

Title: How does the female gender embrace and empower the tailoring and bespoke nature of online business platforms for craft and design-based selling?

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Within my Independent Inquiry, I will investigate small, online female-led businesses and how they are using their gender as a valuable tool to connect with others of a similar background and nature. I will be focusing on female-led business owners that are of interest to my creative practice and will be creating case studies on them. As a fellow female small business owner, this relates to me and interests me. It is something that is close to my heart and is definitely a topic I am enthusiastic to write about.

Chapter 1

In this chapter, I will be focusing on current trends for women in small online businesses, how they are using their gender in the context of their work in order to connect to customers and how they are finding their voice through a female-centric community. To discuss this, I will be considering the background context to women in business, from as early as the 1950s.

It is no secret that the female gender has been overlooked in past years. In terms of education and work, women have been deprived of the chance to study. 'Sixty years ago, almost 50 percent of women had no formal schooling, and their average level of educational attainment was just 3.3 years' (Jakiela and Hares, 2019). At school, girls were traditionally taught sewing, needlework, cooking, and housekeeping while boys were typically taught in more academic subjects such as mathematics, English, and sciences. Females were raised to have a caring, nurturing nature and were expected to be stay-at-home mothers whereas males were raised to climb the career ladder and achieve highly. Stereotypically, women are 'more nurturing and empathetic, while males are portrayed as less emotional and more cognitive' (Christov-Moore, 2014). Females were made aware that 'money is a man's business' (Babcock and Laschever, 2003, p. 68). When writing about schoolboys' education in the 1920s, Sandberg states 'Education for girls, however, was less important both financially, since they were unlikely to contribute to the family's income, and culturally, since boys were expected to study while girls were expected to run a "proper home"' (Sandberg, 2013, p. 12). This gender stereotype was extremely restricting, such a large life limitation and standard expectation from a young age was demoralising and discouraging for female children. So much so that even in 2001, '87.5 percent of the corporate officers of the 500 largest companies were men' (Babcock and Laschever, 2003, p. 65). This constant discouragement throughout their young lives appears to have led girls to feel they were unable to achieve as highly as boys. With little encouragement and gender-specific role models, they were led to believe that trying could be hopeless. Arguably this played to males' advantage and enabled them to achieve more highly than females in the world of education and business simply because there were more males than females in education.

However, recent research by professors at the University of New Brunswick has shown that female children 'earn higher grades in every subject, including the science-related fields where boys are thought to surpass them' (Gnautati, 2014). These changes in society have evidently encouraged girls to work hard and aim high just as much, or even more than boys due to their past disadvantages in the field of education and work. Also, in 2019, '75.8% of teachers were women' (GOV.UK, 2021). Young female students may achieve higher than young male students

because of the fact that when they are in education, they are often directly surrounded by positive female role models at a young age. Female children recognise they can set high goals for themselves because of the fact that their female teachers have succeeded and achieved so highly. When discussing gender inequality in the world of work, FutureLearn states 'Although discrepancies still exist in terms of representation and equality, there has been a lot of progress made in recent years on these fronts' (FutureLearn, 2021).



Figure 1: Thorpe, J. R. *Here's How Women Fought For The Right To Be Educated* (2017)

Figure 1 is an image of women finally being accepted into the world of higher education. 'As female education became more accepted and highly-educated women entered the workforce, the setting was created for the phenomenon we see now: women enrolling in college in higher numbers than men' (Thorpe, 2017). Even though men have been the primary gender of university and college-goers in the past, the fact that women are in actual fact now enrolling in higher education more than men is noteworthy. 'With schools from Harvard to McGill and Brown being led by women in the past or present, it's not too much to hope that the future of leadership in universities is, in fact, going to be very female' (Thorpe, 2017). Such large, prestigious universities being led by females is already such a large step forward in encouraging young girls to obtain a reputable education. In being the leader, they are inspiring young women to achieve well, obtain a valuable education and follow in their footsteps. However, even though this is the case, there are still evident inequalities when it comes to gender in the workplace.

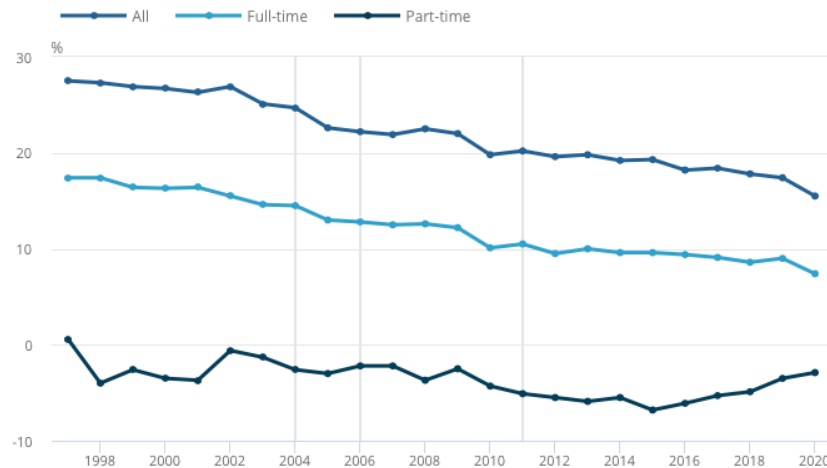


Figure 2: Office for National Statistics: Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings Between April 1997 and 2020.

Nevertheless, even though females tend to be achieving higher education-wise than males 'In the UK, the overall gender pay gap is 15.5%' (Office for National Statistics 2020). The graph above shows that the gender pay gap has clearly decreased from 28% in 1997 to 15.5% in 2020. There is no doubt that females are gradually being recognised to have more of an equal monetary value in the workplace but there is still a significant average gender-specific pay gap, even in such recent years. Women are seen to be working harder and achieving higher qualifications than men are in education, yet recognisably there is still currently a pay gap that is prioritising men's earnings over women's.

On the 2nd December 2021, I attended a self-employed virtual event hosted by Laura Pomfret, a founder of Financielle which is the UK's first female-focused finance app. Pomfret said that 'women could effectively down tools at 2 pm as they will technically stop being paid for the remainder of the year' (Pomfret, 2021). Such a drastic change in a woman's working day would balance their pay with men which means there is still a significant gender pay gap to consider.

Considering this inequality, women starting their own small online businesses is very positive in the fact that they have the ability to pay themselves fairly. If their businesses are successful, this is a clear solution to the apparent pay gap in stereotypical workplaces. 'Being self-employed, you're directly in charge of your money' (Pomfret, 2021). When working for themselves, small business owners do not have to negotiate pay with their superiors because they are their own directors. Although it depends on the business' revenue, they choose how they want to run their businesses. Therefore, women who set up their own businesses do not find themselves having to tolerate or accept the inequality in pay unlike a situation such as working for a larger company that is not their own. In clear relation to the changes in society, there has been a significant increase in female entrepreneurs recently: 'The number of women-owned businesses increased nearly 3,000% since 1972 according to the "2018 State of Women-Owned Businesses

Report" commissioned by American Express' (Castrillon, 2019). Even though 'only 1 in 3 entrepreneurs is female' (Rose Review of Female Entrepreneurship, HM Treasury 2019), there are now more female-led businesses than ever.

The points raised above are all contributing to why more women tend to be starting small businesses.

In this section, I will be linking more current research to the findings regarding education and the workplace for women to the global pandemic that emerged in 2020. In this time, female-led online small businesses have seemed to become so much more popular or perhaps more visible than they were before the pandemic. 'The Covid-19 pandemic has sparked a global spike in the growth of e-commerce sales and online businesses as worldwide lockdowns forced consumers to turn to the internet for buying everyday goods' (SCMP, 2021). When I conducted a public survey and asked 'Why do you think the global pandemic COVID-19 has had an impact on your feelings towards female-led small online businesses?', one participant wrote 'Since the beginning of COVID-19, I've had more time to research about where I want to spend my money'. Another wrote 'The pandemic meant I began to look elsewhere for shopping and led me to discover many new female-led businesses'. Another wrote that they 'had no clue there were so many, or how much it meant to shop small before COVID-19 hit' (Female-Owned Small Businesses survey, 2021). Over the last year and a half, the public has had more time to browse the internet due to working from home which naturally deducts time from their average day. Instead of spending time traveling to and from work every day, they have had more spare time than they usually would have, had there not been a national lockdown where the public was told to work from home where they can. This means they have essentially gained more minutes of their day to spend mindfully deciding where to buy their goods from.

Not to mention the fact that non-essential shops and business places were forced to close due to national lockdowns. Even before the first lockdown of 2020 started, the sheer 'fear of shortage created real short-term shortage' (Taylor, 2020). Anxious people who were panic-buying had a domino effect and this resulted in supply and demand being a significant issue. These issues that are raised here played a large part in how and why the public resorted to shopping online a lot of the time. 'Small business shoppers are buying online more than in the past' (Rosenbaum, 2021). It is evident that more and more people are 'shopping small' from online local businesses.

The Nextdoor Editorial Team has stated that shopping from small businesses 'is becoming not only popular but on-trend' (NextDoor Editorial Team, 2020). For example, when social media influencers promote the fact that they are shopping small themselves, it is inevitable that a large number of their followers are likely to follow suit. The importance of shopping small and local has been broadcast even more than usual across social media platforms such as Instagram:

"Shop local" is more than just a slogan; it's a symbol of solidarity in the COVID-19 consumer marketplace. Businesses have had to use unique business strategies to cope

with COVID-19, and they can continue to meet consumers where they're at by leaning into this trend. (NextDoor Editorial Team, 2020).

Small business owners and supporters are more frequently using quite specific slogans, phrases, and hashtags on online social media platforms such as Instagram to connect with others who share the same outlook on keeping independent businesses alive and afloat. Some examples include: #shopsmall, #shoplocal, #supportsmallbusinesses. These hashtags are used to encourage the public to shop with small and local businesses where they can. They are currently used a lot; for example, #shopsmall has been used in 49.1 million Instagram posts.

Small, online businesses are no doubt becoming more appealing to the public. Customers tend to prefer supporting a person's life and craft or a small group's craft instead of buying from highly established companies with millionaire owners. It is favorable for a customer to be able to 'connect with a human being, rather than a vast, impersonal blob with a call centre on the far side of the world.' (Stedman, 2021). Often a large number of people like to support the people and small businesses close to them. They are able to associate with the small business owner because they have where they live in common and often the products relate to the customer in this way. Amidst the global pandemic COVID-19 lockdown, people found themselves stuck at their homes, unable to go out and the only form of non-essential shopping that was allowed was online. Simultaneously, the initial COVID-19 phase in 2020 released entrepreneurial opportunities despite the obvious restricting negative aspects of the global pandemic. 'Women were the majority of workers furloughed across the UK' (Women's Budget Group, 2020). This meant women were feeling more inclined to take part in activities and keep themselves busy to better their mental health in such a fearful and depressing situation of being stuck at home.

A participant in the survey I conducted about female-owned small businesses said 'the lockdowns in particular hit women harder than men as they picked up the majority of childcare and were disproportionately affected in traditional jobs. It's become more important to support flexible working in general and own-managed businesses are a great facilitator' (Female-Owned Small Businesses survey, 2021). Due to the fact it was mostly women that stayed at home with their children during lockdown because they were not able to attend school, mums were having to juggle both their jobs and teaching their children from home. When working for a company that is not their own, they often have strict deadlines and working hours they are expected to adhere to whereas if they are working for themselves, they are in a position to work flexible hours and are able to set their own realistic targets while taking their home and family life into consideration. On the 2nd of December 2021, I attended a self-employed virtual Zoom event hosted by Financielles Laura Pomfret. Within her first few sentences after welcoming everyone to the event Pomfret said 'I'm hoping no toddlers walk in'. I found this interesting because she is trying to balance both her home life as a Mum and running her small business at home. I have found that this is something women are often doing.

Chapter 2: Case studies and survey

In chapter 2, I will be examining two female-led small online businesses and how the business owners use their gender to empower and celebrate their work and businesses. I will be looking at PerlCosmetics, a small online business established in 2020 and will also include my small online business: Ear Candy Handmade UK. I will also be conducting a survey to gather opinions on female-led small businesses from my female-dominated audience.

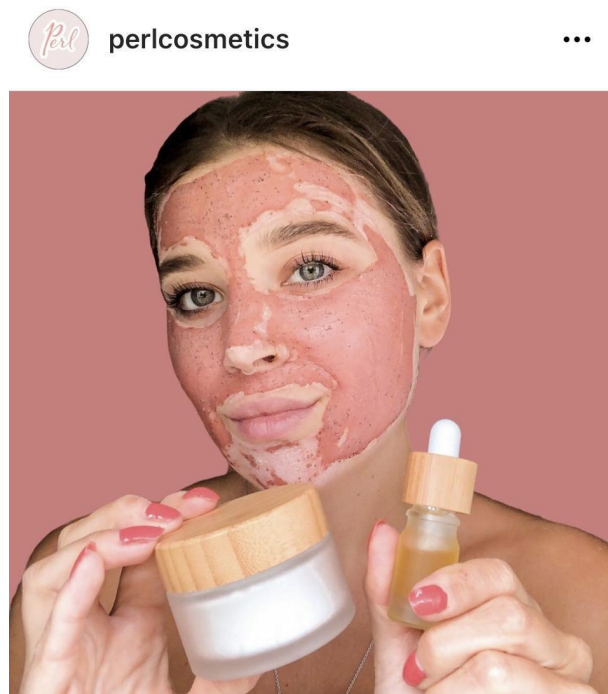


Figure 3: Portrait of Isobel Perl, founder of Perl Cosmetics holding her iconic British pink clay mask skincare creations (June 2020).

Perl Cosmetics is run by Isobel Perl and was established towards the end of July 2020. Due to the global pandemic COVID-19, Perl lost her admin job in May 2020 and said 'instead of seeing it as a setback, I saw it as an opportunity to take a risk and follow a dream of mine to start a business' (Perl, 2020). Even though she had recently lost her job due to the pandemic and the uncertainty of finding a new job quickly was nerve-wracking, her enthusiasm and ambition to start her own business took over. Perl started her business by making an account on Instagram, a photography-based social media platform. She weaved her beliefs and business ideas together in the early days of the Instagram account to entice and connect with the female customer base she was aiming for. "Using my degree in Biology and experience of working in a lab, as well as my love for all things skincare, I formulate and hand-make the pearl powder clay masks with illuminating oil," (Perl, 2021). By creating products that she is passionate about and by empowering females to embrace their natural skin, she has successfully developed a six-figure business.

From the very beginning of her business, Perl has consistently used hashtags to connect to her target customers. Especially by using gender-specific, small business empowering hashtags.

After examining her Instagram feed posts from oldest to most recent, I have found some examples of hashtags she regularly uses:

- #supportyoursisters
- #womeninbusiness
- #girlboss
- #girlsinsbizathome
- #femaleempowerment

As these hashtags are female-focused, Perl is successfully connecting herself to both her target market and also other female-led small businesses. This is valuable to not only her cosmetic business but also her Girls In Business UK directory.

As well as Perl Cosmetics, Perl has been building a business directory to help and support female-owned small businesses. 'I set up GIB shortly after @perlcosmetics as I was struggling to get my business known and thought about how many other women must be struggling too' (Perl, 2021). Due to her struggle with promoting her skincare business, she wanted to help other female small business owners in the same situation. 'To me, I felt there was space for a platform that showcases women in business and so I set up Girls in Business UK, which has the premiss of showcasing a woman in business each day' (Perl, 2021). For female-led businesses with less than 500 followers on Instagram, she offers the chance to be featured on her Girls In Business 22.7k-follower Instagram page for free. Girls In Business also offers:

- Monthly virtual markets for 24 female-owned small businesses
- Daily paid Instagram features for female-owned small businesses
- A free, female-led/owned small business directory
- Advice from Isobel Perl's personal experiences
- Interviews with other female small business owners, sharing tips and tricks for other female small business owners to learn from

Perl is very transparent when writing and talking about being a female small business owner on her Girls In Business Instagram account and website. She tends to talk directly to her audience (female small business owners): 'It's not been easy by any means, and I struggle constantly with motivation and keeping moving forwards. There are good and bad days, just remember to keep on moving forwards and keep on pushing for your dreams'. By being truthful, she is not ignoring the fact that being a female small business owner is difficult at times but is reminding her audience of other female small business owners to keep going and plough through tough times. By being transparent she can tell her narrative to her customer base and therefore create connections with people who have been through the same life situations. '2020 has been a strange year for everyone. For me, it'll also be a year that defines me. I started the year in therapy, hating my job and where I was at in my life. I'm ending the year with two businesses, a new job and a new outlook on life' (Perl, 2021). By telling her own personal experience, she is inviting her listeners or readers to engage with her conversation. 'You could have the most

amazing product in the world, but if you don't create a relationship with your customers, tell a story and share the magic, people will be reluctant to buy' (Perl, 2021). This is one of the many things small business owners can use to their advantage, they are able to tell their own stories and connect with their customers personally, much better than a large company can. Perl has proved to be skillful at this; she strives for a female community-based platform space in both of her businesses, Perl Cosmetics and Girls In Business UK. In the words of Seth Godin (2016), 'People do not buy goods and services. They buy relations, stories, and magic'. By telling a truthful story through a small business' brand, the owner is encouraging their target market to trust them and their business. Women have a tendency to be more talkative 'The female brain excels in verbal tasks whereas the male brain is better adapted to visual-spatial and mathematical tasks' (Cameron, 2007). Because female small business owners are more able to converse well with their customers, this results in customers feeling they can relate and interact with female-led small business social media pages more often. Perl often uses welcoming and female-empowering slogans to invite followers and customers to her Girls In Business UK platform such as 'join our girl gang' and 'girls supporting girls' (Perl, 2021). By making herself come across as a friendly and inviting business owner, she is attracting more of an audience and following. Therefore this increases engagement and consequently increases reach and sales.



Figure 4: Elinor Jones, owner of Ear Candy Handmade UK after the second successful product launch of 2021 (2021)

Due to the national lockdown in March 2020, my first year of studying at the Swansea College of Art Dynevor building for my Surface Pattern Design course was cut short. Because I had no choice but to study from home, it meant that more spare time was available to me than if I were to travel to and from university. Although this restriction was a setback in terms of studying because I was not able to use the studio and workshop facilities that were usually readily available for my projects, I used my time wisely by experimenting with a brand new medium I

had not tried working with before: polymer clay. Because there was not a lot of information readily available about making with polymer clay back in May 2020 and due to my lack of ceramic experience, I spent a lot of time learning how polymer clay behaves through my own experiments. I enjoyed taking time out of my day to work freely with making jewellery out of clay because it distracted me from the insane chaos and anxiety that came with this unheard of situation the world was in.

I decided to create an Instagram account to make a portfolio of my clay work on the 12th of June 2020. By posting photographs regularly, I was building a sizeable portfolio. Interest swiftly built up around my Instagram account so I started taking individually customised orders through Instagram direct messages.



Figure 5: Ear Candy Handmade UK's iconic rainbow polymer clay earrings (2021)

Subsequently, my practice quickly developed from a pure hobby into a small handmade business. Through word of mouth and the advantages of social media, my Instagram account had gained 1,000 followers in early July and reached 2,000 followers in early September. At this point in time I was beginning to become overwhelmed taking so many orders through unorganised messages so I felt the need to set up an online shop. By broadcasting my feminine, chatty personality and talking about my plans for an online shop through my Instagram account, I was able to generate interest and excitement in my followers in the build-up to my shop opening. The Etsy shop launched on the 20th of October 2020 and offered a sizeable range of ready-made items tailored for female wear. The majority of these sold out shortly after launching which really surprised me. I remember being extremely nervous for weeks right up until launch night but it came to be worth it.



Figure 6: Ear Candy Handmade UK's Instagram account (2021)

Before I found this medium I struggled to wear heavy ear jewellery for long periods of time as they nearly always put my ears in pain. However, once I tried making polymer clay earrings I was pleasantly surprised with how lightweight they are after baking. I recognised that painful ears must be a common result of wearing large earrings for a lot of other women and wanted Ear Candy Handmade UK to focus on offering bold jewellery styles while still allowing women to feel comfortable while wearing them. I frequently use a large number of gender-specific hashtags in my social media posts such as '#fempreneur', '#femalesmallbusinessowner', '#supportwomeninbusiness'. Because Ear Candy Handmade UK's target market is females and a large number of them are actually small business owners too, this gender-specific niche and using these hashtags allow me to directly connect with my audience due to the similarity of gender issues and feminism in business today.

Since my Instagram account hit 20 thousand followers in 2021, I decided to start sharing at least five female-owned online businesses on Instagram along with feminine slogans such as 'You go girl' or 'Girl boss' every weekend for 'Small Business Saturday'. Supporting fellow female-led small businesses is extremely important to me; not only does it expose their accounts to a wider audience, but it is beneficial to my business too. As I have established in my earlier discussion, customers value stories and reasons behind small businesses. They like to know that who they are buying from is reputable and what their personality consists of. I try to frequently re-introduce myself to my audience because my following is still growing. I do this to explain my journey as a small business owner, my personal views and how I aim to run my business ethically. Regarding my personal views in business and linking back to supporting fellow female-led business owners, I intentionally promote the fact that I use my sizable Instagram following to support and help them grow their own businesses. It creates a sense of sisterhood between other female small business owners and I. The people in my audience who admire this (predominantly females) are more inclined to support my business because they witness me being a valued member of a female-led small business community.

I have now made over 1,240 sales and 315 reviews through the Etsy shop, and have made over 300 sales through Instagram. Ear Candy Handmade UK now offers over 140 styles that are available to be handmade to order.

Survey

To support my research on female-led small online businesses, I created an online survey using Google Forms. On the 6th December 2021, I released the survey and asked females to give their anonymous answers. This was essential for me to ensure honesty in my findings. Using my business' 22.5k Instagram following, 97.2% of them being female, I shared the link to my post and invited females to participate in my survey. With 73 responses in total, this survey covers a good number of participants' opinions therefore I see it as valuable and relevant source material.

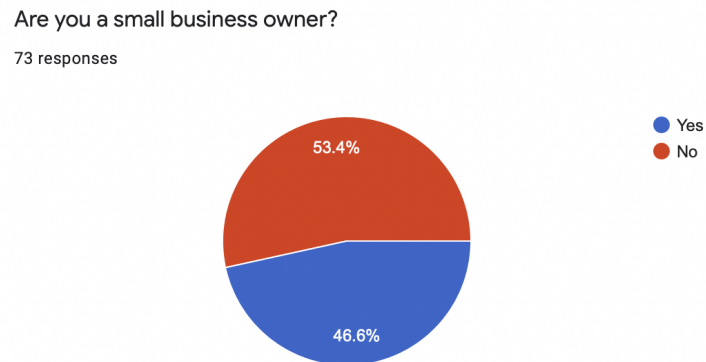


Figure 7: A pie chart showing the results from the survey question 'Are you a small business owner?' (2021)

Firstly, I asked the female participants whether they were small business owners because I was interested to find out whether their opinions differed from those who were not small business owners. I found that 53.4% of participants were small business owners and 46.6% said they were not.

Do you find that female-led small businesses are now appealing to you more than ever?

73 responses

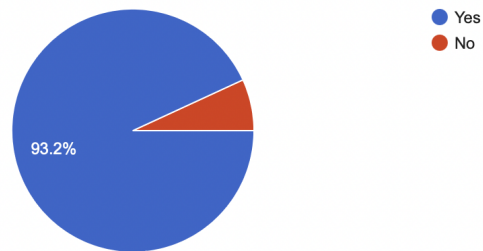


Figure 8: A pie chart showing the results from the survey question 'Do you find that female-led businesses are now appealing to you more than ever?' (2021)

93.2% of the participants said they felt that female-led small businesses are now more appealing to them than ever. When asked why the participants might feel this way one participant stated that they 'find it really impressive to see female-led companies starting from something small and becoming something big, especially in a society where businesses often seem to be dominated by males'.

Another participant stated that female-led businesses are more appealing to them than before because 'It's empowering to see women taking a new role and really starting to step out of their comfort zones'. The same participant also said 'since the pandemic, I've seen a lot of women open up businesses. It's good to see women taking charge, doing something for themselves, and not depending on a corporation for income'. The rise of female-led small businesses disrupts the usual stereotype of what a business should look like and what gender it is expected to be run by.

Do you think that social media platforms had an impact on this?

73 responses

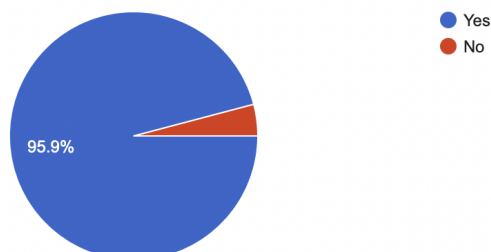


Figure 9: A pie chart showing the results from the survey question 'Do you think that social media platforms had an impact on this?' (2021)

I then asked whether the participants think that social media platforms had an impact on this. 95.9% said yes. When I asked them why they think this is, one participant wrote 'social media acts as a brilliant way for female-led companies to both advertise and celebrate their successes. This can also apply for smaller businesses that are popular in their community, allowing them to expand and become more visible across the world'. Another participant expressed that they think 'social media applications tend to show me more female business owners because that is the content that I interact most with'. Instagram is very customised to each individual. Because this participant follows and interacts mostly with female small business owners, Instagram tailors more of this content to the individual behind their account. Because of this bespoke tailoring according to every account holder's interests, social media enables the opportunity to connect people of the same groups and wider audiences. Another participant wrote 'In my experience, female small business owners seem to be more inclined to promote their businesses on social media. I rarely come across a male-led small business promotion on social media'. As evidenced in chapter 1, females are typically willing to be more social with others than males typically are. Perhaps this is why we are seeing more of an abundance of female-led small businesses in social media compared to male-led businesses.

A social media following is usually a group of people with shared values, beliefs and personalities and is a community. This has meant small, online businesses can generate sales through their following effectively, rather than traditional methods. Through their following they are also able to encourage and inspire others: 'From who I follow on social media platforms, I've seen a growth of female-led small businesses which have inspired me to go for it. I can assume that other women have felt the same'. It is valuable to note the fact that female small business owners tend to support and encourage each other to set up their businesses. They see 'community over competition'.

Do you think the global pandemic COVID-19 has had an impact on your feelings towards female-led small businesses too? Think back to 2020 when we were in national lockdowns, forced to shop online for non-essential goods such as birthday gifts.

73 responses

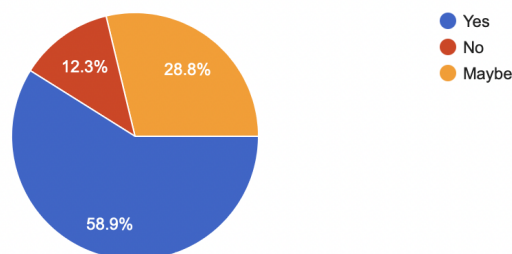


Figure 10: A pie chart showing results from the survey question 'Do you think the global pandemic COVID-19 has had an impact on your feelings towards female-led small businesses too?' (2021)

When asked whether the participants think that COVID-19 has had an impact on their feelings towards female-led small businesses, 58.9% of them said yes.

When asked why they think this is, one participant said that 'shopping has shifted more than ever to becoming online during the pandemic. It lets more voices be heard. I turned to online places like Etsy for gifts during the pandemic, whereas before I would have just looked in local chain shops'. Another said that female-led online small businesses 'were more prominent' to them throughout. They claim 'I had no clue there were so many, or how much it meant to shop small before the pandemic'. More than ever, digital platforms are being used especially because of the pandemic. More home-based female creative practitioners now have the opportunity to showcase their talent, and have the platforms to sell. Having to shop online opened up a new window of opportunity for many small businesses, which I hope continues in the future.

In conclusion, I have thoroughly researched how females use their gender as a valuable tool to connect with others of a similar background and nature. I have found that female-led small online businesses are far more popular and visible than they have been in the past. Even though males were at an educational advantage at school in the 1960s, females have since proved that on average they are now performing more highly in school and at higher education than males. However, there are still evident gender inequalities in pay.

Through conducting a survey I have found that a large number of my audience has gained a lot of respect and admiration for female-owned small online businesses, especially throughout the duration of the COVID-19 global pandemic. The sense of community and female empowerment has been advantageous and a credit to women all over the planet.

The experience in being part of such a strong, female-empowering community over the past year and a half has been extremely valuable. My confidence has drastically improved while becoming a small business owner. People are interested in my wearable artwork and are spending their hard-earned money on purchasing it, which has been constantly encouraging me to believe in my true potential as both an artist and female small business owner. Due to having to work around deadlines at university, I have successfully developed the ability to be flexible with time and schedule my own business work hours and dispatch times. This will be of great worth when I complete my studies at University and become a graduate of 2022. I am certain that I am already well experienced enough to continue to run my business successfully and even establish others too. Especially a female small business directory to continue supporting what I care about most: small businesses led and established by females.

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