcripts to facilitate familiarisation with the data. The second stage involves coding the data, to identify the key elements of the data. This is followed by an iterative process of grouping codes together to form “candidate” themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 90). In the fourth stage, these candidate themes are reviewed against the transcripts and refined through returning to the original codes. Once the analysts were confident that the themes were an accurate reflection of the data, each theme was named. The final stage is the writing up of the findings, and at this point, relevant extracts from the transcripts were selected and
translated into English (a collaborative process involving two authors, one a native English speaker, the other a native Romanian speaker).

The transcripts were analysed in two phases. Initially, the data were analysed in an “inductive” (that is, “data-driven”) way (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 83). The entire data set was analysed, which identified three themes, one of which concerned reasons for selling souvenirs. At this point, the data were analysed for a second time in an analyst-driven (Braun and Clarke, 2006) way, focussing only on reasons for selling souvenirs. Once there was confidence that the themes accurately reflected the data, the themes were named. Four themes relating to reasons for selling souvenirs were identified: a passion for the activity; making souvenirs as a hobby; enjoying interactions with the public; and celebrating local culture and traditions.

**Results**

**Characteristics of the sellers**

Most sellers (18 of 20) were female, replicating research undertaken in the Developing World (Trupp and Sunanta, 2017; Widiastini et al., 2018; Soukhathammavong and Park, 2019). Their average age was 32 years. For 19 of the interviewees, selling souvenirs was a form of self-employment. In all, 12 sellers offered souvenirs that they had made themselves. For some, making and selling souvenirs was their main occupation within a family micro-enterprise (Soukhathammavong and Park, 2019; Kumar et al., 2022). For example, I18 stated: “My family works in the buying and selling of souvenirs. It’s a type of business (maybe it’s too much to call it a business but they are in charge of the shop)”. Significantly, more than half of the interviewees sold souvenirs as a second job to supplement the income from other employment. For example: “I am a barber by profession, but in my free time I help my family to make souvenirs and to sell them” (I8), while I7 stated “when it’s not the season to sell souvenirs I work as a biologist”.

These sellers were micro-entrepreneurs who had recognised a demand for souvenirs at Christmas and during spring (Ratten et al., 2019). Some were selling (and sometimes also making) established products, but others were more innovative in the types of souvenirs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview no.</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Type of souvenirs sold</th>
<th>Employment status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Traditional Romanian carpets</td>
<td>Additional/part-time job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Christmas ornaments and arrangements, jewellery</td>
<td>Main job/occupation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Christmas themed magnets, handmade ceramic objects</td>
<td>Additional/part-time job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Handmade cosmetics and soaps</td>
<td>Additional/part-time job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Fridge magnets</td>
<td>Additional/part-time job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Magnets and keyrings</td>
<td>Main job/occupation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Handmade figurines, natural habitats in miniature</td>
<td>Additional/part-time job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Jewellery, <em>Mărgăioare</em> souvenirs</td>
<td>Additional/part-time job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Handmade wooden souvenirs</td>
<td>Main job/occupation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Handmade souvenirs with flower patterns</td>
<td>Additional/part-time job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Miniature dolls, handmade ceramic souvenirs</td>
<td>Main job/occupation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Objects with dried flowers</td>
<td>Additional/part-time job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Traditional Romanian items</td>
<td>Additional/part-time job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td><em>Mărgăioare</em> souvenirs</td>
<td>Additional/part-time job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Jewellery, fridge magnets</td>
<td>Additional/part-time job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Jewellery</td>
<td>Main job/occupation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Jewellery</td>
<td>Additional/part-time job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Fridge magnets, decorations and religious items</td>
<td>Main job/occupation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Fridge magnets and key rings</td>
<td>Employee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Paintings, statuettes and religious icons</td>
<td>Main job/occupation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Table by authors
they offered for sale. The sellers had established micro-enterprises (which were sometimes seasonal) to meet the demand for souvenirs and to generate income from their businesses. However, it was clear that various non-economic reasons for selling were important. These are examined in more detail below.

**A passion for selling souvenirs**

The most frequently given reason for selling was a passion for the activity of selling (and, for some, also making) souvenirs. Passion was mentioned by both those for whom selling was a main job and a supplementary/part-time job (being more frequently mentioned by the latter group). For example, I7 stated: “I like to make souvenirs. I do it as a passion, and I thought of combining the useful with the enjoyable”. Other participants went into more detail:

> For me, selling souvenirs is a passion and I have been doing it for several years, and it makes me happy […] I am an economist by training, so I haven’t specialized in the creation of souvenirs. I make them only from passion and love (I12).

> It stimulates our creativity and the way to express ourselves better in public. We do it out of passion, especially since they [souvenirs] are handmade. We are 3 friends who set out to make souvenirs and mărgăore and then we decided to sell them […] it’s a passion for us to make them and bring them to sale (I14).

A passion for making and selling souvenirs is clearly important for these vendors, who derived considerable satisfaction and enjoyment from their work (whether full or part-time). As I10 stated: “I like making souvenirs. It relaxes me and it brings me joy”.

The issue of passion has been somewhat overlooked in previous research into souvenir sellers which has tended to focus instead on selling as an economic necessity (Popelka and Littrell, 1991; Cukier and Wall, 1994; Widiastini et al., 2018). However, some research involving handicraft producers in non-tourism contexts has highlighted the importance of passion. Wut et al. (2021) reported that women handicraft producers in Hong Kong were driven by passion and that this (rather than economic necessity) had led them to start their own businesses. Similarly, Oridi et al. (2022) established that passion was an important driving force for women handicraft entrepreneurs in Bangladesh. More broadly, passion has been identified as an important motivating force among entrepreneurs working in the cultural and creative industries who are often at their most creative when they feel most passionately about their work (Bhansing et al., 2018).

There is also a broader literature about passion within entrepreneurship (something termed “entrepreneurial passion” (Newman et al., 2018)). Passion is both a characteristic of entrepreneurial identities (Murnieks et al., 2014) and a component of the self-identity of entrepreneurs (Ranfagni and Runfola, 2018). The situation of these souvenir sellers in Romania accords with these findings. Selling souvenirs is an employment choice which allowed these people to follow their passion and creativity in a way which is personally rewarding and which allows them flexibility and independence. This conforms to the “Artist” form of entrepreneurial identity identified by Ranfagni and Runfola (2018) for whom passion takes priority over business (Ivanycheva et al., 2023). These sellers can give expression to their passion knowing that there is sufficient demand for selling to be a source of (at least part-time) income and employment.

**Making and selling souvenirs as a hobby**

Another group of sellers (all women) described making and selling souvenirs as a leisure hobby that was intrinsically enjoyable. Here, there was some overlap with those who described souvenirs as a passion (although not all who mentioned passion also spoke of selling as a hobby). Perhaps unsurprisingly, all who mentioned making/selling souvenirs as a hobby did so as a supplementary/part-time job. For some, it was an individual hobby. I17
stated: “It’s only a hobby […] I do it as a hobby and relaxation, for the interaction with people”. Another interviewee stated:

Selling souvenirs is a pleasure and relaxation, especially beads and jewellery which I’ve always enjoyed making. It’s a hobby for me. I spent about 3 months preparing them and then I bring them here. It takes time and patience […] it’s not a business, but a hobby for me. It’s only me that’s involved in making them (I13)

For others, making souvenirs was a shared hobby. For example, I17 stated: “I work as a biologist, while my husband is a geographer. For this reason we decided to make souvenirs about natural habitats”. In other cases, the whole family was involved:

I do this as a family hobby. For about 10 years I have been coming and selling souvenirs and magicoare when there is a fair […] I like to paint flowers and I put them on Magicoare (I10).

Making and selling souvenirs as a leisure hobby has not been identified by previous research into souvenir sellers (although this probably reflects the geographical focus of previous studies). This is a form of “artisan entrepreneurship” in which people “produce and sell products or services which possess a distinct artistic value resulting from a high degree of manual input” (Pret and Cogan, 2019, p. 594). However, it can also be identified as a particular form of “unconventional entrepreneurship” (Guercini and Cova, 2018, p.385) which Milanesi (2018, p. 423) terms “hobby-related entrepreneurship”. While artisan entrepreneurs set up a business based on their craft skills (Pret and Cogan, 2019), hobby-related entrepreneurs start a business from an activity initially cultivated for enjoyment in leisure time. Again, this practice is underpinned by passion (Pret and Cogan, 2019; Ivanycheva et al., 2023) which leads people to invest time and energy in their hobby. Over time, enthusiasts can identify and recognise the possibilities of commercialising their hobby. Hobby-related entrepreneurs may start a full-time business, but such entrepreneurship particularly lends itself to establishing a part-time business without the need to quit a full-time job (Wut et al., 2021). Many of the part-time sellers in this study appear to be involved in this form of entrepreneurship. These micro-entrepreneurs had recognised the possibility of earning income from their hobby, not out of economic necessity but to boost their household incomes. Furthermore, many chose to work on a seasonal basis, selling souvenirs during the busiest periods of the year and spending the rest of the year pursuing their hobby, preparing souvenirs for sale in the following season.

Enjoying interactions with customers

Just as tourists can enjoy interactions with souvenir sellers (Henderson and Smith, 2009), so too can sellers enjoy their interpersonal encounters with customers. Both full- and part-time sellers spoke enthusiastically about how they enjoyed meeting and talking to their customers. For example, I14 said “It’s interesting to get to know people”, while I9 stated that selling was “a way of relaxing and socialising with people”. For some, the interactions with their customers were as important as the income they generated. For example:

I do it because it’s nice to communicate with people and it’s nice to bring a smile to their face. Of course, the financial factor is also a reason for selling souvenirs, but in general I think it’s a happy job that makes people happy (I11).

I17 made a similar point:

Even if we don’t manage to sell that many products, what matters is also the interaction we have with people, the transfer of energy that we have. The goal is not only to sell them [souvenirs], but for people to receive information and to leave satisfied.

Clearly, interacting with customers is an important aspect of selling souvenirs. Similar findings have been reported in other tourism contexts (Ateljevic and Doorne, 2000; Komppula, 2004) and also in hospitality settings where the approach of employees toward
guests often goes well beyond that of a simple service encounter (Golubovskaya et al., 2017). For some of these sellers, as unconventional entrepreneurs, the rational pursuit of profits did not appear to be their single goal (Guercini and Cova, 2018). Instead, some appeared to be seeking (and gaining) interpersonal as well as monetary rewards from their selling (Schilar and Keskitalo, 2018). Furthermore, some sellers displayed distinctly altruistic motives that involved making other people happy or providing them with information, without necessarily expecting a sale. Consequently, their stalls were as much about interaction and sociability as about commercial transactions.

This is further evidence that selling souvenirs is not a conventional form of entrepreneurship driven by profit and growth. Previous research has argued that, within developed economies, the nature of tourism entrepreneurship differs from other economic sectors (Shaw and Williams, 2004). In particular, tourism businesses are frequently characterised by “lifestyle entrepreneurship” (Ateljevic and Doorne, 2000) which is driven less by a desire for innovation or wealth but rather by non-economic priorities including the desire to maintain and enjoy a particular way of living and working (Dawson et al., 2011; Ratten, 2018; Ivanycheva et al., 2023). Lifestyle entrepreneurship prioritises current fulfilment, rather than future prospects or wealth (Ivanycheva et al., 2023). Indeed, for many small-scale tourism enterprises, “lifestyle is a strategic business objective” (Hall and Rusher, 2004, p. 94). The sellers in this study accord with these forms of lifestyle entrepreneurship. While selling souvenirs is a way of earning income, sellers also value other benefits such as enjoying interactions with their customers (Komppula, 2004). This enables them to run an informal small business based on their hobby which needs only to operate at times of maximum demand.

Celebrating Romanian culture and traditions

Some sellers spoke of pride in making and/or selling souvenirs that exemplified national or local cultural traditions. Sometimes this involved selling handmade souvenirs that were distinctively Romanian. I2 stated: “Tourists almost always ask for information about how the souvenirs were made and we explain to them that they are crafted and made in Romania”. Other sellers offered souvenirs specific to the western region of Romania (known as the Banat). For example: “The baskets which are hand-woven are authentic and specific to the Banat region” (I14). These findings accord with other research which established that souvenir sellers took pride in selling souvenirs that were a representation of a place, its culture and traditions (Trinh et al., 2014; Schilar and Keskitalo, 2018; Soukhathammavong and Park, 2019; Kumar et al., 2022). More broadly, lifestyle entrepreneurs frequently have strong connections to local place, culture and traditions (Ivanycheva et al., 2023). Therefore, these sellers can be identified as cultural intermediaries who are engaged in the transmission of meanings about places, to both internal and external audiences. Once again, this indicates that selling souvenirs is about more than simple economics.

Indeed, some sellers considered that their souvenirs had an educative role in informing purchasers about the local region. I7 who specialised in souvenirs which celebrated local landscapes and habitats stated:

We also offer them [tourists] an educational value through such souvenirs. We have also included the names of the species [of flowers] so that they’ll have more knowledge. I’ve been as creative as I can with meadow flowers, pollinating insects; also the stories behind them are of interest to people […] It’s important that they leave with some new information.

This again demonstrates the passion and care involved in the preparation of souvenirs, and people can be highly invested in the objects they make and sell. Here, the souvenir is conceived not only as a commodity to be sold and a celebration of local culture, but also as a didactic device intended to have an impact on its purchaser. Similar trends have been reported in other European settings: Schilar and Keskitalo (2018) reported that some.
makers/sellers of souvenirs in the northern regions of Norway, Sweden and Finland displayed a sense of responsibility in their role as a cultural advocate and educator for their region. Furthermore, the response of 17 indicates how people who make and sell their own souvenirs often attach stories to them and regard telling these stories as an important part of their occupation (Schilar and Keskitalo, 2018).

Another important tradition that was identified by some sellers was itself the practice of selling souvenirs (especially Mărgăsoare) to celebrate spring, a custom that is both ancient and distinctive to Romania (and neighbouring countries). It is, however, increasingly challenged by the “rival” celebration of Valentine’s Day which takes place around the same time. In this context, several sellers saw themselves as playing a role in continuing the tradition of selling Mărgăsoare. For example, 117 stated “it’s the first year that I do this, so that the tradition isn’t lost”. Similarly, 112 remarked on his pride in selling “ornaments showing snowdrops [a traditional indication of spring in Romania and elsewhere] because they are specific to our country. The tradition in itself is one that is specific to this country and it’s good that it is preserved”. Here, sellers see themselves as inheritors and practitioners of a very old practice (see Trinh et al., 2014 who report a similar situation in Vietnam).

Discussion and conclusions

The limited research into why people sell souvenirs has, to date, mostly focused on contexts in the Developing World. This paper has sought to broaden the debate by focussing on street vendors of souvenirs in a European context. These findings indicate that such selling takes a form that is clearly different from its equivalent in the Developing World. This is a form of micro-entrepreneurship that is based on choice (rather than necessity). It was frequently undertaken as a second, part-time or seasonal job to supplement income from a main job (and, as such, was predominantly undertaken by women). In this context, seasonality is less of a “problem” for the seller (Dawson et al., 2011) and the precarity of income from selling souvenirs is also less critical. Indeed, sellers can choose to sell souvenirs only during the busiest season to boost household incomes.

Furthermore, this study suggests that souvenir selling does not conform with the typical model of entrepreneurship in which an entrepreneur identifies a business opportunity and then develops a path to exploit this opportunity (Wongtada, 2014; Nikraftar and Hosseini, 2016; Guercini and Cova, 2018). Instead, this is an “unconventional” form of entrepreneurship (Guercini and Cova, 2018) in which non-economic motives are often as important as generating profit and in which business owners prioritise quality of life over growth (Ratten et al., 2019). These non-economic motives took various forms. For many, their entrepreneurship was the expression of a passion for selling (and also making) souvenirs. For others, selling represented the (small scale) commercialisation of an existing hobby. Some also took pride in the items that they made and sold as representations of place and culture, and as such, they acted as cultural intermediaries, seeing their souvenirs as a way of communicating a message to their customers. Furthermore, some saw themselves as agents who were actively engaged in maintaining the tradition of selling souvenirs in Spring. These micro-entrepreneurs found their work satisfying and fulfilling, again demonstrating that it was motivated by more than economic necessity. For some, their interpersonal encounters with their customers played a key role in their enjoyment of their work. These characteristics conform to the model of lifestyle entrepreneurship (which characterises many small businesses in tourism and, in particular, the “expression-driven” form of lifestyle entrepreneurship Ivanycheva et al., 2023, p. 9) in which a small business is founded which allows the entrepreneur to express and develop their creativity. A conceptual model which summarises these findings is presented in Figure 1.

The theoretical contributions of this paper are as follows. First, in contexts outside the Developing World, making and selling souvenirs is a form of work that is about deliberate choice, rather than being driven by economic necessity. Indeed, selling souvenirs can be a
matter of lifestyle choice associated with artisanal creativity and personal passion. Second, small-scale entrepreneurship in tourism may often be unconventional in form and driven by non-economic motives. In particular, it can have its origins in a leisure hobby in which an individual identifies an opportunity to monetise their hobby, drawing on their personal passion for the activity. In the process, a hobbyist becomes a micro-entrepreneur but one whose motivations and requirements are about more than generating profit. This, in turn, has implications for the experiences of tourists when they encounter a tourism worker who is driven by passion, rather than the quest for profit. Third, making and selling souvenirs can be a fulfilling form of work and the interpersonal benefits of selling may be as important as the financial returns on their investment of time in making souvenirs. Fourth, these findings affirm the findings of other researchers (Hall and Rusher, 2004; Komppula, 2004; Shaw and Williams, 2004; Ratten, 2018) regarding the significance of lifestyle entrepreneurship in small-scale tourism enterprises in a European context. Furthermore, while most previous studies of lifestyle entrepreneurship in tourism have focussed on the accommodation or adventure sports sectors, such entrepreneurship is also evident within the souvenir sector (and indeed may be more widespread within the tourism economy than has been previously recognised).

In terms of practical implications, these findings have most relevance for urban managers. It is well-established that souvenir sellers can generate income for local people (thereby contributing to local economic development). However, they also add energy and vibrancy to city-centres which can enhance the experience of place (for both visitors and local people), particularly during events and festivals. Furthermore, the encouragement of souvenir sellers can enhance a city’s identity as a lively and creative place. Such a reputation can attract the creative classes and, more broadly, contribute to a flourishing local art and creativity scene (Ivanycheva et al., 2023). Indeed, creative entrepreneurs may
thrive from the “buzz” generated by their peers through a process that Bhansing et al. (2018, p. 3) term “localised passion”. Urban managers can, therefore, invest in creating the conditions to support creative/artisan micro-entrepreneurs. Furthermore, as many artisan and hobby-based entrepreneurs sell souvenirs which celebrate local culture and traditions, encouraging this activity can contribute to local place distinctiveness, creating memorable experiences for visitors. It can also encourage local communities to value these traditions (Ratten et al., 2019; Ivanycheva et al., 2023).

A number of limitations to this research can be identified. This study was confined to one city in Romania, so that motivations for selling souvenirs may differ in other European contexts. Therefore, future studies are required to confirm or extend these findings. Second, a larger sample may have identified additional motives for selling souvenirs which may have included further unconventional forms of entrepreneurship. Third, the interviews undertaken were, of necessity, short (as the souvenir sellers were “at work”) which means that they may not have uncovered all the dimensions of unconventional entrepreneurship involved in souvenir selling. As such, longer interviews with sellers outside their working hours (or during the times of year when they do not sell) would have allowed the development of a deeper rapport with sellers and may have led to a richer understanding of selling souvenirs and the associated lifestyle entrepreneurship.

Various directions for future research can be identified. There is a need for a better understanding of the people who make and sell souvenirs, particularly in contexts outside the Developing World. This research could embrace souvenir sellers at major tourist destinations and attractions in Europe. Second, there is scope for further research into the relationship between hobbyism and unconventional entrepreneurship, both within souvenir selling and in broader tourism contexts. This, in turn, would contribute to a better understanding of both lifestyle entrepreneurship and the nature of the tourism informal economy. Third, the issue of passion in the making and selling of souvenirs (and street vending more broadly) also represents a potential research agenda, particularly as passion within tourism work is poorly-understood. In particular, the role of creative/entrepreneurial passion in the branding of cities as creative places could be examined in greater depth. Finally, future research could explore differences in motives and behaviour between artisan/hobbyist entrepreneurs (those who sell souvenirs that they have made themselves) and those who are “distributors” (selling souvenirs acquired through a supply chain). This would provide insight as to whether entrepreneurial passion is something that is confined to artisans or whether it is a broader phenomenon among souvenir sellers.

References


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