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Painting equality: female artists as cultural entrepreneurial marketers

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Abstract

**Purpose** – There is growing interest by marketers in historical accounts that paint early female artists as entrepreneurial marketers. The purpose of this paper is to challenge the traditional view of entrepreneurship to incorporate a feminist theory of cultural entrepreneurship by considering the role of two female artists.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Using calls for historical research and new methods of enquiry in marketing, this paper traces early female artists and applies modern entrepreneurial theory to their marketing methods to identify their innovation, adaptability to change and planned marketing approach.

**Findings** – The paper suggests that entrepreneurial marketing is fused with the artists’ persona resulting in their celebrated status being widely recognised. It contributes an important fresh body of knowledge to the wider entrepreneurship debate by offering a new model of cultural entrepreneurial marketing. The three concepts of innovation, adaptability and marketing approach have not previously been applied to link women artists as entrepreneurs, however, this article argues that there is plenty of evidence to do so.

**Research limitations/implications** – While these artists are Australian (which could be seen to be a limitation), the art market is indeed international. In this respect, these artists join a longer international history as producers and consumers involved in entrepreneurial organisations from early days.

**Originality/value** – The artists’ significance falls within the context of emerging modernism, feminism and cultural identity during the 1920s and 1930s in Sydney, Australia. It is combined with and explains the actions and the success of two female artists’ unusual marketing approach. It is of value to readers interested in historical context regarding equality in the visual arts.

**Keyword(s):** Entrepreneurialism; Women; Australia; Graphic arts; Marketing strategy.

Introduction

Had it been left up to male artists alone … Australia would not have experienced modernism (Topliss, 1996, p. 59).

There has been a growing interest in historical accounts that paint early female artists as entrepreneurs, as well as calls for new methods of enquiry into entrepreneurial marketing.
This investigation combines a review of art history, entrepreneurial marketing theory and feminist theory. Feminism and entrepreneurship have long existed in their own right as fields of study and increasingly they have been considered together. By elucidating the art history links and relating them to overlapping concepts of feminism and entrepreneurship, this study makes significant conceptual contributions to marketing. This paper discusses the emergence of women artists in a new light called cultural entrepreneurial marketers. Entrepreneurship has generally been understood as relating to individuals and organisations in business and, more recently, non-profit organisations and micro-enterprises. It is rarely attributed to artists. This presents methodological challenges in conducting research in this area and for fieldwork which may follow this conceptual analysis.

Fillis (2000a, b) has specifically researched entrepreneurship in the art industry. While acknowledging the importance of creativity, Fillis notes that the entrepreneur must also be involved in promotion and marketing of product. Hence, the term “cultural entrepreneur” could apply to an artist whose body of work has had a great impact on the changing perceptions of aesthetics and identity, has produced for mass consumption for a wider audience than would normally have been the case and who has actively marketed their work (Chong, 2002). Margaret Preston (1875-1963) and Thea Proctor (1879-1966) from Sydney, Australia, are two artists in that category. Their contributions to theory development allow a convergence of approaches of feminism, entrepreneurship and art history. While it has been argued that women's contribution does not deserve special mention or consideration apart from that of the general artistic maelstrom (see, for example, Galbally, 1975), the author agrees with Burke (1975) and Edwards and Peel (2005) that the unique contribution of Preston and Proctor merits them a place apart, not only in the arts but also as cultural entrepreneurs. Using calls for historical research and new methods of enquiry in marketing, this paper traces early female artists and applies modern entrepreneurial theory to their marketing methods to identify their innovation, adaptability to change and planned marketing approach.

Modernism comes to Australia

This study is of interest to feminists for a number of reasons. First, in the 1920s and 1930s, Australian art adapted due to a growing interest in modernism where consumer needs were accommodated more than ever before. Second, this movement remained quite distinct in organisation. Modernism involved a shift in interest from the 1880s focus on “noble” and “heroic” survival and the individual, to contemporary life, societal change and subjects that favoured intellectual ideas. Students of this movement were taught art outside the schools nestled in art museums and similar institutions. The innovative theories of modernist art were seen as marginal and therefore posed no threat to the dominant mode of traditional academic British and European style landscapes. Marginalisation was assisted by the rise of modernism, which distinguished art by type in hierarchies, and considered women's representations of contemporary life more utilitarian and less powerful (Wolfram Cox and Minahan, 2002). Finally, although women were free to explore modernist techniques unhindered (Eagle, 1989), they were excluded generally from organisational elites such as art museums. This led to the need for new marketing approaches if they were to succeed.

Early modernism in Australia was central to debates around the politics of national and cultural identity as well as the identities of the “artist” and of “woman”. Women were regularly associated with symbols of modernity, particularly with consumerism and new production processes (Moore, 1934). The image of the “New Woman” was a popular feature
of post-World War I society and the primary target of advertising (Eagle, 1989). Australia immersed itself in all aspects of modernisation and this infiltrated art education. This leads to an important point for marketing managers: these artists attended “learning institutions” as their art lessons were built around innovative teaching schools outside mainstream institutions. This is not dissimilar to the early exercise in modern branding discussed by Herman (2003).

Further, as artists, they managed their own micro-enterprises, possessing a specialised talent which could not be substituted by another and they remained in control of their product. Drawing on other cultures, including Japanese and Australian Aboriginal, rather than the traditionally accepted European and British cultures, Preston and Proctor initiated a new aesthetic linked to modernism and a growing sense of nationalism. In addition, they exploited their special assets and participated actively in conditions under which their assets would be used. They managed projects of artistic activity strategically in order to earn a reputation and become recognised (Greffe, 2002). The existence of such micro-enterprises in the artistic field gives an extended meaning to entrepreneurship.

Preston's and Proctor's work and approach conform to an agreed construct of entrepreneurship, defined below. Both were able to support their new theories on art and design, to discuss the various cultural influences on and origins of their inspirations and market their art and ideas to the wider community. Following this argument, this article develops a perspective on entrepreneurship as a field of study which might be described as a base of operations for future work. As the study of entrepreneurship is still in its relative infancy, the author has selected for examination three concepts: creativity and innovation, adaptability to change and a planned marketing approach (Brazeal and Herbert, 1999). While these concepts have not previously been applied to link women artists as entrepreneurs, this article argues that there is plenty of evidence to do so.

Overall, Preston and Proctor represent another distinctive, important and enduring organisational form worthy of study. The new forms of art they developed and shared and the publications they used to promote their ideas had a profound impact on the market within which they worked and affected how they differentiated their product from competitors. The article also shows that while the market was less developed than it is today, Preston and Proctor understood the links between painting, writing and product development.

**Entrepreneurship**

This study of entrepreneurship takes place in a similar timeframe to King's (2003) study of organisational structure and geometric art. The first three decades of the twentieth century were ones of intense artistic creativity and change, not only in Europe and the USA but also in Australia. Within marketing, one of the most fundamental concepts is innovation, central to entrepreneurship. The definition of entrepreneurship used here takes Schumpeter's “creative destructive” process of market turbulence and market change as activities to be considered when examining entrepreneurship. This aspect produces a key line with the work of DiMaggio (1987) who argues that economic rationalism must become more sensitive to a broader social environment when applied to the arts. The economists Jean-Baptiste Say and Joseph Schumpeter produced an interpretation of the term which identifies entrepreneurs as “the catalysts and innovators”, which more appropriately describes the contemporary use of the term (Dees, 1998). More importantly, Greffe (2002) states that entrepreneurs, such as those who work in one person micro-enterprises in the arts, do not necessarily concern
themselves with the creation of wealth or profit. Rather, they are persistent and able to be innovative in identifying and pursuing new opportunities, creative in executing ideas and adaptable in the face of encountered challenges. Fillis (2002a) points out that recognition of opportunity and exploitation of networks will result in a competitive advantage, while Mort et al. (2002) have reduced the main requirements of social entrepreneurs to be innovation, pro-activeness and a tolerance of risk (Lumpkin and Dess, 1996). There are two common ingredients in all of these discussions: the need for an entrepreneurial event and an entrepreneurial agent. Preston and Proctor fulfil these requirements.

**Cultural entrepreneurs**

Within the arts, cultural entrepreneurship is more readily known as social entrepreneurship, linked to the preservation and promotion of cultural capital and related primarily to the marketing of non-profit museums, galleries and other related institutions. (see, for example, Rentschler and Geursen, 1999). While DiMaggio and Stenberg (1985) use the term “cultural entrepreneur” in relation to innovation in theatre companies, only Chong (2002) appears to have used the term in relation to individual artists. In discussing a number of artists, Chong discusses the use of artist studios for the prolific production of works, such as in the case of Rembrandt, and the mass production of the works of Warhol.

This article examines the roles played by Margaret Preston and Thea Proctor in meeting the criteria for cultural entrepreneurship. Their influence extended beyond the art world to the wider community, having a significant impact on the intellectual and social activities which combine to form the cultural identity of a community (Willis, 1994).

The author is unaware of any previous literature that has considered these two artists as cultural entrepreneurs. Their contribution is examined for its creativity and innovation, adaptability and the development of market strategy, all of which affected the artistic and cultural development of Australia. The aim is not only to assess the past, but also to develop themes in such a way that they may help us to shape the future of cultural entrepreneurship for marketers.

**The context for cultural entrepreneurs**

During the first-half of the twentieth century, marketing was developing to meet the needs of new artistic forms. The Sydney art world was dominated by members of the Edwardian generation who held positions of power in art museums, newspapers and magazines. Modernists, artists, critics and progressive members of the public claimed that state art museums continued to buy inferior works by men in the face of brilliant examples of women's art. The structure of Australian painting practice was loaded against female artists, with art still considered an unsuitable career for men let alone women, and so most women went without status or support to study abroad. In other words, established bureaucratic institutions remained static while new forms of marketing emerged outside them to cater to the needs of emerging art and artists.

Proctor and Preston's concerns were multi-faceted. They saw themselves and their fellow women artists as professionals and did much to change the status of print-making, flower-painting and other so-called “lower” forms of art that were chiefly the domain of women. Preston's new direction for Australian art was based on a broadened aesthetic of Australian
culture to include urban, industrialized domestic scenes and images of native flora and indigenous Aboriginal art (Burke, 1980).

Proctor's work, on the other hand, played a vital role in the promotion of the “New Woman” in Australia. Her covers for *The Home* magazine depict women who are clearly stylish and beautiful, but above all independent, active and bohemian. Proctor was a strong feminist, always “up in arms for the women painters” (Cossington-Smith in Burke, 1975, p. 50), organising a petition signed by all women artists to protest against the conservative critic and Director of the National Gallery of Victoria, J.S. MacDonald's declaration that there had “never been a good female artist” (Burke, 1980, p. 50).

In opposition to the established view of appropriate subjects, Preston and Proctor acknowledged what now seems a post-modern concern for “leisure, consumption, the spectacle and money” and “the desire for the new that fashion expresses so well”. In addition, their oeuvres were “culturally tied to the development of a new visual language for the twentieth century – abstraction” (Chadwick, 2002, p. 253). They were innovative risk-takers in a time of change and succeeded in marketing their work to the wider community through articles, lectures, mass-producing their art for wider consumption and impacting on an emerging Australian culture.

**Margaret Preston: “Mad Maggie”**

Anyone familiar with the Sydney's art world in the 1920s and 1930s would immediately think of Preston. She advocated for a distinctive national art in Australia in her writing and lecturing, a cause to which she dedicated much of her life. For over 30 years she made strident demands for recognition for both her own art and the theories she held regarding Australia's artistic atrophy, attacking Australia's bush ethos and entrenched traditionalism (Butel, 1985).

Preston's fiery and self-promoting ways caused early art critic, Howard Ashton, to dub Preston “Mad Maggie” a comment on her vocal opposition to the establishment, passed off by conservative critics as irrational and unbecoming (Butel, 1985, p. 29). However, despite this prejudice, in 1929, Preston was invited to paint a self-portrait for the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW) and in 1937 she received a Silver Medal at the Paris International Exhibition (Butel, 1985).

Preston furthered her previous art studies in Australia with a course in Japanese art at the Musee Guimet, Paris, during her first overseas trip from 1904 to 1907. In particular, she was influenced by the line and rhythm of Japanese woodblocks which adapted well to the graphic illustrations in contemporary fashion magazines. She was also attracted to the strong colour of French artists such as Cezanne, Gauguin, Van Gogh and Matisse as well as the work of les Nabis and les Fauves which contrasted with the dark tonal paintings which were popular in Australia. In addition, she studied the new principles of colour theory put forward in France and promoted them to her colleagues back in Australia through lectures, publications and teaching.

Preston challenged existing thought and convention and concluded that Australian artists needed to release themselves from the encroaching internationalism and the artistic influences of the traditional schools of art in Britain and Europe which depicted arcadian perspectival landscapes, and finely executed realism of still-life and portraits. She argued
that, as European artists drew on their countries’ folk traditions, so should Australians look to the history and art of their own country and its original inhabitants – the Australian Aborigines (Preston, 1925).

Preston was the first artist to utilize the aesthetics of Australian Aboriginal art. Most important to her was the development of a truly indigenous national art which incorporated aspects of Aboriginal art. With its flat planes, strong forms and the elimination of highlights, Aboriginal art was well-suited to her Modernist taste for simplicity and line. Combined with the strong lines of the woodblock and linocut, Preston's paintings and prints reflected a distinctive and original technique. Her use of vibrant solid colours highlighted by the distinctive black lines reinforced the theory that “there is more than one vision in art” (Butel, 1985, p. 2).

Preston used journals as a “communicative instrument” to convey her theories on art and techniques to the wider community. Examples of her art frequently graced the covers of interior decoration, fashion, home and art magazines including *The Home*, *Australia National Journal*, *Art in Australia* and *Society of Artists* yearbooks from the mid-1920s. A special issue of *Art in Australia* was devoted to her in December 1927, in which Proctor supported Preston's “individual vision” (Butel, 1985, p. 40). Her first major article, “Why I became a convert to modern art”, was published in June 1923 in *The Home* magazine. In it, Preston advocated the application of the vitality of modernism to produce a “purely Australian product” (Preston, 1923). By 1924, she had devised a program for the formation of a national art which she explored in her articles “Art for Crafts” in *The Home* magazine (Preston, 1924) and “The Indigenous Art of Australia” in *Art in Australia* in 1925 (Preston, 1925) (see also Preston 1927, 1930a, b, 1935, 1940, 1941, 1942, 1946).

**Thea Proctor: cosmopolitan and contemporary**

Thea Proctor initiated a new aesthetic that was linked to modernism, a growing sense of nationalism and a “light-heartedness” that pervaded the art and fashion circles in the post-World War 1 era (Butel, 1985, p. 26).

Proctor completed a Diploma in Interior Decoration in New York. Her oeuvre reflected the distinctive “line and hue found in Eastern art” and the costumes and colours of Diaghilev's Ballet Russe (Minchin, 1980, p. 12). Her interests in decoration and design, graphic arts, lithography and poster and magazine illustration were closely linked to contemporary design and female fashion and indicative of the growing taste for modernism and marketing.

Proctor's magazine contributions began while she was in Europe between 1903 and 1921 where she worked as an illustrator among her other pursuits. While in Europe she was invited to design the front cover of *The Home* magazine. Requests for further cover designs and illustrations followed her return to Australia in the early 1920s. Interviews and articles detailing her views on fashion and decoration for *The Home* followed and a mutual interest with Preston in design and floral arrangement was expressed in an article in the fashion conscious *The Home* magazine in 1924. Consequently, this access to a wider community resulted in an extraordinary marketing campaign for her work (Minchin, 1980).

The AGNSW, the National Gallery of Victoria and other institutions at the time found her work most acceptable (Butel, 1985). In 1926, in conjunction with fellow artist, George Lambert, Proctor formed the Contemporary Group, set up to provide an opportunity for
artists to exhibit art which differed from that of the conservative nationalist values of the establishment taste (Minchin, 1980). In 1946, Proctor was awarded the Society of Artists’ medal for her services to art in recognition for her valuable work towards developing taste in New South Wales. For well over ten years, Proctor was the only female member of the Society of Artists hanging committee making her the only woman to have an official position in the Sydney art world at the time. Proctor believed in her right to effect change. She was a powerful influence within the conservative and radical art communities alike and used her position within the establishment to promote younger, experimental artists (Burke, 1980).

**A fusion of three concepts**

**Creativity and innovation**

Creativity and innovation are fundamental to entrepreneurship and important to the development of marketing. They have been discussed widely in analyses of entrepreneurial activities. Original ideas in any area are of significance (Amabile *et al.*, 1996, p. 1154), but it is the creative and adaptable approach to these ideas which is relevant to entrepreneurship as noted by Filipczak (in Fillis and McAuley, 2000; McCoy and Evans, 2002). “Being creative is seeing the same thing as everybody else but thinking of something different” (Fillis and McAuley, 2000, p. 8).

Creativity is often linked to the arts (Amabile, 1996; Fillis, 2000b). However, creativity alone is often seen as not enough within the context of entrepreneurship. The author holds a broader view of creativity that entails not only the expression of original ideas, but also the expertise and motivation to action them: in other words, innovation: “a balance between creating new ways of doing things and building on established traditions” (Rentschler, 2002, p. 39).

Amabile (1998) has identified intrinsic motivation as possibly the greatest stimulant in the production of creativity. The exposure to broader cultural influences and a passion for identifying and extending new levels of aesthetic taste stimulated and motivated Preston and Proctor. Their “creative progression of artistic ideas and practices” laid the foundations for the development of a more nationalistic and contemporary artistic movement (Fillis, 2002b, p. 133). In 1934, a significant exhibition, *Women Artists of Australia*, was held in Sydney. Proctor’s foreword to the exhibition catalogue expresses the innovation inherent in hers and Preston's work:

> It has sometimes been denied that women are capable of imaginative creation. This has been disproved by the contributions of women to art, especially since the revolt in Europe against the purely pictorial and decadent art of the nineteenth century… Great art is inventive, not imitative. The great weakness of Australian art in the past has been its lack of imagination and inventive design. Therefore it is pleasant to see an increasing number of young artists, and most of them women, who are showing imaginative qualities in their work (Kerr and Holder, 1999, p. 4).

**Adaptability to change**

The ability to adapt to a situation and to implement appropriate strategies was identified as a necessity in marketing and entrepreneurship (Mort *et al.*, 2002). However, a change could not occur without key people who were willing and able to transform existing social and cultural norms and incorporate outside influences (Florida, 2003).
An environment for change presented itself following the First World War with the rise of feminism when women assumed the male role in industry and work outside the home. An increase in access to artistic training resulted in a growing number of women gaining professional status alongside their male colleagues. This shift in the status of women coincided with the rise of modernism in Australia and paved the way for those seeking new ways of looking at the world to break down the accepted conventions and preoccupations through new marketing approaches. It was in this context that a number of women, Preston and Proctor key among them, adapted to their changing environment and took up modernist ideals before their male counterparts.

The limited acceptance of modernism by the conservative art establishment of the 1920s and 1930s only fortified the argument against women's right to compete as professionals on par with their male colleagues. Restrictive opinions regarding the appeal and role of women were analogous to estimations of their work, but a number of entrepreneurial women used this freedom to identify opportunities and use their creative abilities to effect change in their own micro-enterprises. In fact, 20th century modernism owes its foundation to the decorative arts (Wolfram Cox and Minahan, 2002). A new market was emerging for art as decoration, and the paintings and prints of Preston and Proctor served this function within the artistic hierarchy, fulfilling a perceived lesser, superficial and “complementary feminine role within the whole” (Jordan, 1994). Despite this positioning, they successfully used their public profile as a brand for marketing their products.

The integration of the essential elements of modernism (bright colour, lyrical rhythm and clean design) into Australian art can be primarily attributed to women artists. The movement towards subjectivity and the internal in art, literature and psychology not only reflected women's traditional interests but also, with the popularisation of subjects, such as still-life, the domestic scene and fashion, were a means of addressing the technological and everyday issues that modernism highlighted in art.

Preston and Proctor broke with tradition. They responded to the changing domestic and social environment and adapted their varied artistic pursuits to reflect the new societal vision.

Marketing approach

The difference between the artist and the cultural entrepreneur is the level to which their creativity is delivered to “customers-collectors who want to be cultural pioneers” and the market which “craves new products” (Chong, 2002, p. 39). The entrepreneurial marketer utilizes multiple approaches, including the ability to work with change rather than against it and to develop a new vision for the future or a new school of thought. Equally applicable to the individual artist is the argument put forward by Scheff and Kotler (1996) who state that during adverse conditions, such as lack of growth in audiences due to changing social and economic conditions, arts organizations must meet the challenges by establishing alternative techniques to attract the public.

Fillis (2002a), in his study of entrepreneurship within smaller firms, identifies the creativity found in entrepreneurial activities as vital to the marketing of a business. This relates equally to the successful marketing of the arts (Fillis, 2002a, b). Using case studies such as Van Gogh and Dali, Fillis also emphasizes the importance of the media and the need for self-belief, development of new ideas, risk-taking and the benefits of copying existing marketing methods or adapting or inventing new ones.
Fillis (2002b) produced a “manifesto” of entrepreneurial practices for artists which is in line with the co-ordinated pursuits of Preston in the promotion of her oeuvre. Preston and Proctor can be likened to Van Gogh and Dali in putting forward their philosophies and practices through their writings. The creativity that Preston applied to the production of her artistic pursuits was equally relevant to the marketing of her theories, not only among her peers in the art world but to the wider community via her lectures, articles and the reproduction of her works in various journals. Her co-ordinated pursuit of methods of promoting her oeuvre is in line with the “manifesto” of entrepreneurial practices of artists examined by, for example, the Young British Artists, Surrealists and Futurists.

Preston and Proctor's new style of art became a commodity and consequently a signifier of social status and a new form of cultural capital (DiMaggio, 1994). DiMaggio discusses various theories, including those of Weber (1958) and Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) in relation to taste and aesthetic preferences as “identity markers” which bond or divide status groups within society. The transition period in the emergence of a changing Australian culture was an opportune time for Preston and Proctor to capitalise on new technology “… to forge mass markets, [and use] design and advertising to create new classes of human needs …” (DiMaggio, 1994, p. 45).

Consumer satisfaction and trust is considered an important pre-requisite of successful marketing (Garbarino and Johnson, 1999). Continuing articles by Preston and Proctor ensured ongoing reinforcement of their theories and designs in art and decoration and gained the confidence of their emerging consumer-savvy and independent female audience. Similarly, the journals that published their work were astute enough to capitalize on a potential marketing tool for their magazines – the link between art and growing interest in home decoration and design fed by the emergence of modernism, the more independent working and fashion conscious woman and a national sense of identity (Amabile, 1985).

What elevated these women to the realm of cultural entrepreneurs was not just their creative concepts and their innovative styles of art, which certainly impacted on their students, peers and the future direction of art in Australia, but also the fact that they had the ability to market their work and promote themselves to the art community and the wider public (Chong, 2002).

Conclusions

The key argument in this article is that entrepreneurial marketing requires an extended definition to account for unusual organisational forms and the feminist implications of early female modernists in a creative community. The feminist implications see women as autonomous and active against a masculine establishment. It has also been argued that while women in prominent entrepreneurial positions are often asked to answer for their gender and are subjected to constant and unseemly surveillance, invisibility was the issue among the early female artists in 1920s and 1930s Sydney. Writings by art historians 50 years ago hardly mention the exploits of female artists. Proctor and Preston stand out for their prominence, due in part to their own writings and public profile which gave them a marketing edge, and also because of the far-sightedness of a few male art historians to document the outstanding contribution of women to this unique period of art history (see, for example, Moore, 1934).
Based on the historical approach taken for this article, a conceptual model of cultural entrepreneurship is presented (Figure 1). This model acknowledges the natural blending of research streams from a much wider field than marketing.

The term cultural entrepreneur can justifiably be applied to Preston and Proctor. Their entrepreneurial activities, their creative and innovative approach to their work and the pursuit of new avenues of production and dissemination of their work and visions resulted see marketing as central to their endeavours. This article argues that the painting of cultural entrepreneurs does not necessarily conform to the rules of the dominant elite. Thus, at many levels, the author argues for the inclusion of early women artists as cultural entrepreneurs. Further research is required into female artists as cultural entrepreneurs from the three periods of feminism, in the late 19th century, and in the early and late 20th century. A cross-country study of Commonwealth nations would be a good place to start, followed by a study of US female artists.

The argument presented in this article indicates the interconnections between marketing and the entrepreneurial picture painted by female artists. The entrepreneurial aspect inherent in Preston and Proctor's artistic contribution has not previously been discussed. It is this type of lacuna that makes recognition of the marketing contribution of these two women imperative.

![Conceptual model of cultural entrepreneurship](image)

**Figure 1** Conceptual model of cultural entrepreneurship

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Further reading


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