

## Dr. Sara Elias



**Elias, S.R.S.T.A., Chiles, T., Duncan, C., Vultee, D. (2017). The Aesthetics of Entrepreneurship: How Arts Entrepreneurs and their Customers Co-create Aesthetic Value. *Organization Studies*, 39(2-3), 345-372.**

Do entrepreneurs develop their products in isolation, or are customers engaged as partners in the development process? Research has long presented entrepreneurship as something that takes place in a vacuum, despite evidence that the customer plays a vital role long before walking into a store and purchasing a product.

Dr. Sara Elias and her co-authors posit that entrepreneurs rely on this more collaborative model, and demonstrate how in their ethnographic study of arts entrepreneurs.

“Sometimes the literature assumes that the customer is only important because they buy the product, but their contribution is significantly greater than that. We found that the customer and entrepreneur iterate together in three different ways to co-create a product that has value to both of them.

“In this study, we’ve brought in the customer as a co-creator. So not just being connected—we knew entrepreneurs built networks—but bringing in the customer at the same level as the entrepreneur and recognizing that they have power beyond simply buying the product. For example, in the creation of unique products, customers continually enter entrepreneurs’ minds as they imagine and reflect on what might make customers tick. What this means is that, at some point, customers might only be imagined; yet they are extremely powerful!”

Elias and her co-authors conducted an ethnographic study with four entrepreneurs with different artistic specializations in Missouri. They found that processes of both an embodied nature (i.e. incorporating the physical body and senses as a part of the creation process) and relational nature (i.e. engaging and sharing ideas with another person) were central to the creation of a product that holds value for the customer and entrepreneur.

The paper identifies three components in the collaboration between entrepreneur and client: imagination, contemplation and consensus. These processes, although all falling under the category of relational and/or embodied actions, could be separated into these three unique components.

“Identifying these terms means we can begin to discuss *how* clients co-create value, in addition to identifying that they *do*,” says Elias. “Grounding the creative process in sensory or bodily experience expands entrepreneurship beyond the traditional approach emphasizing rational, conscious thought, and allows for exploring how ideas may emerge from the unconscious or imagination. Reflection, feelings, and the senses, as experienced by both the entrepreneur and the client during the development of unique products, are what allow individuals to better deal with ambiguity—including the kind of complex, messy, uncertain problems entrepreneurs and their customers often face.”

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