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Kiptoo, M , Sambajee, P and Baum, T (2024) Resilience through adversity: a case of informal artisan entrepreneurs in Kenya. *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behaviour and Research*, 30 (11). pp. 446-465. ISSN 1355-2554

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEBR-07-2023-0762>

**Publisher:** Emerald

**Version:** Published Version

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# Resilience through adversity: a case of informal artisan entrepreneurs in Kenya

Maryline Kiptoo

*Department of Strategy, Enterprise and Sustainability,  
Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK and  
Department of Work, Employment and Organisation, University of Strathclyde,  
Glasgow, UK*

Pratima Sambajee

*Department of Work, Employment and Organisation, University of Strathclyde,  
Glasgow, UK, and*

Tom Baum

*Department of Work, Employment and Organisation, University of Strathclyde,  
Glasgow, UK and  
School of Tourism and Hospitality, University of Johannesburg,  
Johannesburg, South Africa*

## Abstract

**Purpose** – The study aims to understand how informal artisan entrepreneurs demonstrate resilience while experiencing adversity. To achieve this, it explores how artisans handle adversities and how this differs from other informal entrepreneurs.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The study engaged with entrepreneurial theories of resilience. It incorporated 46 qualitative telephone interviews with 32 artisans in the informal tourism industry of Kenya, conducted over two phases and analysed using thematic analysis. Notably, it draws key methodological considerations for conducting remote qualitative data collection and engaging with participants operating in an informal setting.

**Findings** – The findings suggest that informal artisans exhibit individual attributes and behaviours that are associated with resilience in entrepreneurship. Beyond these, their resilience is also influenced by cultural norms related to resourcing their business and culturally derived tacit knowledge.

**Originality/value** – The paper extends the understanding of resilience among informal artisan entrepreneurs, who display different characteristics due to the nature of their entrepreneurial activities. It shows that beyond the individualistic view of resilience, culture also influences resilience through social norms and values that govern behaviours. Furthermore, culture reinforces resilience as it is rooted in tacit knowledge held by artisan entrepreneurs. The paper thus contributes to resilience theory in entrepreneurship and to the unique context of artisanry.

**Keywords** Resilience, Adversity, Artisans, Informal artisan entrepreneurs, Informal sector, Tourism

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

Artisan entrepreneurs are key economic players in tourism-dependent countries, particularly those in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) (Dana *et al.*, 2022; Ratten *et al.*, 2019). However, their abounded presence in the informal sector has created adverse environments such as harassment by authorities, limited financial resources, scarcity of essential infrastructures,



insecurity, and constant market competition (Grobar, 2019; Dalal *et al.*, 2024). Moreover, fluctuations due to the seasonal nature of the tourism industry, regional political instability, terrorism and natural disasters have exacerbated adversities for artisan entrepreneurs (Harris *et al.*, 2012; Dahles and Susilowati, 2015).

Amid such adversities, informal artisan entrepreneurs continue to emerge and operate, including in the tourism sector (Hasanah *et al.*, 2023; Ratten *et al.*, 2019). Their persistence in running enterprises through adversity alludes to their resilience (Caliendo *et al.*, 2020; Huggins and Thompson, 2015; Nautiyal and Pathak, 2023). Informal artisan entrepreneurs are at the intersection of informality and creativity and remain under-theorised in entrepreneurship research (Smagina and Ludviga, 2020, 2021). They are commonly positioned along a behavioural continuum from “a total focus on creative output to a complete commitment to economic performance” (Tjemkes, 2011 p. 122), and their resilience during adversity is often conflated within general conceptualisations of entrepreneurship resilience.

Against this backdrop, we look at the case of informal artisan entrepreneurs in tourism, whom we define as those who manually make and sell handicrafts to tourists (Wright, 2009) and operate businesses in a socially acceptable manner but are not registered or regulated by the state (Chen, 2005; Salvi *et al.*, 2023). We focus on Kenya and answer the research question: How do informal artisans handle the adversities they experience, and how does this differ from other informal entrepreneurs? In doing so, the paper proposes to extend existing theories of entrepreneurship resilience to contribute to a better understanding of how this type of entrepreneur demonstrates resilience and the factors that enable this. It also contributes empirically towards the literature on informal entrepreneurs, specifically informal artisan entrepreneurs within tourism and craft industries.

## 2. Theoretical approach

### 2.1 Resilience approaches

Resilience is studied and conceptualised in various disciplines like ecology, physics, control system design, engineering, biology, psychology and economics, to mention a few (Hudson, 2010; Carlson *et al.*, 2012; Walker *et al.*, 2004). Given the diverse disciplinary views, we narrow our focus and draw on the theoretical background of resilience in entrepreneurship and informal entrepreneurship.

While there is no universally accepted definition, resilience is commonly understood as the ability to maintain positive functioning while others experience considerable disruption or adversity (Bonanno, 2005; Shepherd *et al.*, 2020). In entrepreneurship, the conceptualisation of resilience has been greatly influenced by positive psychology (Hartmann *et al.*, 2022; Bernard and Barbosa, 2016), where it is considered a positive adaptation to adversity and associated with success and better-than-expected outcomes (Norris *et al.*, 2008; De Bruijne *et al.*, 2010; Masten, 2001). Consequently, resilience is used to explain different facets of an entrepreneur and business success. For example, resilient entrepreneurs are seen as those who end up as successful and more robust after facing adversity or crisis (Duchek, 2018; Bullough and Renko, 2013; Boyd *et al.*, 2023; Fisher *et al.*, 2016). They bounce back after failures (Bernard and Barbosa, 2016; Huggins and Thompson, 2015) and adjust operations or regenerate while facing shocks or uncertainty (Dahles and Susilowati, 2015; Huggins and Thompson, 2015). Similarly, resilience explains why some entrepreneurial ventures perform better than others (Subekti *et al.*, 2023; Korber and McNaughton, 2018; Powell and Baker, 2014).

Several individual attributes explain entrepreneurial resilience. These include holistic positivism, motivation, perseverance, resourcefulness, hardiness, optimism, persistence, self-efficacy, purpose in life and problem-solving (De Vries and Shields, 2006; Ayala and Manzano, 2014; Korber and McNaughton, 2018; Bullough and Renko, 2013; Shepherd *et al.*, 2020; Fisher *et al.*, 2016). These individual attributes are viewed as dimensions of resilience and are associated with psychological capital that enables entrepreneurial success (Tang, 2020;

Welter and Scrimshire, 2021). In the context of adversity, which we define as the state of serious and continued difficulty (Tian and Fan, 2014), entrepreneurial resilience is similarly connected to individual traits and identity that drive perception and responses to adversity (Shepherd *et al.*, 2020; Powell and Baker, 2014).

Other conceptualisations of entrepreneurial resilience, specifically in the informal sector, include the ability to overcome unemployment and make a living during an economic crisis and the ability to withstand and recover from financial turmoil (Moyo, 2018; Lubell and Zarour, 1990). This stems from the perception that resilience is synchronous to the economic performance of entrepreneurs (Williams and Vorley, 2014; Iyengar *et al.*, 2021). While these give an understanding of resilience in relation to the economy, they may risk giving a narrow perspective that focuses heavily on individual financial well-being. They also risk promoting the assumption that informal entrepreneurs are survivalists, which has led to their persistence in entrepreneurship being deemed necessity-driven (Adom, 2014). These demean their entrepreneurial practices, where they are considered illegitimate and not actual entrepreneurs (McElwee and Smith, 2015).

Skills are essential for entrepreneurial resilience, and existing literature has identified problem-solving, relationship-building, planning, negotiating and so forth (Baron and Markman, 2003), most of which are acquired through experience or formal training. Both skills and experience have a positive correlation with entrepreneurial resilience, yet for informal entrepreneurs, most of their acquired skills come from informal training or traditional education (Berengu, 2012). Informal training and learning often play the most significant role in providing skills (Overwien, 2005), but there is limited understanding of how those in the informal sector, who have limited access to formal education and training (Lautier, 2000), remain resilient through adversity.

Overall, while individual-level factors such as skills, attributes and behaviours help to understand the resilience of entrepreneurs to an extent, they are likely to offer a restricted individualistic perspective (Ungar, 2010; Van Breda, 2018). Thus, it begs the need for a more holistic understanding of resilience beyond the individual-level factors of entrepreneurs.

### *2.2 The informal sector and tourism industry in Kenya*

Kenya has a predominant informal sector that is estimated to account for 95% of the country's businesses and entrepreneurs (Safavian *et al.*, 2016). Conspicuously, the informal sector in the country is known as “*jua kali*”, a Swahili word for “hot sun.” The term originated from the observation that people in the sector work outside in the scorching sun (Hope, 2014), indicating the precarious nature of the informal sector.

Alongside the predominant informal sector, Kenya is a tourism destination that offers diverse tourist attractions due to its beaches, wildlife, geographical diversity, history, culture and heritage (Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife, 2022). Notably, Kenya's tourism industry is not new to crises. Alongside the COVID-19 pandemic, Kenya has experienced several crises, like political instabilities and terrorist attacks, that have resulted in insecurity and travel advisories against the country (CEIC, 2020; Buigut and Masinde, 2021). Kenya also operates in a competitive environment against destinations like South Africa and Namibia, which may threaten the sustainability of tourism (Mayaka and Prasad, 2012). These challenges and crises have negatively affected Kenya's tourism industry and economy. Ultimately, they present an adverse environment for entrepreneurs such as artisans who depend on the industry for their livelihoods.

As an African nation, Kenyan informal entrepreneurs are also influenced by the country's culture and traditions, which further inform various practices. For example, the family, as a highly valued social unit, is a source of social welfare and business support (Njoh, 2016), while religion and ancestral roots are said to influence entrepreneurship (Jaravaza *et al.*, 2024; Namatovu *et al.*, 2018). Additionally, values and norms around non-individualist behaviours in business are considered important to the community, which suggests the existence of an

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African philosophy that permeates business practices (Jaravaza *et al.*, 2024; Woermann and Engelbrecht, 2019). In the following section, we discuss the need for a culturalist approach to exploring resilience among informal artisan entrepreneurs in Kenya.

### 2.3 The culturalist approach

The idea that culture influences entrepreneurship through social values and norms can be linked to institution theory (North, 1990). Institutions, in the form of formal and informal structures, are perceived to define the “rules of the game” (North, 1990 p. 1); that is, the structures consist of rules, social norms, values, and cognitive structures that shape various practices in society. Through this lens, culture is a societal-level informal institution that can shape intention, desirability, and decision-making within entrepreneurship (Szlyiowicz and Galvin, 2010).

Artisanry and artisan entrepreneurship have strong connections with culture. Hoyte (2019) conceptualised culture from the perspective of the artisan entrepreneur’s personality and found dimensions such as cultural heritage, community, entrepreneurship, craftsmanship and innovation. Other studies found that artisan entrepreneurs favour collective good over individual desires and value cultural heritage and traditions, craft fidelity and quality more than mass production (Dana *et al.*, 2022; Ratten *et al.*, 2019). Thus, artisan entrepreneurs tend to embed cultural practice into their business activities, and their behaviours seem to be defined by norms and values in their society and profession. Relatedly, knowledge associated with artisanry is tacit and culturally derived, given that it is learnt through an experiential process and direct interaction with others (Ratten, 2021). Entrepreneurship research defines tacit knowledge as a necessary cognitive capacity to create entrepreneurial intentions and design and make entrepreneurial artefacts (Dorst and Cross, 2001). The knowledge context of entrepreneurs is influenced by entrepreneurial models, know-how, and know-who (Chirico, 2008; Dohse and Walter, 2012), which places the family and networks as important in the creation and transfer of knowledge for artisan entrepreneurs.

While there are some studies on entrepreneurial resilience within SSA (Nakpodia *et al.*, 2023; Dimitriadis, 2021; Tengeh, 2016), a specific focus on understanding the influence of culture, on resilience within informal entrepreneurship remains scarce. This paper presents a unique opportunity to explore the resilience of entrepreneurs who are not only impacted by the challenges of operating in the informal sector and a highly volatile industry but also in a context that is strongly informed by cultural norms and values. We, therefore, propose to explore the resilience of informal artisan entrepreneurs through adversity by considering both individual-level factors and culture. We define individual-level factors as skills, attributes and behaviours, and culture as societal norms and values that program peoples’ way of thinking and behaving (Soares *et al.*, 2007).

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Research strategy

The study assumed a social constructionism philosophical stance, which posits that reality and knowledge are not objective but are constructed through social interactions and interpretations (Lindgren and Packendorff, 2009). It also emphasises the role of culture and social norms in shaping people’s individual and collective perceptions, beliefs and behaviours and is rooted in qualitative methods (Burr and Dick, 2017).

Therefore, a qualitative approach was chosen for this study as it provides a more in-depth understanding and insight into the complex informal entrepreneurship (Akin, 2000). Qualitative approaches are also highly encouraged in the study of marginalised groups in SSA as they focus on individual experiences, give entrepreneurs a voice, and minimise the loss of meaning (Keikelame and Swartz, 2019; Adu-Gyamfi *et al.*, 2018).

### 3.2 Sampling and data collection

The study was conducted between November 2020 and August 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic, which restricted physical access to the field. Given the widespread access to mobile telephone devices in Kenya, including in the informal sector ([Communications Authority of Kenya, 2020](#)), telephone interviews were selected as an ideal method for the study.

The study used purposive and snowball sampling techniques ([Saunders, 2019](#)). Participants were selected based on three specific criteria: they had to be adult artisans who made and sold handicrafts for a living; they had to own informal businesses not registered by the government; and they had to operate in the tourism industry, where they primarily sold handicrafts to tourists. The lead researcher received several referrals and interacted with many potential participants, and in the end, 32 artisans were sampled, as shown in [Table 1](#). The artisans made handicrafts such as but not limited to wooden and stone carvings like animals, maces, walking sticks, utensils and accessories; weaved items like bags and baskets; and beaded ornaments like necklaces, bracelets, rings and keychains.

The semi-structured qualitative telephone interviews were carried out over two phases. The first phase was conducted between November 2020 and January 2021, whereas the second phase was conducted 6–9 months after the first phase, between June and August 2021. This

**Table 1.** List of sampled participants

Participants	Gender	Age group	Years of operation	Handicrafts made
P1*	Female	30–40	15	Beaded ornaments
P2	Male	40–50	23	Animal carvings
P3*	Male	20–30	6	Beaded ornaments
P4	Female	40–50	15	Animal carving and weaved items
P5*	Male	50–60	35	Animal carvings and beaded ornaments
P6*	Male	30–40	14	Animal carvings
P7	Female	40–50	15	Handcrafted bags
P8*	Female	30–40	12	Beaded ornaments
P9*	Male	40–50	15	Assorted carvings
P10	Female	50–60	27	Assorted carvings
P11*	Male	50–60	34	Animal carvings
P12	Male	50–60	30	Wooden carvings
P13	Male	50–60	25	Beaded ornaments
P14	Female	30–40	7	Beaded ornaments
P15*	Female	30–40	16	Beaded ornaments
P16*	Male	40–50	26	Animal carvings
P17	Female	40–50	12	Beaded ornaments
P18	Male	40–50	20	Assorted carvings
P19	Female	50–60	31	Beaded ornaments
P20*	Male	50–60	36	Assorted carvings
P21	Male	40–50	20	Weaved items
P22*	Male	40–50	22	Assorted carvings and beaded ornaments
P23	Female	40–50	15	Assorted carvings and beaded ornaments
P24*	Female	40–50	17	Beaded ornaments
P25*	Male	40–50	12	Assorted carvings
P26*	Female	40–50	16	Beaded ornaments
P27	Male	60–70	50	Assorted carvings
P28	Male	40–50	17	Beaded ornaments
P29	Male	20–30	5	Beaded ornaments
P30	Male	20–30	4	Beaded ornaments
P31	Female	40–50	20	Assorted carvings and beaded ornaments
P32	Female	40–50	15	Beaded ornaments and weaved items

**Note(s):**\* Participants that had follow-up interviews

**Source(s):** Authors' creation

allowed for follow-up interviews with some artisans, resulting in 46 interviews. The follow-up interviews were crucial in overcoming some challenges of telephone interviews. For instance, it enabled the researcher and the participants to establish trust, build rapport and enrich depth through probing and seeking clarity (Read, 2018; Drabble *et al.*, 2016).

Other vital methodological considerations were employed while conducting the remote data collection and engaging with participants. For example, the study managed the insider-outsider researcher positions and identities to enhance proximity. In this case, the lead researcher drew on areas of similarity with the participants. These included the common language of Swahili, similar cultural backgrounds and the shared contextual knowledge of Kenya's informal sector and tourism industry. Notably, the telephone interviews were valuable in silencing some of the socioeconomic differences between the researcher and the marginalised participants. These included differences in age, financial position, education levels and social status. Collectively, these strategies enhanced the depth of the interviews, built rapport, developed trust and heightened the participants' collaboration.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted at the participant's convenience to ensure that they had the power and flexibility to schedule the interviews (Holt, 2010). Interviews lasted an average of between 30 min to 1 h, thus enabling varied questions to be asked. These included questions on the adversities they experienced, how they overcame them and how they persistently worked in the context.

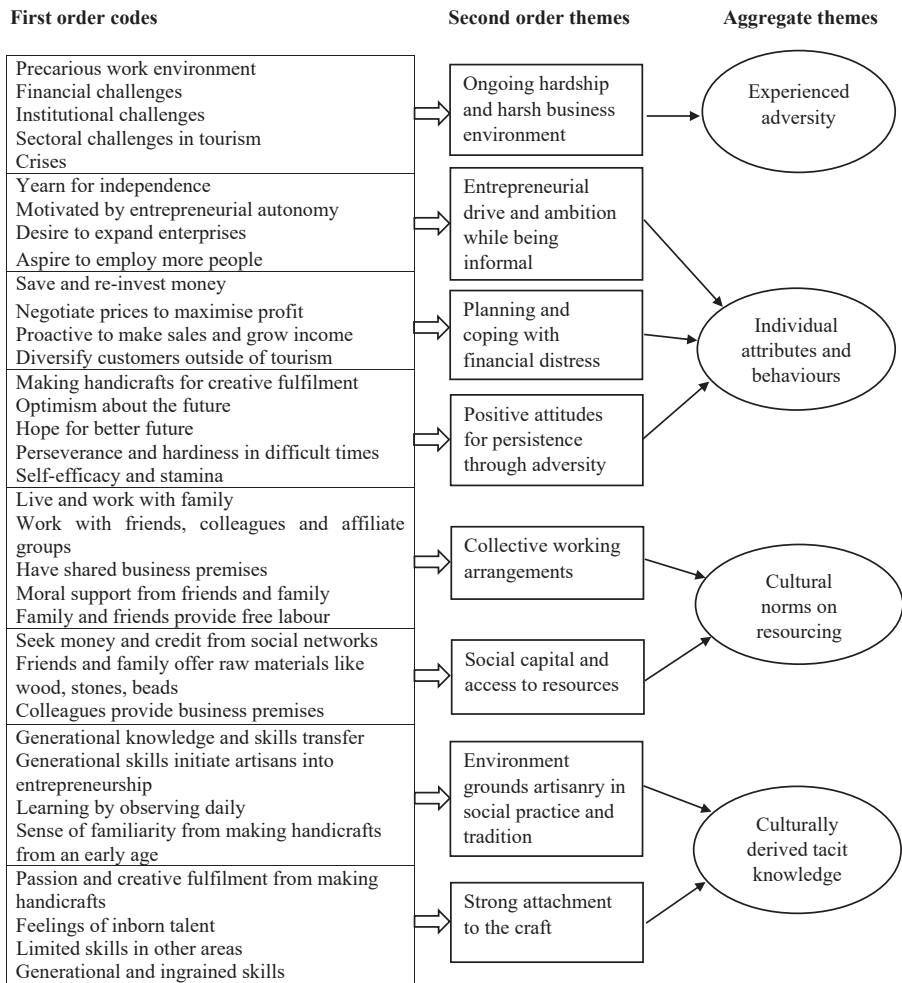
Ethical considerations were upheld throughout. For example, the artisans consented to the interviews, their participation was anonymous, and the study ensured they did not get any physical, emotional or psychological harm (Leavy, 2014).

### 3.3 Data analysis

Data were analysed using six phases of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The first step was data familiarisation, which entailed replaying the audio-recorded interviews, transcribing and carefully translating from Swahili to English. The second step involved generating initial codes. Here, line-by-line coding was done to derive codes that were relevant to the research question and key concepts. These included, but were not limited to, individual factors, which we defined as skills, attributes and behaviours, and culture, which we defined as societal norms and values that program peoples' way of thinking. The third step was searching for themes. This involved sorting out and categorising codes to derive themes. It started by inductively establishing themes based on the data. This was followed by a deductive approach, where themes were sought based on key theories and concepts, such as resilience, adversity, artisan entrepreneurship, culture and tacit knowledge. For example, the theme of positive attitudes for persistence was derived from analysing the theoretical dimensions of resilience, such as hope, optimism, perseverance and self-efficacy (De Vries and Shields, 2006; Ayala and Manzano, 2014; Korber and McNaughton, 2018).

The fourth step entailed reviewing the themes. Here, themes were assessed to check whether they aligned with the identified codes. This process resulted in some themes being split, combined, or discarded. The fifth step involved defining and naming the themes, where careful consideration was given to ensure the themes addressed the research question and reflected the findings. The last step was producing the report, which is presented in the findings and discussion.

The data analysis was an iterative process that involved several rounds. To promote rigour, the above steps were enhanced further by starting off with open coding to create first-order codes from the participants' words. This was followed by axial coding, where the first-order codes were further categorised based on theoretical lenses of resilience, adversity, artisan entrepreneurship and culture. Hence, resulting in theory-centred second order themes. Afterwards, the second-order themes were distilled to create aggregate themes. The above steps are represented in a data structure shown in Figure 1 below.



Source(s): Authors' creation

Figure 1. Data structure

#### 4. Findings

##### 4.1 Experienced adversity

Findings show that artisans experience adversity through ongoing hardship and scarcity of resources. They lack decent work environments and fixed work locations, resulting in constant transport of handicrafts, which creates further risks of damage and increases operation costs:

The challenge is that we lack a permanent place to sell the handicrafts. *As jua kali*, we do not have a permanent place, so we get rained on, and the customers do not come to see us when it rains. Businesses close when it rains. Going from one place to another also means missing out on customers. (P19)

Additionally, artisans have limited financial resources caused by inconsistent sales, slim margins and restricted access to credit facilities. The recent COVID-19 pandemic also negatively affected their financial positions due to a drastic decline in tourists. Consequently,



artisans were exposed to other livelihood challenges like poverty and were unable to procure tools and raw materials for their businesses.

The income I get fluctuates each month. It is difficult to meet the rent and other livelihood needs like transport and food. (P30)

Furthermore, the findings show that artisans operate in a context governed by authorities such as government institutions. It is apparent that these institutions contribute to the artisan's adversity through unfavourable policies that result in marginalisation, harassment, eviction from business premises and the artisans' lack of voice. Artisans believe these challenges are heightened by the negative perception that they are inferior to their formal counterparts, who own registered businesses.

I do not get any kind of support from the government. Nothing at all. I feel like the government oppresses and harasses us. It is only interested in taxing what we make. It does not value us at all. (P16)

Furthermore, artisans experience competition from intermediaries, comprising tour guides, traders and brokers who easily access handicrafts and customers. The intermediaries are also notorious for defaulting on credit and restricting access to customers.

Tour guides make it hard for us to access tourists. They intensify the competition here . . . I have to befriend or give them money to access the tourists. They make business difficult. (P29)

Artisans also experience fluctuations in the tourism industry caused by seasonality. They point out that the tourism industry is characterised by high and low seasons. The high seasons enable them to generate more income and save money. Nonetheless, the low season is characterised by fewer tourists, resulting in minimal income, with some artisans being forced to close their businesses temporarily.

Business in tourism is very seasonal. There are seasons when the tourists do not come, which makes business tough. I think this is one of the main issues we face . . . When the season is low, I make less money and am forced to depend on my savings. (P3)

Aside from seasonality, the findings suggest that artisans are not new to challenges caused by the impact of crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, political instability, and terrorism. They attest that these crises have diminished tourism and resulted in uncertainty around their livelihoods and business ventures.

The tourism industry in Kenya is affected by many things like terrorism and political instability. For instance, tourists do not come during the election period or whenever there are any attacks from Al-Shabaab [terrorists]. Nonetheless, COVID-19 has been the worst attack. (P22)

The above adversities are summarised in [Table 2](#).

#### 4.2 Resilience and handling adversities

[Figure 1](#), derived from the findings, illustrates that the resilience of informal artisans can be attributed to three factors. These include individual attributes and behaviours, cultural norms on resourcing and culturally derived tacit knowledge.

##### 4.2.1 Individual attributes and behaviours that enable resilience.

###### 4.2.1.1 Entrepreneurial drive and ambition while being informal.

The findings show that despite being informal, artisans have entrepreneurial attributes pertinent to their resilience. To elaborate, artisans portray agency and entrepreneurial traits that enable them to run enterprises while experiencing adversity. For instance, despite adversity, artisans run entrepreneurial ventures because they desire independence and autonomy. They enjoy the independence of being entrepreneurs, which they may not otherwise attain.

I like the independence of running my business . . . It is better than being employed. (P26)

**Table 2.** Experienced adversity

Nature of adversity	Examples	Frequency
Work environment	Poor locations in open-air markets and roadsides Exposure to adverse weather conditions, dust and mud Danger to life with vehicles ramming into artisans	Ongoing
Financial	Unpredictable sales Poor profit margins High competition Restricted access to credit facilities Poverty Unaffordability of raw materials Customers default on credit	Ongoing
Institutional	Marginalisation and harassment by authorities and intermediaries Lack of voice Being perceived as inferior	Ongoing
Sectoral	Seasonality of tourism Shrinking markets	Ongoing
Crises	Political instability Terrorism COVID-19	Unexpected

**Source(s):** Authors' creation

Additionally, while they have limited financial resources, artisans save and reinvest money into their businesses and pursue sales. They also negotiate prices with customers to maximise profit. These entrepreneurial behaviours have proven valuable in helping them manage and create financial cushions during adversity.

When I started the business, I re-invested everything into the business. So, I kept selling and putting it back into the business. (P20)

Besides this, the findings point to the artisans' entrepreneurial ambitions. Despite operating small-scale informal businesses, they aspire to expand their enterprises, grow income and employ more people. They also seem determined to overcome adversity and sustain their businesses. Thus, they display entrepreneurial drive that has shown to be essential in motivating their persistence.

Furthermore, the artisans display the ability to identify and pursue business opportunities, which has proven essential in enabling them to cope with competition in the informal sector.

I saw the opportunity to overcome competition by getting online . . . The competition is very stiff. Many people are selling similar products around that area, so we always compete. (P29)

Relatedly, the artisans' entrepreneurial traits and behaviours have allowed them to cope with other similar difficulties. For instance, owing to their ability to pursue sales, artisans cope with challenges in tourism by using handicrafts to diversify their customers outside the industry. These customers include local households that buy sculptures as home decoration and local people who buy beaded items like necklaces, bracelets, belts and other handicrafts as fashion accessories or gift items. It also includes intermediaries who buy handicrafts for resale. Hence, the artisans' handicraft-making skills and ability to pursue customers appear valuable in helping them sustain an income during a tourism decline.

#### 4.2.1.2 Positive attitudes for persistence through adversity.

Alongside the entrepreneurial attributes, the findings show that artisans portray individual and collective psychological behaviours and attitudes of hope, optimism, perseverance and self-efficacy.

Challenges are always there. You must get challenges for your business to continue. There is no work that does not have challenges. Challenges come and go. It is part of the business. There are ups and downs, just like the earth has mountains and valleys. (P20)

I persevere to cope with all the challenges . . . I persevere and remain hopeful that the next day will be better. (P14)

These are also recognised as dimensions of resilience and enable artisans to perceive and respond to adversity positively. Consequently, while they experience adversity, their individual and collective hope, optimism and perseverance generate positive attitudes that build resilience.

#### 4.2.2 Cultural norms on resourcing.

Artisans' resilience is also attributed to their cultural norms on resourcing. They live and work with family, friends, colleagues and affiliate groups, where they exchange key resources during adversity as discussed below.

##### 4.2.2.1 Collective working arrangements.

Cultural norms around collective support enable artisans to access labour from family members. The family members are not formal employees but provide free labour by assisting artisans in making handicrafts and running businesses. The findings show they do so because of societal expectations and cultural obligations. Ultimately, the family members make it possible for artisans to access human capital, which may otherwise be challenging due to financial constraints.

I have family members who assist in making the handicrafts. I have a sister-in-law, nephew and uncle who assist me. I do not have to pay them, which helps me to save money. (P23)

Additionally, the findings show that artisans work in clusters, where they interact with their colleagues, family and friends. These networks have emerged as critical towards enabling them to access business premises.

I have a friend that has given me space at his business premise. He gave me the space for free. I do not pay any rent to him. He gave me the space out of goodwill. (P26)

As mentioned, artisans lack permanent business structures and run businesses in open-air markets or on roadsides. They are also often harassed and evicted from business premises by authorities. Therefore, social networks enable artisans to cope with indecent work environments. They facilitate access to business premises by sharing and offering short-term rent-free spaces, which are vital, especially during adverse weather conditions.

##### 4.2.2.2 Social capital and access to resources.

The findings also show that cultural norms foster social networks and relations that enable artisans to seek resources such as raw materials and finances. For example, affiliate social groups, popularly called *chama*, a Swahili word for "group" or "body", are often drawn upon for financial assistance. The *chama* forms part of the institutionalised social capital and is popular amongst the artisans who would otherwise not have easy access to financial support due to marginalisation and their informality.

I am part of a *chama*, which is handy when I need money. I can save and borrow money . . . There is no discrimination within the *chama* . . . we have known each other for a long time. We have built trust over time. (P1)

Likewise, artisans access raw materials like wood, stone and beads through their social capital, which may otherwise be difficult to access due to financial constraints.

Cumulatively, the findings show that cultural norms enhance social capital, which enables artisans to access vital resources such as human, financial and physical capital. Hence enabling them to persist through adversity.

#### 4.2.3 Culturally derived tacit knowledge.

##### 4.2.3.1 Social practice and tradition.

Artisans learnt their skills from earlier generations, meaning their skills and knowledge were

passed across generations. Hence, they are not first-generation artisans and have other family members who are artisans. They also learn skills informally through friends and other social networks.

My family is full of artisans. My late father used to make handicrafts. My brother also makes handicrafts. When we were young, my dad took my brother and me to the curio shops. We watched him and loved it. As young people, the skills got ingrained. (P16)

Learning skills from an early age initiated the artisans' entrepreneurial endeavours. It also created a sense of familiarity and established an environment normalising artisanry, not just as a source of income but also as a social practice that binds family members together and ensures traditions are preserved. Thus, the artisans' tacit knowledge, passed through social practices and traditions, drives artisans to persist in making handicrafts despite ongoing adversity.

#### 4.2.3.2 Strong attachment to handicrafts.

Artisans are passionate and derive creative fulfilment from making handicrafts. They gain a sense of fulfilment they are unlikely to get while engaging in other economic activities. Thus, showing how artisanry is more than just a hobby or a source of income.

I love what I do. I get a great sense of fulfilment from making handicrafts. I know I cannot get this feeling anywhere else. (P24)

Therefore, despite adversity, artisans persist in making handicrafts, which may otherwise not be the case if they did not have such attachments to their handicrafts.

Additionally, as artisan have made handicrafts from an early age, their skills and knowledge are positively ingrained. This has made them attached to handicrafts and inflexible towards alternative economic activities. Consequently, artisans persist in making handicrafts, including during crises and challenges.

I started making handicrafts as a young boy, and now I am an old man . . . I have trained my son to make handicrafts too. (P20)

I am used to making handicrafts. I cannot do another kind of job. I am familiar with this, so it keeps me going. I have done this for 20 years, a very long time. This is all I have done over the years. It is all I do. (P18)

Some artisans attribute the ingrained skills to in-born talents, which they believe have further attached them to making handicrafts. They also attribute their success to their inborn talents and knowledge.

## 5. Discussion

The findings display various indicators that showcase informal artisans' resilience. For example, artisans portray attitudes of hope, optimism, self-efficacy and perseverance, which are associated with building resilience (Eggerman and Panter-Brick, 2010). These individual attributes are also recognised as common dimensions of entrepreneurial resilience (De Vries and Shields, 2006; Ayala and Manzano, 2014; Korber and McNaughton, 2018). Artisans also show the ability to persist in pursuing entrepreneurial ventures regardless of adversity or the availability of an existing alternative (Caliendo *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, they can handle challenging situations and survive adverse conditions (Branzei and Abdelnour, 2010). Cumulatively, these showcase the artisan's psychological capital (Tang, 2020; Welter and Scrimshire, 2021) and resilience.

Besides this, the findings show that artisans have individual attributes and behaviours that enable their persistence through adversity. These traits also make artisans legitimate entrepreneurs despite being informal. For instance, like other entrepreneurs, it appears that artisans also work in the informal sector out of their own free will and for personal reasons such as a social appreciation for business ownership and self-employment (King, 2001; Adom,

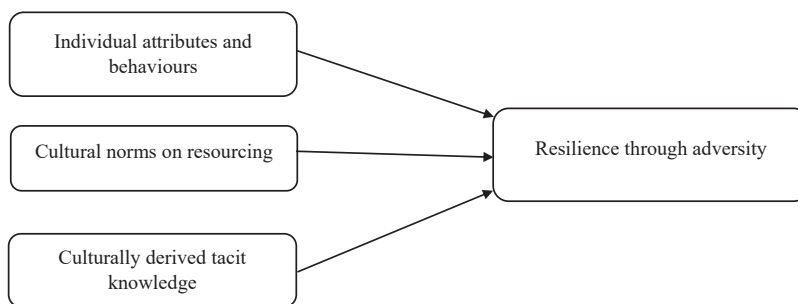
2014). They also focus on and aim to increase their economic capital (Çakmak *et al.*, 2018). Additionally, they desire independence and autonomy, which are recognised attributes of entrepreneurs (Lordkipanidze *et al.*, 2005).

Beyond their individual behaviours and pursuits, artisans have collective working arrangements and access to social capital, which have emerged as critical towards their resilience. They have cultural norms that strengthen social ties, thus enabling them to work and live together and access resources such as human, financial and physical capital, which they would otherwise not easily access due to marginalisation (Hope, 2014). The findings confirm that the collective cultural norms around the family and other social ties are the backbone of artisans' entrepreneurial ventures and resilience. Apart from access to resources, the family and networks facilitate the creation and transfer of tacit knowledge, making artisanry more than a livelihood pattern but a context where artisans become entrepreneurial by learning and developing the cognitive capacity to evolve, create, and solve problems (Chirico, 2008; Dohse and Walter, 2012).

Besides this, the artisan's skills and craft allow them to diversify customers outside of tourism, which is valuable when there is a decline in the industry. Notably, the ingrained skills through tacit knowledge distinguish artisans from other entrepreneurs in the informal sector (Çakmak *et al.*, 2018). While the skills allow artisans to use handicrafts to venture out of tourism, the cultural meaning behind the tacit knowledge also contributes to a strong attachment to handicrafts, leading to inflexibility towards other economic activities. This is despite working in the informal sector, where there is flexibility and opportunities to engage in other economic activities due to the ease of entry (Gërkhani, 2004). Hence, they appear different from other informal entrepreneurs who are likely to close their businesses during adversity or when better business or employment opportunities arise (La Porta and Shleifer, 2014). Consequently, they have run informal businesses for several years and generations, including during crises like political instability, terrorism and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Furthermore, the findings show that despite desiring to make money, the artisans' passion and creative fulfilment take precedence. On the one hand, this confirms that artisans are creative entrepreneurs (Ferreira *et al.*, 2019; Dana *et al.*, 2022). Nonetheless, on the other hand, it portrays that the artisans' perception of work may vary from that of other informal entrepreneurs, who perceive work as necessary for survival (Blunch *et al.*, 2001). Hence, the artisans' creative fulfilment attaches them to handicrafts and motivates their persistence in running enterprises. Acknowledging these distinguishing behaviours and attributes is essential as they have emerged as enablers of resilience through adversity.

Overall, the individual traits and behaviours, cultural norms on resourcing and culturally derived tacit knowledge explain the artisans' resilience through adversity. Figure 2 below showcases a conceptual model of these factors.



Source(s): Authors' creation

Figure 2. Conceptual model for informal artisan's resilience through adversity

To an extent, resilience theory and the entrepreneurial theory of resilience enable an understanding of the artisans' resilience. For instance, they make it possible to understand the resilience of artisans by explaining the behaviours and traits such as hope, optimism and perseverance. As mentioned, these are recognised as dimensions of entrepreneurial resilience (De Vries and Shields, 2006; Ayala and Manzano, 2014; Korber and McNaughton, 2018). Nonetheless, it is evident that the theories may not be sufficient to elaborate on the artisan's resilience. To expound, resilience theory prescribes that resilience is achieved when better-than-expected outcomes exist (Van Breda, 2018). Thus, the theory emphasises resilience as a positive outcome after adversity. This is similarly the case within entrepreneurship, where resilience is viewed as a positive outcome and resilient entrepreneurs are classified as those who do better after facing adversity (Bernard and Barbosa, 2016; Huggins and Thompson, 2015). Consequently, there are underlying assumptions that resilience and vulnerability are flip sides and opposite (Berkes, 2007; De Bruijne *et al.*, 2010). These imply that more resilience leads to less vulnerability or adversity and vice-versa.

However, the findings suggest that resilience amongst artisans does not necessarily result in better-than-expected outcomes. Additionally, their resilience does not mean that they stop experiencing adversity. This is because artisans experience constant challenges in the tourism industry and the informal sector, which are beyond their control. They are also often oppressed, marginalised, and harassed by institutions. Owing to this, artisans are in a state of ongoing adversity. Hence, their resilience is not necessarily manifested in positive or better-than-expected outcomes pointed out in the resilience theory.

Additionally, entrepreneurial resilience tends to focus on individual traits and behaviours. As alluded to, it focuses on individual traits such as but not limited to perseverance, persistence, optimism, flexibility, hardiness and self-efficacy (Ayala and Manzano, 2014; De Vries and Shields, 2006; Korber and McNaughton, 2018; Bullough and Renko, 2013). While these behaviours and traits are essential resilience indicators, they risk being individualistic. More specifically, they insinuate that people are responsible for their resilience and minimise institutional and social contexts that are a part of people's resilience (Van Breda, 2018). For artisans, this narrow conceptualisation ignores the responsibility of the government and other institutions in supporting people's resilience.

Furthermore, the focus on individual traits and behaviours restricts the consideration of other aspects like social and cultural norms, which should be considered when understanding resilience. This is not to say that artisans lack agency to determine their resilience, but to point out that the knowledge context beyond the individual also influences entrepreneurial resilience.

Based on the above findings and discussion, Table 3 below summarises these differences. It showcases how resilience is conceptualised in entrepreneurship against the empirical evidence of the resilience of informal artisan entrepreneurs.

Moreover, it is evident that the artisans' resilience and persistence to work in the informal sector are not purely based on necessity. Instead, it is a culmination of individual attributes and behaviours, cultural norms on resourcing, and culturally derived tacit knowledge. As alluded to, this is essential to note as the informal sector is associated with marginalisation and poverty (Kanbur, 2017). Thus, there is an assumption that informal entrepreneurs persistently work in the informal sector out of necessity (Adom, 2014) due to poverty, lack of employment opportunities and alternative livelihood options. Therefore, there is a need to go beyond this narrow perspective, which minimises the complexity of how informal artisan entrepreneurs handle adversity and persist in running enterprises.

**Table 3.** Key differences in the conceptualisation of resilience

Conceptualisation of resilience in entrepreneurship as derived from literature	Conceptualisation of the resilience of informal artisan entrepreneurs as derived from findings and discussion
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Resilient entrepreneurs achieve and do better after facing adversity. They recover and bounce back after failures <a href="#">Bernard and Barbosa (2016)</a>; <a href="#">Huggins and Thompson (2015)</a>; <a href="#">Subekti et al. (2023)</a></li> <li>Resilient entrepreneurs and businesses are flexible. They adjust activities and regenerate while facing shocks or uncertainty <a href="#">Dahles and Susilowati (2015)</a>; <a href="#">Huggins and Thompson (2015)</a></li> <li>Resilience is individualistic: portrayed by individual traits like optimism, hope, self-efficacy, motivation and perseverance <a href="#">Ayala and Manzano (2014)</a>; <a href="#">De Vries and Shields (2006)</a>; <a href="#">Korber and McNaughton (2018)</a>; <a href="#">Bullough and Renko (2013)</a>; <a href="#">Shepherd et al. (2020)</a>; <a href="#">Fisher et al. (2016)</a></li> <li>Resilience in entrepreneurship is linked to economic performance <a href="#">Williams and Vorley (2014)</a>; <a href="#">Iyengar et al. (2021)</a></li> <li>Resilient entrepreneurs overcome and withstand economic collapse and recover from financial turmoil or crises <a href="#">Moyo (2018)</a>; <a href="#">Lubell and Zarour (1990)</a></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Resilience does not necessarily lead to better-than-expected outcomes because of ongoing challenges</li> <li>There is ongoing adversity; therefore, no occasions for bouncing back</li> <li>Culturally derived tacit knowledge and skills create inflexibility towards other economic activities outside handicrafts. Thus, resilience is not necessarily about flexibility; instead, about persistence while facing shocks or uncertainty</li> <li>Artisans portray psychological behaviours and attitudes. However, their resilience is not solely individualistic. It is a culmination of individual attributes and behaviours, cultural norms on resourcing, and culturally derived tacit knowledge</li> <li>While finances play a role in enhancing resilience. Artisan entrepreneurs still showcase resilience in the wake of poverty and financial crises</li> </ul>
<b>Source(s):</b> Authors' creation	

## 6. Conclusions and implications of the study

The paper sought to understand how informal artisan entrepreneurs demonstrate resilience while experiencing adversity. It has discussed the adversities artisans experience, how they handle them, and how they differ from other informal entrepreneurs. It is apparent that artisans experience ongoing adversity but have remained resilient. This is possible because of their individual attributes and behaviours, cultural norms on resourcing and culturally derived tacit knowledge. Collectively, they enable artisans to cope with challenges, combine resources to handle adversity and persist in running enterprises.

### 6.1 Implications

The paper makes theoretical, empirical, and contextual contributions. Firstly, it contributes to the theoretical understanding of resilience. It challenges how resilience is conceptualised in entrepreneurship and calls for a more holistic conceptualisation that considers culture alongside individual attributes and behaviours. This is essential as resilience theory and entrepreneurial theory of resilience have heavily focused on psychological and individual traits and ignored socio-cultural contexts ([Van Breda, 2001](#); [Korber and McNaughton, 2018](#)).

Secondly, this paper contributes empirically to our contextual understanding of artisan entrepreneurs, specifically those in the informal sector and the tourism industry in SSA. It has elaborated on the traits and behaviours that make artisans legitimate entrepreneurs despite

being informal. It has also discussed how artisans are distinguished from other entrepreneurs in the informal sector because of their ingrained skills, inflexibility towards other economic activities, desire for creative fulfilment and the influence of cultural norms on their resilience. More so, it is evident that the artisans' persistence and resilience in the informal sector and tourism industry is not purely based on necessity. Instead, it is a culmination of individual attributes and behaviours, cultural norms on resourcing and culturally derived tacit knowledge. By making this contribution, the paper also extends the empirical research on artisan entrepreneurs, which is still limited in the African context (Pret and Cogan, 2018; Hasanah *et al.*, 2023).

Thirdly, the paper makes a methodological contribution. It draws research implications by highlighting some methodological considerations for conducting remote qualitative data collection and engaging with participants operating in an informal setting. It also shows the value of telephone interviews in overcoming difficulties of accessing participants, increasing flexibility for participation, and silencing the potential socioeconomic differences between the researcher and the participants.

Artisans make significant contributions. They make and sell handicrafts that maintain culture and heritage. They also create jobs that contribute to the economy and sustain livelihoods in their communities. Thus, their persistence and resilience in the informal sector and the tourism industry cannot be understated. Consequently, by discussing their adversities, we create awareness and generate the need for supportive policies to alleviate these challenges. These include policies that promote conducive work environments, alleviate financial struggles, ensure institutional support and safeguard artisans against sectoral challenges and unexpected crises.

### 6.2 Limitations and recommendations

While the study incorporated various methodological strategies to attain rich data, which addressed the research aim, the study faced limitations of telephone interviews, such as the lack of visual contact and one-on-one engagement with participants (Drabble *et al.*, 2016). Therefore, future studies can consider conducting a similar study using methodologies that allow for immersion and engagement with participants as they can overcome the limitations of telephone interviews, enable an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon and ease the establishment of trust and rapport with participants (Leavy, 2014).

Furthermore, while climate change and its effects did not emerge in the findings, it is inevitable and likely to shift artisans' ways of doing business and cultural traditions (Panneels, 2023). It is also likely to generate more challenges, such as disruptions in the tourism ecosystem and limited access to raw materials like wood. Thus, future studies can examine how the adversities of climate change will impact artisans.

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### Corresponding author

Maryline Kiptoo can be contacted at: [m.kiptoo@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:m.kiptoo@mmu.ac.uk)

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