

Exploring how South African handicraft entrepreneurs can use self-schema and brand love to foster positive word-of-mouth from customers

South African
handicraft
entrepreneurs

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Abstract

Purpose – Handicraft entrepreneurs often lack the marketing funding needed to achieve brand awareness and, ultimately, sales. While positive word-of-mouth (WOM) from customers can bridge the funding gap, handicraft entrepreneurs may not have knowledge of how to generate WOM effectively. The purpose of this study is to examine role of self-schema and brand love in generating positive WOM in a developing country research context, namely, South Africa.

Design/methodology/approach – This study used a quantitative approach. A survey was completed by 250 South African respondents who purchase handmade home décor items. The interrelationships between constructs were analysed using covariance-based structural equation modelling.

Findings – Self-schema and brand love are instrumental in generating positive WOM, albeit via different underlying mechanisms. Brand love mediates the relationships between self-schema (inner- and social self) and positive WOM.

Originality/value – This paper contributes to the entrepreneurial marketing (EM) field theoretically by providing a needed customer perspective for EM strategies from a developing country. Moreover, by considering underlying cognitive and emotional processes that underpin WOM, the authors demonstrate how handicraft entrepreneurs can use customers as a resource in their marketing strategy. Practical recommendations for handicraft entrepreneurs and policymakers are also offered.

Keywords Entrepreneurial marketing, SME marketing, Branding, Customer relationships, Crafts, Word-of-mouth

Paper type Research paper

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1. Introduction

Handicraft entrepreneurship fulfils essential economic and cultural roles. Economically, handicraft entrepreneurship offers a source of livelihood for many people, especially in developing countries such as South Africa (Abisuga-Oyekunle and Fillis, 2017; Pret and Cogan, 2019). Moreover, the income handicraft entrepreneurs generate is often circulated in the local economy, contributing to further employment opportunities and community upliftment (Abisuga-Oyekunle and Fillis, 2017). Culturally, handicraft entrepreneurs often use traditional techniques such as weaving, pottery and wood carving to make their products, thus ensuring that these techniques are preserved for future generations (Guha *et al.*, 2021). Despite handicraft entrepreneurs' economic and cultural importance, many struggle to achieve growth, often citing a lack of funding and marketing expertise (Shah and Patel, 2017).

Resource constraints that characterise small and medium enterprises (SMEs), including handicraft entrepreneurs, have led to the emergence of entrepreneurial marketing (EM) theory (Breit and Volkmann, 2024; Miles *et al.*, 2015). The interdisciplinary nature of EM recognises the need for creative and proactive leveraging of resources that are available to entrepreneurs (Saiyed *et al.*, 2024; Miles *et al.*, 2015). Effective leveraging of resources also requires effectuation thinking, whereby entrepreneurs start their strategies with the resources at their disposal and not future end goals (Robledo *et al.*, 2023; Sarasvathy and Dew, 2005).

According to Morgan *et al.* (2019), a marketing strategy encompasses decisions related to strategy formulation (figuring out what to do) and strategy implementation (doing it). In marketing, brand awareness is a crucial first step in establishing strong consumer-brand relationships and, ultimately, sales (Keller, 2009). Advertising media that can be used to establish brand awareness include traditional media (newspapers, magazines, radio and television), digital media (online advertising, websites and sponsored sites, blogs, podcasts and e-mail marketing) and social media (Andrews and Shimp, 2018). Although paid digital and social media might be more affordable for handicraft entrepreneurs than traditional media (Guha *et al.*, 2021), it still requires financial resources (WebFX, 2023), often unavailable to these entrepreneurs. Handicraft entrepreneurs should consider utilising their customers as a marketing resource, considering financial constraints. Customers become a valuable marketing resource when they willingly recommend a brand to others, also called positive word-of-mouth or WOM (Dichter, 1966). Positive WOM is invaluable because it is provided freely by customers and is therefore generally regarded as more credible than paid advertising sources (Chen *et al.*, 2017; Haenlein and Libai, 2017).

While positive WOM is clearly beneficial for cash-strapped handicraft entrepreneurs who need to create brand awareness, how exactly they should endeavour to elicit it from their customers is less so. Initially, some scholars argued that positive WOM is a logical consequence of controllable marketing factors such as high product quality, reasonable pricing and exceptional after-sale service (Lovett *et al.*, 2013). However, because WOM is a socially embedded process of human conversations (Berger, 2014), customers' motivation for providing WOM stems beyond controllable marketing factors and is underpinned by interconnected cognitive and emotional processes (Alexandrov *et al.*, 2013; Ladhari, 2007).

Customers often provide WOM to satisfy self-needs such as self-affirmation using consumption choices (Alexandrov *et al.*, 2013). Stated differently, customers engage in WOM to cognitively affirm the self and express who they are to others. Customers' need for self-expression is, therefore, closely linked with their motivations for providing WOM in the first instance. However, because self-schema theory suggests that multiple selves exist (Gergen, 1971), the interrelationships between self-expression and WOM may be nuanced.

Furthermore, emotions are central to understanding goal-directed behaviour (Bagozzi *et al.*, 1999), with the feeling-as-information theory (Schwarz, 1990) suggesting that affect forms the basis from which customers make judgements and engage in behaviour. Customers are, therefore, likely to provide positive WOM if they have a favourable emotional connection with a brand. Favourable emotional connections often manifest as brand love (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006), and should also be considered when studying WOM.

The purpose of this study is to examine the interrelationships between self-schema, brand love and positive WOM in a South African handicraft entrepreneurial context, thus addressing several caveats in the EM field. First, this study provides a needed customer perspective in the development of EM strategies, which is lacking in the EM field (Breit and Volkmann, 2024). Previous studies that have considered the EM strategy of handicraft entrepreneurs have done so from an entrepreneurial perspective (Robledo *et al.*, 2023; Saiyed *et al.*, 2024; Brandão *et al.*, 2021). However, customer perceptions are integral to the effectiveness of marketing strategies, thus requiring a customer perspective (Fink *et al.*, 2020; Zeithaml *et al.*, 2020). Second, this study considers WOM, self-schema and brand love as psychological processes underpinning WOM phenomena. Previous WOM studies in the EM field have focused on innovation diffusion in electronic settings (Ahmad *et al.*, 2022), the dissemination of information about entrepreneurs via the internet and its effects on overall company brand evaluations (Yuan and Peluso, 2020) and the relationship between effectuation and WOM as mediated by networking (Robledo *et al.*, 2023). However, these studies have not considered the cognitive and emotional processes, namely self-schema and brand love, associated with customers providing WOM in the first instance. The inclusion of underlying cognitive and emotional processes is imperative for a vital part of marketing strategy, namely, the “how” (Morgan *et al.*, 2019). By including self-schema and brand love, our study addresses the research call for how entrepreneurs can build close relationships with customers despite limited resources (Alqahtani and Uslay, 2022; Breit and Volkmann, 2024).

Finally, this South African study addresses the call for more EM studies in a developing country context (Amjad *et al.*, 2023). With an estimated unemployment rate of 31.9% in 2023 (South African Government, 2023), the South African craft sector is instrumental in job creation (South African Cultural Observatory, 2019; Abisuga-Oyekunle and Fillis, 2017). However, the South African craft sector within which handicraft entrepreneurs operate is fragmented with an informal structure, thus exacerbating national and regional government interventions for skill development and training (Dhurup and Makhitha, 2014; Kaye, 2011). Therefore, South African handicraft entrepreneurs often have to “hustle” on their own to overcome growth challenges and achieve success (Fisher *et al.*, 2020; Kanayo and Duncan, 2019). Such hustling requires an EM lens and effectuation thinking, whereby handicraft entrepreneurs start with what they have and who they know.

2. Contextualising the present study in the entrepreneurial marketing field

The conceptual paper of Miles *et al.* (2015) offers a valuable understanding of EM as a theory. Specifically, Miles *et al.* (2015) argued that EM primarily focuses on “how individuals and management teams accept risk to innovatively and proactively leverage resources to create value in the marketplace”. Miles *et al.* (2015) further contended that EM has been associated with the marketing activities of firms that are small and resource-constrained and that survival in the marketplace, therefore, requires creativity and innovativeness. Such creativity and innovativeness can be better understood against the background of effectuation thinking. According to Sarasvathy (2001), effectuation thinking denotes a logic whereby entrepreneurs start with the means (i.e. what they have) as opposed to the end goals (i.e. where they want to be). Robledo *et al.* (2023) described the means as the resources

entrepreneurs have at their disposal, including who they are, what they know and whom they know. This study draws from effectuation thinking to argue that the “who” handicraft entrepreneurs know should include their customers. Customers become an invaluable marketing resource in handicraft entrepreneurs’ network when they provide positive WOM to others.

As previously mentioned, EM is associated with resource-constrained small firms (Miles *et al.*, 2015). Handicraft entrepreneurs are usually linked with craft-based microenterprises. These enterprises are defined by Fillis (2002) as those with fewer than ten full-time employees and the owner or founder manages more than half of the business. Moreover, handicraft entrepreneurs often cite the lack of resources as a significant challenge in achieving growth and market success (Saiyed *et al.*, 2024). Handicraft entrepreneurship subsequently offers suitable research settings for EM studies, given the overlap of firm size and resource unavailability. Fruitful opportunities to investigate the marketing/entrepreneurship interface also arise because handicraft entrepreneurs must juggle multiple roles simultaneously. These roles include creator or artist and owner or manager (Saiyed *et al.*, 2024; Fillis, 2004), which may lead to duality and internal conflict arising from resource demands. For example, as a creator or artist, the primary focus of handicraft entrepreneurs is on creativity or the craft itself, that is, art for the sake of art (Fillis *et al.*, 2023, Fillis, 2004). In contrast, the owner or manager role demands a focus on business efficiency and ensuring profitability, that is, art for the sake of business (Fillis, 2004). While this study does not consider role conflict *per se*, its presence underscores the importance of utilising available resources (such as customers) effectively entailing another “hat” for handicraft entrepreneurs as relationship manager and brand ambassador.

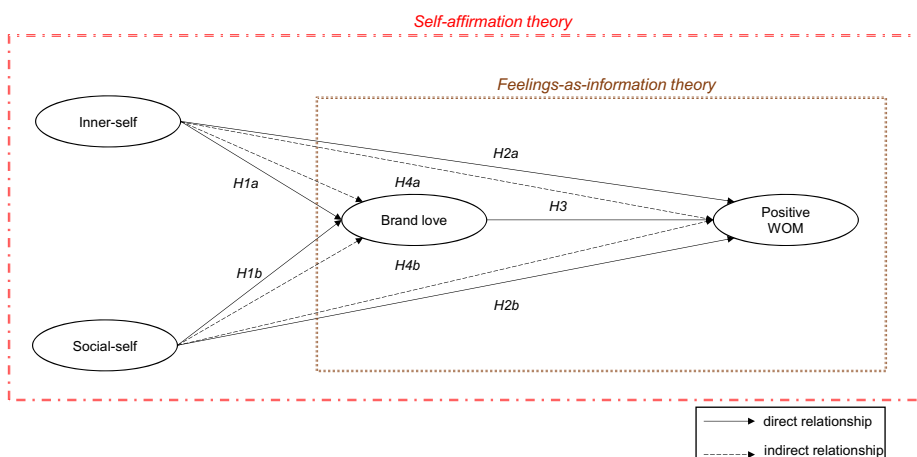
3. Theoretical background and hypotheses development

In this section, we explicate the marketing theories that underpin our study. Specifically, we draw from self-schema to argue that the self is multi-faceted and that many selves exist depending on context (Hogg and Vaughan, 2014). Moreover, we synthesise self-affirmation theory and feelings-as-information theory to support the hypothesised interrelationships between self-schema (inner-self and social self), brand love and positive WOM (depicted in Figure 1). We first explain the relevance of these theories to the current study before delving into hypotheses development.

3.1 Self-schema

Schema denote the mental structures by which individuals organise knowledge, which in turn, steer cognitive processes and behaviour (Hogg and Vaughan, 2014). By extension, self-schema, therefore, implies that individuals cognitively store information about the self as separate, context-specific nodes (Hogg and Vaughan, 2014 p. 119). Individuals, therefore, hold a repertoire of distinct identities and subsequently, multiple selves exist depending on the context (Gergen, 1971). Because different nodes are activated by different contexts (Breckler *et al.*, 1991; Higgins *et al.*, 1988), different aspects of the self can co-exist in different situations.

The existence of multiple selves is recognised and often used in the marketing strategy of brands (Ratneshwar *et al.*, 2003 p. 11). For example, products and services could be targeted to customers within the context of a particular self or communications could facilitate positive self-brand connections by emphasising how a brand is representative of an aspect of customers’ self (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2004, p. 113). By implication, handicraft entrepreneurs create products primarily using their hands and tools. As such, handmade products might vary slightly, thus enhancing perceptions of uniqueness and value (Fuchs



Source: Author's own work

Figure 1.
Conceptual model

et al., 2015). Handmade products can therefore reflect notions tied to self-schema. Thus, although handicraft entrepreneurs may not focus on segmentation and targeting (Saiyed *et al.*, 2024), customers as value co-creators may identify with the handicraft entrepreneur, the handicraft brand or the handmade product. Furthermore, customers assign meaning to objects such as possessions, including handmade products. Such meaning is given using a combination of personal (private, subjective meanings undisclosed to others unless consciously choosing to do so) and public meanings (consensual by all observers) (Richins, 1994). In this study, we thus consider the perceived degree to which handmade products reflect a consumer's inner-self and social-self. Whereas inner-self (or real self) is defined as how customers see themselves (Dolich, 1969), social-self refers to how they feel others see them (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Schiffman and Kanuk, 2004, p. 145).

3.2 Self-affirmation theory and feelings-as-information theory

Self-affirmation theory posits that individuals are motivated to maintain self-integrity in their self-schema (Sherman and Cohen, 2006). Self-affirmation may be accomplished by affirming values (Howell, 2017), such as valuing uniqueness, community upliftment and culturally embedded production methods, all evident in handicraft entrepreneurs' handmade products and reflected in the customer's self-schema. Furthermore, self-affirmation theory often underpins studies of WOM (see e.g. Alexandrov *et al.*, 2013), as customers could provide WOM to affirm and maintain self-integrity using their handmade product choices. Handicraft entrepreneurs may thus be in an ideal position to effectuate the WOM of customers in their network.

In addition, this study draws from feelings-as-information theory to explain the relationships between brand love and positive WOM. Feelings-as-information theory is one model used to explain the interrelationships between affect and cognition. Specifically, this theory argues that individuals use their affective states as a source of information when making decisions (Clore and Huntsinger, 2007; Schwarz, 1990). Feelings, therefore, act as a heuristic in decision-making when examining the interrelationships between emotion and cognition (Niedenthal and Ric, 2017). Stated differently, feelings-as-information theory posits that individuals primarily base their judgements and subsequent behaviours on how

they feel. Based on feelings-as-information theory, we argue that customers' decision to provide positive WOM will be prompted by their affective states. Because handmade product choices have been explored by considering love (Fuchs *et al.*, 2015), and handicraft entrepreneurs may embed their products with the labour of love, we consider brand love as a proxy for customers' affective state in this study, thus providing a broader network view beyond the entrepreneur's perceived value of love.

3.3 Hypotheses development

Next, we develop the study's hypotheses for direct and mediated relationships.

3.3.1 Self-schema and brand love. Brand love, albeit operationalised in different ways (Grace *et al.*, 2018, pp. 580-581; Palusuk *et al.*, 2019; Schmid and Huber, 2019), refers to object love for brands, products, services, experiences and destinations (Ahuvia, 2016). Such loved objects become integrated into customers' self-schema over time (Ahuvia, 2016; Bagozzi *et al.*, 2017). Previously, Fuchs *et al.*'s (2015) seminal paper considered how being made with love or embedded with love, increases the perceived attractiveness of handmade products. Handicraft entrepreneurs' craft thus evokes customers' awareness whereby the craft itself becomes effectuated in building customer relationships. Moreover, brands linked to customers' inner- and social-selves are associated with greater brand love (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Karjaluoto *et al.*, 2016; Loureiro *et al.*, 2012, p. 24; Wallace *et al.*, 2014, p.38) because brand love serves self-definitional needs (Ahuvia, 2005, 2016) and could thereby help to support self-integrity (Sherman and Cohen, 2006). Hereby, the consideration of both the inner- and social self could unearth deeper insights into brand love for handicraft entrepreneurs' products. It is therefore hypothesised that:

H1a. A customer's inner-self is associated with brand love for handmade products.

H1b. A customer's social-self is associated with brand love for handmade products.

3.3.2 Self-schema and positive word-of-mouth. Although social media marketing activities can be effectuated by handicraft entrepreneurs (Guha *et al.*, 2021), customers' positive WOM is self-focused (Chawdhary and Dall'Olmo Riley, 2015, p. 1031; Dichter, 1966, p. 148); customers share information to also benefit themselves. Personal, intimate excitement and satisfaction drive positive WOM in person (Lovett *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, positive WOM as associated with customers' self-schema using handmade consumption choices is highly likely to occur in person. WOM in person normally encompasses interpersonal, face-to-face communication (Kozinets *et al.*, 2010). Consequently, the inner- and social-self should be related to positive WOM in person about handmade consumption choices, especially as such WOM can affirm self-integrity. It is therefore hypothesised that:

H2a. A customer's inner-self is associated with positive WOM in person about handmade products.

H2b. A customer's social-self is associated with positive WOM in person about handmade products.

3.3.3 Brand love and positive word-of-mouth. Entrepreneurs build the feeling of customer confidence based on personal reputation, trust and credibility (Jones and Rowley, 2009) and customers are more likely to discuss content with which they have an emotional connection (Botha and Reyneke, 2013). Brand love, a form of positive emotion (Ahuvia, 2016), should thus be related to positive discussions, such as positive WOM in person. Moreover, brand

love as a self-integrated affective state (Ahuvia, 2016; Bagozzi *et al.*, 2017) would be a source of information guiding positive WOM (based on the affect-as-information theory, (Clore and Huntsinger, 2007; Schwarz, 1990) to affirm the self-integrated handmade product choices. It is therefore hypothesised that:

H3. A customer's brand love is associated with positive WOM in person about handmade products.

Similar to handicraft entrepreneurs' multi-hat roles (Fillis *et al.*, 2023; Saiyed *et al.*, 2024) that will inevitably create a wondrous entrepreneurial assemblage, customers' self-schema and brand love coalesce. Self-schema drives positive WOM in person (Chawdhary and Dall'Omo Riley, 2015, p. 1031; Dichter, 1966, p. 148), especially in self-affirming circumstances. Furthermore, brand love allows for these loved objects to become integrated into customers' self-schema (Ahuvia, 2016; Bagozzi *et al.*, 2017), inherently becoming entangled with the inner- and social self, while simultaneously acting as a possible affective driving force for WOM in person (Botha and Reyneke, 2013; Clore and Huntsinger, 2007; Schwarz, 1990). Accordingly, brand love has been established as a mediator between customers' self-schema and WOM (Coelho *et al.*, 2019; Wallace *et al.*, 2014, p. 38). Hereby brand love can become the mechanism through which customers' self-schemas are associated with WOM in person about handmade consumption choices. It is therefore hypothesised that:

H4a. A customer's brand love mediates the association between the inner self and WOM in person about handmade products.

H4b. A customer's brand love mediates the association between the social self and WOM in person about handmade products.

4. Research methods

4.1 Research design, target population and sampling

This study used a descriptive, cross-sectional research design. Handicraft entrepreneurs are usually associated with craft-based microenterprises. In South Africa, craft-based microenterprises form part of the craft sector within the creative industry (Oyekunle and Sirayi, 2018; Kaye, 2011). Callinicos (1996) defines the crafts sector as :

The creation and production of a broad range of utilitarian and decorative items produced on a small scale with hand processes being a significant part of the value-added content. The production of goods uses a range of natural and synthetic materials.

Because handmade home décor reflects a significant proportion of the product categories sold by South African handicraft entrepreneurs (DACST, 1998), it served as this study's research context.

This study's target population and subsequent sampling elements included individual customers who had purchased handmade home décor in the past 12 months at the time of data collection. In accordance with ethical guidelines at the institutions where the researchers are employed, respondents had to provide informed consent to voluntarily participate in the study. In the absence of a sample frame, data was collected from respondents using non-probability convenience sampling. Specifically, trained fieldworkers approached prospective respondents in public places in and around a large socio-economically diverse South African university in Tshwane. Respondents were qualified by asking whether they were 18 years and older and whether they had purchased handmade home décor items in the past year before data

collection. If the respondents answered no to these questions, they were excluded from this study as a sample element. Furthermore, fieldworkers were supervised and monitored in the field and all questionnaires were checked for completeness. A total of 250 usable questionnaires were used for analysis, which compares favourably with that of previous studies exploring handmade consumption and love (Fuchs *et al.*, 2015, p. 106), as well as WOM (Wallace *et al.*, 2014, p. 36).

4.2 Measurements and data analysis

Self-administered questionnaires with Likert scales ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly agree), were used to measure the constructs of the study. Self-expressiveness (inner-self and social-self) and brand love were measured using items adapted from Carroll and Ahuvia (2006, pp. 84–85). Inner- and social-self were operationalised as two independent first-order constructs consistent with the approach of Khandeparkar and Motiani (2018). WOM was measured with items adapted from Eisingerich *et al.* (2015, p. 213), to reflect self-reported behaviour (Ruane and Wallace, 2015, p. 340).

IBM SPSS Statistics version 28 was used to calculate frequencies and percentages to present the sample's demographic profile and patronage habits. The interrelationships depicted in Figure 1 were examined using covariance-based structural equation modelling (CB-SEM) in Mplus version 8.7. CB-SEM was deemed appropriate in this study since it combines factor analysis and multiple regression, thus allowing for robust estimation of, and interrelationships between, constructs. Furthermore, CB-SEM accounts for measurement error which is a growing concern in survey-based research (Strasheim, 2014, p. 31). CB-SEM analyses included assessing the measurement model (to ascertain construct validity and reliability) and the structural model (to test the main effects based on *H1* to *H3*). Since the distribution of the study's data did not meet the criterion of multivariate normality, the MLM estimator was used for model specification (Muthén and Muthén, 1998–2017, p. 533). Finally, mediation effects as proposed in *H4* was tested in Mplus using bootstrapping resampling procedures ($n = 5,000$) and statistical significance of the total, direct and indirect effects was based on the 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals (Zhao *et al.*, 2010, p. 202).

5. Results

5.1 Sample profile and patronage habits

The majority of respondents were female (65.6%) and the average age was 21. Furthermore, most respondents purchase home décor at least once every three months (33.6%), followed by at least once every six months (26.6%). Most respondents preferred to purchase handmade home décor products (54.3%) versus machine-made ones. Finally, most respondents searched for home décor inspiration on Pinterest (79.2%) and engaged DIY and crafts activities (62.0%), and drawing (46.0%).

5.2 Measurement model analysis

The measurement model exhibited acceptable model fit [chi-square = 241.037, degrees of freedom (df) = 113, scaling correction factor for MLM = 1.3552, Satorra–Bentler adjusted chi-square/df = 2.133, RMSEA 0.067, CFI = 0.956, TLI = 0.947, SRMR = 0.054], all factor loadings are significant and > 0.6 , the average variance extracted (AVE) > 0.5 and all composite reliability (CR) and Cronbach's alpha coefficients > 0.7 (see Table 1 below). These results provide evidence of convergent validity (Field, 2013 p. 715; Hair *et al.*, 2014, p. 605). Additional results (see Table 2) provide evidence of discriminant validity because the

Construct items	Factor loadings	AVE	CR	Cronbach's alpha
<i>Brand love</i>		0.648	0.916	0.910
Handmade home décor is wonderful	0.845			
Handmade home décor makes me feel good	0.859			
Handmade home décor is totally awesome	0.820			
Handmade home décor makes me happy	0.869			
I love handmade home décor	0.740			
I am passionate about handmade home décor	0.679			
<i>Inner self</i>		0.818	0.947	0.946
Handmade home décor symbolises the kind of person I really am inside	0.858			
Handmade home décor reflects my personality	0.893			
Handmade home décor is an extension of my inner self	0.938			
Handmade home décor mirrors the real me	0.927			
<i>Social self</i>		0.708	0.906	0.908
Handmade home décor contributes to my image	0.875			
Handmade home décor adds to a social "role" I play	0.845			
Handmade home décor has a positive impact on what others think of me	0.840			
Handmade home décor improves the way society views me	0.804			
<i>Positive WOM in person</i>		0.780	0.916	0.913
I say positive things about handmade home décor to others in person	0.826			
I encourage friends and relatives to buy handmade home décor in person	0.913			
I recommend handmade home décor to others in person	0.915			

Notes: AVE = average variance extracted, CR = composite reliability

Source: Author's own work

Table 1.
Construct validity
and reliability of the
measurement model

Constructs	Brand love	Inner self	Social self	Positive WOM in person
Brand love	<i>0.805</i>			
Inner-self	0.629	<i>0.905</i>		
Social-self	0.592	0.801	<i>0.841</i>	
Positive WOM in person	0.674	0.561	0.575	<i>0.886</i>

Note: Square root of the AVE is italic and on the diagonal

Source: Author's own work

Table 2.
Assessment of
discriminant validity

absolute correlations among factors are lower than the square root of the AVE (Fornell and Larcker, 1981; Hair *et al.*, 2014, p. 620).

As the measurement model showed sufficient evidence of construct validity and acceptable model fit (Hair *et al.*, 2014, p. 620), the structural model was estimated according to the conceptual model presented in Figure 1.

5.3 Structural model analysis (H1–H3)

We included customers' preference for handmade or machine-made (Fuchs *et al.*, 2015, p. 102) home décor categories as a categorical exogenous variable in the estimated structural model to control for possible confounding effects. The structural model showed acceptable model fit [chi-square = 284.892, (df) = 128, scaling correction factor for MLM = 1.371, Satorra–Bentler adjusted chi-square/df = 2.226, RMSEA 0.070, CFI = 0.948, TLI = 0.938, SRMR = 0.078].

The inner self does have a significant positive relationship with brand love ($\beta = 0.357$; p -value = 0.001), but does not have one with positive WOM in person ($\beta = 0.052$; p -value = 0.566). Hypothesis 1^a is therefore accepted, whereas H2a is rejected. Furthermore, the social-self has a direct and positive relationship with brand love ($\beta = 0.292$; p -value = 0.001) and with positive WOM in person ($\beta = 0.244$; p -value = 0.008) respectively. H1b and H2b is therefore accepted. Finally, H3 is accepted because brand love has a direct effect on positive WOM in person ($\beta = 0.479$; p -value = 0.001). Figure 2 offers a visual summary of these results.

5.4 Mediation analyses (H4)

Bias-corrected bootstrap resampling ($n = 5,000$) was used to test whether brand love is a mediator between inner- and social-self and positive WOM (H4). To determine whether mediation effects were significant or not, the guidelines proposed by Zhao *et al.* (2010) were used, that is, full mediation when the indirect effect is significant and the direct effect is insignificant, complementary mediation when both the direct and indirect effect is significant, and no mediation when the indirect effect is insignificant.

The results indicated a significant indirect relationship between inner-self and positive WOM in person, which is mediated by brand love (0.171, lower level confidence interval 0.070 and upper level confidence interval 0.298). Furthermore, a significant indirect relationship is also evident between social-self and positive WOM in person, which is mediated by brand love (0.140, lower level confidence interval 0.050 and upper level confidence interval 0.269). Consistent with Zhao *et al.*'s (2010) classification, there is evidence that brand love fully mediates the relationship between the inner-self and positive WOM in person, but it also partially mediates the relationship between social-self and positive WOM in person. H4 is, therefore, accepted.

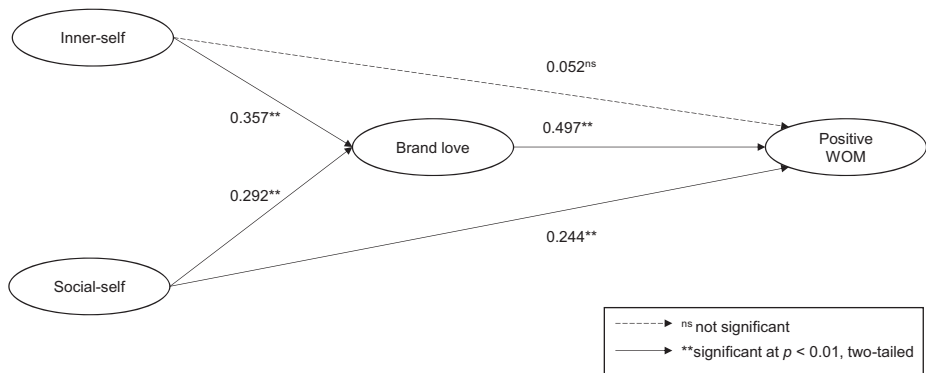


Figure 2.
Summary of results

Source: Author's own work

6. Discussion and theoretical implications

This study considered the role of self-schema and brand love in generating positive WOM. Our findings show that brand love plays an important role in eliciting positive WOM from customers, both directly and indirectly as demonstrated by its mediation effects. We, therefore, support [Carroll and Ahuvia's \(2006\)](#) research on the positive relationships between self-schema, brand love and WOM. We further uncover finer nuances embedded in WOM about handmade products. Specifically, although both the inner- and social self are associated with brand love supporting the findings of [Wallace *et al.* \(2014\)](#), only the social self is directly associated with positive WOM in person. Previously, the inner-self had a stronger direct relationship with WOM online ([Wallace *et al.*, 2014](#)). Thus, the interaction between the context of WOM (in-person vs online) and the consumption situation that is handmade products in this study, provides important parameters for our findings. These findings emphasise the importance of considering multiple self-schemas when exploring self-schema and WOM. Finally, our study shows that customers' inner-self has a stronger association with brand love than the social self. To maintain self-integrity, customers may use inner- and social self-schemas especially tied to loved handmade home-décor products for self-affirmation, by providing WOM about such loved handmade products based on the tenets of self-affirmation theory ([Howell, 2017](#); [Sherman and Cohen, 2006](#)). Our findings hereby support seminal work related to handmade products ([Fuchs *et al.*, 2015](#)) guiding handicraft entrepreneurs in moving customers as marketing resources.

The study's findings hold several theoretical implications for EM. Firstly, we expand on the ongoing dialogue of the interception between the marketing/entrepreneurial interface. Specifically, we demonstrate the value of applying marketing constructs, namely, self-schema, brand love and WOM in an EM context, namely, handicraft entrepreneurs. Hereby, we shed light on two marketing/entrepreneurship interface research priorities for 2023–2026 proposed by [Alqahtani and Uslay \(2022\)](#), namely, the deployment of marketing resources amongst SMEs and how the customer's experience (including WOM) must be designed. Second, a common theme in EM is the leveraging of limited marketing resources ([Breit and Volkmann, 2024](#); [Miles *et al.*, 2015](#)). Our study demonstrates how handicraft entrepreneurs can effectuate close customer relationships in their network for WOM marketing. Finally, our study underscores the value of EM in a developing country characterised by intensified entrepreneurial challenges where customers as a resource become invaluable for business longevity.

7. Managerial and policy implications

We propose several strategies handicraft entrepreneurs could pursue to attain positive WOM in person. Firstly, they should focus on creating brand love by highlighting their passion for their craft and their products during their interactions with customers. For example, handicraft entrepreneurs could share their craft stories – why they started making handmade products in the first instance and their apprenticeship journey. Also, they could inform customers about the materials, processes and time that is required to make products and place emphasis on the love with which each product is made. Secondly, they should appeal to customers' inner-self (real-self) by emphasising their products' authenticity. Specifically, underscore the fact that they produce real products for real people, and not the typical "run-of-the-mill", mass-produced products that most customers are accustomed to. Customers' inner-self could also be teased out by asking about their preferences for handmade products (what they buy and why). Then, find a connection between what customers appreciate about handmade (for example quality) and what your products offer (durability). Self-schema claims on packaging could include for example, "Authentically you: Lovingly handmade for your home". Third, handicraft entrepreneurs should appeal to

customers' social-self (how others see "me") by emphasising the care with which they make each product and their hope that the product will be bought by a discerning consumer who will hold the product in the same esteem as they do. Product claims may include "Handmade home décor: Showing others what you stand for". Customers' social-self could also be activated by utilising social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram etc.) and encouraging them to upload photos of the handmade products that are bought or used at home using voucher discounts or competitions to win specific handmade items. Such photos can also be tagged by using the name of the handicraft entrepreneur. Also consider the use of creative handles to underscore the love and uniqueness of products (for example #RealProducts4RealPeople or #CraftedWithLove4You).

Policymakers in emerging markets such as South Africa should support handicraft entrepreneurs in developing their networks with customers by creating avenues for craft markets with special tax relief strategies to foster interest from both parties. For example, The South African Department of Trade Industry and Competition could create craft markets for handicraft entrepreneurs where value added tax (VAT) is voided to incentivise customer support and create opportunities for interaction between handicraft entrepreneurs and customers. Hereby, brand awareness could be created and relationships can be built. Also, the Sector Education and Training Authority of South Africa (SETA) should provide training to handicraft entrepreneurs in managing their personal brands as brand ambassadors to manage these entrepreneurial businesses while fostering connections with customers.

8. Limitations and recommendations for future research

Customers' self-concepts used during self-affirmation depend on the consumption situation (Hogg and Michell, 1996). Therefore, the methodological limitations of this cross-sectional study examining one product category specifically on category level, could be addressed in future research by exploring longitudinal relationships not only on product category level, but also with individual handicraft entrepreneurs and across product categories. Moreover, WOM in person may be especially relevant when exploring handmade consumption of home décor as access to the home is restricted to a selected group of people. However, WOM online is also associated with self-presentations (Chawdhary and Dall'Olmo Riley, 2015), could reach more recipients (Eisingerich *et al.*, 2015), has been associated with brand love (Batra *et al.*, 2012; Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Karjaluoto *et al.*, 2016), and can be easily monitored using search phrases. WOM online could thus be another fruitful avenue for handicraft entrepreneurs to consider in future research. This study was a first step towards uncovering possible opportunities for handicraft entrepreneurs to benefit from customers' WOM regarding handmade product choices.

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