Crafters' Multiple Identities and Practices:

Navigating the Dilemma of Innovation and Tradition

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ABSTRACT

In the contemporary revival of craftsmanship, artisans face critical tension between tradition and innovation. While existing research has examined this paradox at the organizational level, particularly within family businesses, little is known about how individual craftspeople navigate this dilemma through their multiple identities. This study addresses this gap by exploring how the salient identities of craftspeople shape their innovation decisions. Adopting a qualitative approach, this research conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with nine ceramics crafters. The thematic analysis of the data revealed a typology of three distinct archetypes: the independent artist, who is driven by professional identity and uses innovation as a tool for self-expression; the traditional successor, who is guided by family identity and innovates to preserve their family legacy and spirit; and the industry pioneer, who is motivated by a collective or organizational role and views innovation as a strategic tool for advancing the entire sector. This study contributes to theory by linking identity to innovation within the craft context

and proposes a novel typology. Practically, it suggests that fostering craft innovation requires

support that goes beyond technical training to include identity-based guidance that helps crafters

reflect on their unique roles and motivations. This framework provides valuable insights for

policymakers and support organizations.

Keywords:

Roles of crafters; identity; innovation and tradition

INTRODUCTION

In today's rapidly changing world, we are witnessing a growing revival of craft. This

resurgence is often rooted in a sense of nostalgia, representing a longing for more human-

centered and meaningful ways of making. This is particularly evident in the "Pure Craft"

movement, an idealistic pursuit that seeks to "re-enchant" the process of making in response to

industrialization by reconstructing and giving meaning to work through its connection to history

(Kroezen et al., 2021). Yet, craft cannot rely on past creations or tradition alone. To stay relevant

and respond to evolving market demands, crafters must also find ways to innovate. If makers rely

only on inherited knowledge, they may risk becoming rigid or outdated. So even traditional

producers are now expected to reinterpret their heritage—to create new meanings and adapt their products for modern-day use. This approach is what De Massis et al. (2016) call "innovation through tradition." It's a way of preserving the past while using it as a foundation to build something new and allowing craft to not only survive but gain a sustainable competitive advantage by leveraging its unique cultural legacy.

Against this backdrop, traditional crafters are increasingly expected to engage in innovation themselves. At the same time, they bear deep responsibilities—to their families, communities, and cultural traditions. Especially in family-run craft businesses, crafters simultaneously occupy multiple roles: skilled professionals, family members, employees, owners, and managers (Okamoto, 2010; Tagiuri & Davis, 1996). In Stryker's (1980) symbolic interactionism, people get their sense of who they are—their identities—from the roles they play in society. These roles connect them to their place in the social world.

This leads to an important question: How do the different identities of crafters influence their innovation activities? Previous studies examined how family firms manage innovation and tradition (Erdogan et al., 2020). However, little is known about how individual crafters in family firms make creative decisions when navigating multiple identities. Therefore, the goal of this study is to bridge this gap by contributing to both identity research and family business studies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Craft, Tradition, and Innovation

In organizational studies, craft is defined as a human-centered approach to work that prioritizes human involvement and agency over machine control (Kroezen et al., 2021; Roy & Sarkar, 2025). A reliance on individual workers, coupled with more adaptable production processes, is what defines organizations that take a craft approach. This model stands in contrast to those built on anonymous "collective workers" performing highly specialized duties (Adler, 2007; Ingvaldsen, 2015; Marx, 1977) or on managers singularly focused on profit who treat staff as interchangeable components (Smith & Miner, 1983; Thornton, 2002; Kroezen et al., 2021). It can be said that craft is a way of working that respects the value and autonomy of crafters.

According to Kroezen et al. (2021), craft can be classified by the degree of mechanization into traditional craft and industrialized craft. Traditional craft is centered on a "community of artisans," "embodied knowledge," and "tradition and norms." In contrast, industrialized craft is characterized by a "mix of machine production and human skills," "formalized skills," and "market-driven evaluation." It can also be classified by its focus into

three types: technical craft, which is technology-centric; pure craft, which values handmade

techniques; and creative craft, which centers on artistic creativity.

Given that craft can be focused on the pursuit of technological and artistic innovation as

well as the preservation of traditional manual techniques, it frequently faces the dilemma between

being true to tradition and innovating. There are strict rules for the definition of traditional

handmade crafts. For example, Japanese traditional craft is legally defined by specific criteria: it

is mainly used in daily life, its core manufacturing process is handcrafted, it employs traditional

techniques and raw materials, and its production forms a regional industry of a certain size, where

the term "traditional," as clarified by the relevant association, specifically refers to elements that

have existed for over one hundred years (Promotion of Traditional Craft Industries Act 1974; The

Association for the Promotion of Traditional Craft Industries, 2024). For crafters who make

traditional crafts, it is necessary to preserve such traditions.

On the other hand, craft can also mean using new techniques and patterns. However,

innovative craft is not the same as industrialized craft. One does not need to reject traditional

resources. For instance, designers have created innovative wooden cabinets by combining

traditional Masonite material with novel techniques and designs (Holmquist et al., 2019). Also,

for craft in family businesses, there are arguments about whether the tradition will hinder

innovation. Previously, tradition was seen as an obstacle to innovation, but it is now recognized

as a source of innovation (Barron et al., 1994; Messeni Petruzzelli & Albino, 2012). Over-

reliance on the latest knowledge can lead to overlooking the benefits of past knowledge (Capaldo

et al., 2017; Katila, 2002). In addition, De Massis et al. (2016) propose that family firms have a

dynamic capability of leveraging tradition to create product innovation. It has been shown that

craft can be innovated through tradition in family firms at the organizational level. However, it is

not clear how crafters manage the dilemma of combining innovation and tradition at the

individual level.

Crafters' Roles and Identities

When examining how crafters navigate the relationship between tradition and

innovation, it is essential to consider their individual roles because these multiple roles affect

their way of managing this dilemma. Also, identity can drive creative action, especially for

crafters who produce personal works that reflect their identity (Bjorklund et al., 2020; Gowlland,

2009). In identity theory, a social role is what's expected of a person in a specific position within

a social group or network. An identity is when a person takes on those expectations as part of

who they are (Stryker & Burke, 2000).

Regarding the roles and identities of crafters, first, crafters have the role of an artisan or

a professional in their community. In arts and crafts organizations, crafters function as symbols of

tradition, sources of creativity, key contributors to the manufacturing process, and mentors for

future generations (Manfredi Latilla et al., 2019). There have also been discussions about crafters'

professional identities. Based on the definitions provided by Ibarra (1999) and Chreim et al.

(2007), a professional identity refers to the self-concept that an individual defines through their

professional role. Additionally, Wilson (2022) discusses the professional identity of crafters and

the related challenges within the American craft beer industry. Okamoto (2010) proposes that an

expert potter's professional identity is a dynamic developmental process rooted in a fundamental

trust in their work and the mastery of skills. This identity is deepened through dedicated effort

and the acquisition of a sense of competence. It is ultimately solidified by expressing personal

originality and engaging in the generational transfer of knowledge and craft.

When crafters are part of a family business, they can be a family member, an employee,

a manager, or an owner (Tagiuri & Davis, 1996). Additionally, crafters can be committed family

members with a sense of responsibility and a tendency to inherit the tradition. Sasaki et al. (2019)

report that craftsmen at long-established, family craft companies in Japan felt a sense of

obligation toward their families, local communities, and even their ancestors. It is also said that

entrepreneurs in traditional Japanese family businesses are tasked with pursuing innovation

(Yamada, 2013). Crafters can leverage past knowledge to contribute to product innovation as members or founders of a family business (De Massis et al., 2016).

While past studies show that crafters hold multiple identities with different characteristics, it remains unclear how these identities influence their approach to navigating the dilemma between tradition and innovation. This leads to the current research question: How do these multiple identities affect how crafters handle tradition and innovation?

METHODOLOGY

Data Collection

This study employed a qualitative research design that focused on the professional experiences and artistic perspectives of nine crafters in ceramics. This is because identity formation is a dynamic process, informed by past experiences and involving continuous learning and adjustment through practice (Pratt et al., 2006). Also, the aesthetics of crafts give their work characteristics. To ensure the privacy and confidentiality of the participants, especially given the report's public accessibility on the university website, rigorous anonymization protocols were implemented. All participants were assigned pseudonyms (see Table 1), and the name and

specific location of the company they were affiliated with at the time of the interviews have been

anonymized to protect both the individuals and the organization from potential identification.

A purposeful sampling strategy (Palinkas et al., 2015) was employed to select the nine

study participants. The primary selection criterion was the participants' professional involvement

within a family business, a scope defined by the initial directive of this research project. While

not intentionally selected for diversity, the final sample of nine individuals naturally exhibited

variations in roles in the family business, artistic styles, educational and apprenticeship

backgrounds, age, and years of professional experience (see Table 1). This study also included

non-family members, such as the founders' apprentices and long-term employees. This inclusion

allows for a multifaceted analysis of how the unique environment of a family business shapes the

identity formation of not only family members but also other diverse individuals within the

organization. This focused sampling approach enabled an in-depth exploration of the

phenomenon within the specific context of a family business. Participants were initially contacted

through the researcher's personal network.

Insert Table 1 about here

The primary data consists of in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted in 2023 via WeChat video calls. The data for this study was originally collected for the author's Master's thesis (Ge, 2024a), which explored the participants' innovation process within their family business. Each interview lasted an average of 60 minutes. It is important to note that these interviews were originally designed to explore the participants' innovation process in the family business. For the current study, these rich, pre-existing datasets were subjected to a secondary analysis, focusing specifically on the themes relevant to this report's research question. This approach was advantageous as it allowed for the exploration of themes that emerged organically from wide-ranging conversations. All interviews were audio- or video-recorded with consent and subsequently transcribed. The accuracy of technical terms, personal names, and place names within the transcripts was verified by an industry expert to ensure data reliability before analysis.

To supplement and triangulate the interview data, additional data was collected in 2024. This included: (1) photographic documentation of the crafters' works to analyze artistic expression and technique; (2) informal consultations with industry experts to gain deeper contextual insights; and (3) a review of background literature, including articles from WeChat official accounts, academic journals, and professional books on the history of local craft. This multisource approach enhances the validity and depth of the research findings.

Data Analysis

While the richness of this dataset has informed preliminary work presented at academic conferences (Ge, 2024b; Ge, 2025), the current study offers the first focused, multiphased analysis designed to specifically answer the research question: How do these multiple identities affect how crafters handle tradition and innovation? The thematic analysis framework, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), served as the foundational methodology in developing a typology of crafter identities, their works, and activities. The qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA was used to manage the process.

The analysis proceeded in three main phases. The first phase involved a re-engagement with the data at the code level. The existing 182 first-order codes from the transcripts were systematically reviewed and re-categorized based on their relevance to the core concepts of this study: crafters' expressions of their roles and identities, and their discourses and practices surrounding tradition and innovation.

In the second phase, through constant comparison, distinct patterns began to emerge. It became evident that specific sets of identity-related codes consistently co-occurred with particular approaches to innovation. For example, codes related to "artistic self-expression," "market recognition," and "academic techniques" formed a clear theme. Another cluster of codes

centered on "family legacy," "craftsmanship preservation," and "classic forms." A third cluster was identified around concepts of "community contribution" and "industry promotion."

The final phase of the analysis involved synthesizing these thematic clusters into a higher-order typology of crafter archetypes. By observing that these distinct identity-and-innovation clusters were consistently embodied by different groups of participants, three primary archetypes were constructed: (1) the independent artist, driven by an individual artistic identity, also as a professional identity; (2) the tradition bearer, guided by a custodial family identity; and (3) the industry pioneer, motivated by a collective community identity. This process of moving from open codes to thematic clusters and finally to archetypes allowed for a nuanced answer to the research question, revealing not just what the crafters do but the identity-based motivations for why they do it.

FINDINGS

The analysis of nine ceramic crafters' experiences revealed a typology of three distinct archetypes, each representing a different approach to navigating the dilemma of mixing tradition with innovation. These approaches are directly linked to one of the crafter's multiple identities that is most salient in their work. The three archetypes constructed from the data are as follows:

(1) the independent artist—driven by a professional identity and prioritizes personal artistic expression and originality; (2) the tradition bearer—guided by a family identity and focuses on preserving craftsmanship and the continuity of their cultural legacy; (3) the industry pioneer—motivated by a collective community or organizational role identity and concerned with mentorship and contributing to the future of their industry.

The Independent Artist

Crafters classified as an independent artist (Participants #2, #4, #5, and #8) are characterized by the salience of their professional identity. For them, innovation is not merely a commercial necessity but an essential means of self-expression, technical exploration, and the pursuit of a distinct personal style that leads to professional recognition.

A primary motivation for this archetype is the desire to achieve expert status and push creative boundaries. This is exemplified by Participant #4, a younger crafter who experiments with novel sculptural teapot forms to match their personal aesthetic. Their ambition is explicit: "My goal is to keep improving my work, even surpassing the market standard. I also hope to become a renowned expert in the future." This sentiment is shared by Participant #8, whose diverse background in art education and apprenticeships led them to Zisha pottery specifically for

its "greater vitality in terms of producing artistic achievements." their work reflects this, as they focus on technically demanding categories, from realistic depictions of nature to "an academic style featuring exaggerated and abstract forms."

While driven by personal vision, these artists do not abandon tradition. Instead, they use it as a foundation for developing a unique artistic language. Participant #2, for instance, blends formal art school education with market awareness by reinterpreting traditional symbols. They use the gourd motif as a starting point, applying modern sculptural methods to "incorporate elements of the gourd... and apply them to the body of the Zisha teapot, as well as the spout and handle."

Likewise, Participant #5 demonstrated a sophisticated dialogue between old and new. They use the traditional "Shih Piao" teapot shape as a canvas but innovate in its decoration. Although the carving patterns are inspired by traditional paintings, they deliberately break from historical technique: "I opt for shallow carvings inspired by Chinese painting motifs rather than the deeply carved traditional double knife engraving style." This, along with their experimentation in giving a teapot to a friend to test "low-temperature glaze," underscores this archetype's commitment to technical and stylistic evolution.

The Tradition Bearer

The second archetype, the tradition bearer, is characterized by a dominant family

identity that shapes their approach to innovation. Crafters in this category, including Participants

#1, #3, and #7, view themselves as custodians of a legacy. For them, creativity is more like an

evolutionary process aimed at ensuring the continued relevance and vitality of their family's craft.

The core belief of this archetype is that they are inheriting more than just a set of

techniques. This vision is clearly expressed by Participant #7, who stated, "In a multigenerational

family like ours, we inherit not only the Zisha techniques but also the atmosphere and spirit of the

tradition itself." This perspective prioritizes the preservation of an intangible cultural and

aesthetic essence. This is reflected in the work of Participant #1, who, after "rigorous training,"

focuses their efforts on subtle refinements. They update traditional vessel shapes to enhance

modern usability but are careful to maintain their "traditional aesthetic appeal," ensuring that the

teapots remain enjoyable to both use and appreciate. Participant #1's emphasis on mastering tacit

family knowledge, such as proprietary "clay processing" methods, underscores a commitment to

the foundational integrity of the craft.

The tradition bearer navigates the delicate balance between honoring their lineage and

developing a personal voice. Participant #3, whose father and uncle are both managers and

crafters in the family business, illustrates this dynamic perfectly. Although their direct master is a

non-relative, they demonstrate a strong commitment to inheriting the business's tradition

(Participant #3's father and uncle's master is the founder of the family business), for example, by

incorporating their father's style into their own work. They begin by absorbing the family's style:

"My father specializes in the tree stump style, so I draw upon those elements and integrate them

into my own teapots." Yet, this act of drawing from the family wellspring is the first step toward

individuality. Participant #3 elaborates that the goal is to merge this foundation with new

influences: "I lean toward traditional Zisha craftsmanship, but I also absorb and integrate

contemporary understandings of Zisha. I want to form my own style... to create works that have

my own unique character." For the tradition bearer, a personal style is an authentic evolution of

the family legacy, not a departure from it.

The Industry Pioneer

The final archetype, the industry pioneer, is defined by a prominent collective identity

tied to their role within the broader craft community or organizations. For crafters like

Participants #6 and #9, innovation is a strategic imperative for advancing the entire industry.

They are driven by a sense of social responsibility and a desire to build a sustainable and dynamic

future for their craft.

A key role of the industry pioneer is to inspire and institutionalize a culture of creativity that extends beyond their own studio. This is exemplified by Participant #6, the founder of the family business and a symbolic figure in the sector. They see their success as a platform to give back, stating, "We must feel content and strive to live up to society's expectations and our own reputation." Their artistic philosophy, a "continuous pursuit" of their "own artistic perspective" rather than "simply repeating a single pattern," serves as a model. This influence is directly visible in their apprentice, Participant #9, who was encouraged to "be creative". As a result, Participant #9 has built a career centered on developing novel designs, using awards and patents as verification of successful innovation.

Beyond individual mentorship, industry pioneers actively create opportunities for the entire community. They leverage their reputation and networks to build an infrastructure that supports collective advancement. Participant #9's career demonstrates this proactive community building. They took a primary role in "planning and establishing the 'World Teapot Art Competition,'" a major undertaking made possible by collaborating with the International Academy of Ceramics. Looking to the future, they are focused on attracting the next generation of talent. By introducing new concepts, such as "sculptural vessels," they aim to make the field more appealing and accessible, "encouraging more graduates from other art schools to come to

Yixing... to bring more people into the Zisha pottery field." This strategic effort to enrich the

talent pool and elevate the craft's international standing is the hallmark of the industry pioneer.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings of this study reveal three distinct types of crafter: the independent artist, the

tradition bearer, and the industry pioneer. While the Findings section details what these

archetypes do, this discussion explains why they behave so differently. It is argued that the

mechanism behind these divergent approaches to innovation can be understood through the

concept of identity salience. Identity salience originates from role identity theory (Stryker, 1980)

and is also a central concept for social identity (Ashforth et al., 2008), as it explains which of an

individual's multiple coexisting identities is active in a given situation.

While all crafters navigate a complex web of multiple roles (see Table 1), their actions

are driven by the identity that is most salient in shaping their professional worldview. This

concept provides a powerful theoretical lens to understand why different crafters, despite facing

similar industry pressures, choose such divergent paths.

Each archetype corresponds to the salience of a specific identity discussed in the literature. First, the independent artist archetype embodies the prominence of professional identity. Their intense focus on establishing a personal style and gaining market recognition is consistent with studies about professional identity around crafters' originality and independence from their masters (Okamoto, 2010; Okamoto, 2011). This pursuit of market recognition is fundamentally driven by the crafters' desire for autonomy as independent artists. Innovation, for them, is a vehicle for self-expression.

Second, the tradition bearer archetype is guided by a salient family identity. Their emphasis on preservation, continuity, and reinterpreting tradition aligns with studies on family legacy (Sasaki et al., 2019), where maintaining symbolic meaning often takes precedence over radical change. For them, innovation serves to keep the family spirit alive.

Finally, the industry pioneer archetype is motivated by a salient organizational role identity. Their concern with contributing to the future of the industry reflects their self-perception as managers, owners, or community leaders. In this context, innovation becomes a strategic tool for collective advancement and industry leadership.

Therefore, the typology presented in this study is more than a simple classification; it is a framework illustrating how the salience of different identities shapes the very meaning and practice of innovation in a traditional craft sector.

Contributions and Implications for Practice

This study offers several contributions to both theory and practice. Theoretically, it develops a typology of three distinct identities—the independent artist, which can be seen as a kind of professional identity; the tradition bearer, which can be seen as a family identity; and the industry pioneer, which can be seen as an organizational role identity, each linked to a different engine of innovation. In doing so, it connects identity theory with the study of innovation in traditional family businesses, opening a new avenue for inquiry in this relatively underexplored area.

Practically, the findings of this study suggest that supporting innovation in the craft sector requires more than just technical training. It necessitates a focus on identity-based support, helping crafters reflect on their roles and motivations. Recognizing which identity is salient can help align innovation with personal meaning, while early engagement in meaningful roles can foster an identity in younger crafters that sustains both tradition and innovation over time.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The primary limitation

lies in its focus on a single, salient identity for each crafter. This approach does not capture how

multiple identities may interact or conflict within an individual, while an internal negotiation

process is likely crucial for complex decision-making.

A further methodological limitation relates to the data analysis process. The entire

analysis was conducted by the sole researcher. While this approach allowed for a deep and

iterative engagement with the data from multiple perspectives, it also introduces the potential for

researcher bias. The lack of a second coder means that intercoder reliability, which is a measure

used to ensure interpretive consistency, could not be established. Therefore, the resulting themes

and archetypes are inevitably shaped by the author's subjective lens.

Finally, the study's scope presents limitations regarding generalizability. The findings

are derived from a small sample size and are specific to a single type of craft within one

geographical region. Consequently, these results may not be transferable to a broader population

of artisans or different contexts.

Implications for Future Research

Building on this limitation, several avenues for future research emerge. First, researchers could expand the sample to include a wider variety of craft businesses and cultural contexts to test and refine the proposed typology. Second, a longitudinal or ethnographic approach could provide a more dynamic understanding of how these identities evolve, interact, and shift in response to career changes, market pressures, and other external factors.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research positions identity not as a static label but as a dynamic resource that can bridge tradition and innovation. By understanding the different identity-based motivations of crafters, we can more effectively nurture a vibrant ecosystem where heritage is honored and creativity flourishes.

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TABLE 1

Interviewee Information

Pseudonym	Age	Years in the Industry	Role in the Family Business	Artistic Style	Educational and Apprenticeship Background
Participant #1	52	34	Manager, receptionist, family member	Traditional handcrafted teapots, focusing on meeting demand for practicality	Received further training at art schools; masters are relatives, and one of the masters was the founder of the family business
Participant #2	30	8	Employee, co-runs workshop, non-family member	Preference for rural themes, employing sculptural techniques	Attended an art school; one of the masters was a manager in the family business, but this particular master was not a relative
Participant #3	27	5	Apprentice, later independent, non-family member	Pursuit of a personal style with a tendency toward traditional vessel forms	Attended a non-art university; one of the masters was a manager in the family business, but this particular master was not a relative
Participant #4	30	6	Employee, co-runs workshop, non-family member	A delicate aesthetic expressed through sculptural methods	Attended an art school; one of the masters was a manager in the family business, but this particular master was not a relative
Participant #5	26	4	Apprentice, later independent, non-family member	Development of a personal design style and artistic experimentation, leaning toward traditional forms	Attended a non-art university; one of the masters was a manager in the family business, but this particular master was not a relative
Participant #6	86	69	Founder, designer, receptionist, family member	Integrating ceramic carving and sculptural techniques, merging sculpture with teapot design to create unique artistic expressions	Received further training at art academies; the apprentice was introduced by family

Participant	55	30	Second-generation owner, receptionist, family member	Strong commitment to traditional handcrafted teapots	Attended a non-art university; the main master is not a relative
Participant #8	61	40	Retired designer, independent, non-family member	Biomimetic teapots inspired by nature, combining animals and plants; styles range from realism to academic deformation with geometric design	Attended an art school; the main master is the founder of the family business, but not a relative
Participant #9	53	34	Designer, non-family member	Integration of modern sculptural styles and modeling techniques into teapot making	Received further training at art schools; the master is the founder of the family business, but not a relative