

Emerging Marketing Strategies for the Micro-Enterprise – A Study of Micro Creative Industry

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Abstract With the progress of industrialization and digitization globally, an individual's material needs are gradually sublimated to the pursuit of life satisfaction and spiritual pleasure. The Creative Industry has been formed accordingly based on this phenomenon and many firms are developing towards culture, environment, art, literature, and other aspects. According to the literature, these firms exist in the form of micro businesses or workshops through a local foundation and are less capable of marketing, promotion, and connecting with new consumer groups. Over decades, governments have attached greater attentions to the development of the Micro Creative Industry (MCI) and set about implementing relevant grants, programs, and professional guidance mechanism. However, the question of why MCI is still faced with considerable difficulties regarding product management and brand marketing remains unknown. This knowledge gap becomes the focal motivation for this study. The study is to ascertain the issue and advise the operators and managers of MCI on how to determine their products for Profitable Core Trade and establish marketing strategies in line with industry characteristics. The results and marketing guidelines presented in this study are expected to enable the operators and firms of MCI to properly establish their respective marketing strategies and channels, and, moreover, proactively to achieve further sustainable business.

Keywords Micro-Enterprise, Creative Industry, Profitable Core Trade, Micro Creative Industry Marketing Strategy

1. Introduction

'Micro-enterprise' is defined differently based on diverse international business context and social environments [9,18]. The core concept of 'micro-enterprise' refers to enterprises with a small number of employees or a small amount of capital. This kind of firms generally conduct business from a residence due to the relatively small scale. Most of the operators or managers have a relative lack of knowledge and experience in business finance and bear greater entrepreneurial risks. When such firms are currently subject to impacts from a number of aspects, for instance, improved consumption ability, change in preference for creative products, and increased demand for living standard by consumers, they are progressively devoting to the new type of industry, namely the 'Micro Creative Industry (MCI)' [25]. As the consumer groups of MCI are small and prone to regional constraints, it seems to be difficult to access global channels if merely relying on independent

capital and dedicated work, especially without effective marketing strategies.

The operators of MCI have long utilized the traditional rules of marketing, such as [12,16], to establish their brands and promote their products. However, some of these principles and strategies are outdated and not applicable to MCI because the generally accepted marketing techniques and procedures for mass industrial products should not be applied to exquisite, eminent, and relatively rare products. As analyses and discussions of the 'Profitable Core Trade' [5,13] for MCI are limited, especially in the traditional marketing realm, and only few studies have proposed specific marketing strategies and guidelines to facilitate MCI sustaining their business for long-term growth, this study takes up the challenge.

The study expects to fulfill a knowledge gap in the marketing strategies for MCI and proceeds as follows. First, the concept of 'Micro Creative Industry' and 'Profitable Core Trade' are reconnoitered in some depth. Second, the characteristics of new emerging consumer groups that have dominated in related creative markets are then revealed. Third, the strategic marketing guidelines for MCI are discussed and presented by applying the continuously updated information of cases in long-term development. Subsequently, the results are discussed and concluded.

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2. Conceptual Background

In this section, looking first at the concept of ‘Micro Creative Industry (MCI)’ and the notion of ‘Profitable Core Trade (PCT)’ are interpreted in some detail, then the characteristics and nature of the new consumer groups, namely the young middle class, are revealed, and finally the limited work describing the relationship between the features of products and brands of MCI and the present marketing circumstances for this distinct industry are processed.

2.1. Micro Creative Industry

In 2002, Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Micro Enterprise Summit defined that only firms with less than 5 employees, including single-member companies, personal studios, self-employed sole proprietorship, and joint ventures can be called a ‘micro-enterprise’ [1]. According to the 2017 Small Business Act (SBA) Sheet France [10], small enterprises in France accounted for more than 4/5 of all enterprises, with a total added value accounting for 54.5% of the entire country in 2016. In the United States, micro-enterprises have 5 or less employees, most had an initial capital less than US\$ 35,000, and they generally lack business financing channels, such as enterprise credit accounts or commercial bank services [22].

In the economic system of Australia, a large proportion of enterprises are also micro-enterprises, which provide the majority of employment for the labor market in Australia, and have driven industrial innovation [3]. However, most operators are responsible for managing their business, covering everything from daily business execution to financial accounting. Many micro-enterprises are based on family and conduct business at home from other than an office or store. Generally, they also have to shoulder most entrepreneurship related business risks, make initial capital contribution, or use personal assets, such as properties, to obtain bank loans or financing. If their business become successful, they could obtain handsome profits, but most of them are still facing reverse and critical circumstances [22].

Meanwhile, many new types of industries are emerging at a fast pace, including the ‘Creative Industry’. In countries with highly developed economy and culture, such as the United Kingdom, France, the United States, and Australia [23], as well as countries striving to combine traditional culture with an open economy, such as China, Japan, and Korea [7], the development of the Creative Industry is strongly supported. According to David Throsby AO [21, p.219], a cultural economist in Australia; as compared with general traditional industries, the products and services of the Creative Industry have the following three characteristics: (1) some input of human creativity in production; (2) vehicles for symbolic messages of purchased commodities and services realized by consumers; (3) certain forms of intellectual property (even potential) are contained in such commodities or services. According to the United Nations Industrial Development Organization

(UNIDO), most of the firms in the Creative Industry operate according to the micro-enterprise model [24].

In view of above concepts and current status of micro-enterprises and the Creative Industry, related literature and technical reports indicate that these firms are faced with the following issues: poor credit standing; weak resistance against the business cycle; over reliance on operator’s personal ability in management; absence of stability and complete accounting; difficulty in determining the performance of operations; short product life cycle; insufficient research and design, innovation capability, talent training, and IT inputs; unclear marketing strategies; and difficulty in developing marketing channels [6]. Most importantly, how to market micro-scale and low-market recognition creative products is an ambiguous and urgent issue. It is also unclear whether the marketing concepts and inputs of human creativity in production, especially for the general public, can be applied to improving the sustainability of the MCI? Therefore, this study would like to disclose practicable and feasible marketing suggestions for MCI.

2.2. Profitable Core Trade

The Profitable Core Trade (PCT) is a relatively new concept in marketing [5,13], and was originally applied in strategies for creating and producing luxury products. This study regards the notion as an important element which must be integrated into the production process, especially while developing the MCI marketing strategies. Based on this notion, the operators or managers of MCI must plan and produce their main products within a certain range in order to support the long-term existence of the firms.

In setting the products of PCT, the operators of MCI should recognize a key condition – ‘the quality of product’ – which should no longer a selling theme for MCI; instead, quality should be a basic and requisite key of the products for the industry [13].

Figure 1 shows how to establish the concept of Profitable Core Trade based on the product quality. First, the operators of MCI should prudently review all existing products, select one or more items according to the existing products or service, and then, ask themselves: whether the firm’s profits as a whole could be maximized and cover a large proportion of costs if one or more of them are sold within a certain period (such as one week, one month, etc.)? If yes, subsequently, similar products and competitors in the current market place must be analyzed, and then products with unique characteristics and market segmentation should be revised and produced.

The purpose of such concept lies in that the operator, and their firms, could maintain the existence and might gain main consumer groups with sufficient financial capacity, who also intend to improve their living standard and be willing to continuously buy the range of products. Furthermore, when the main consumer groups use such products in their daily life and might be seen directly or indirectly by others (such as sharing via online media), this

will affect and attract other potential consumer groups.

The operators of MCI could also select several existing items as the threshold series products, in order to attract consumer groups with buying power that are willing to try new products or want to buy them due to sideline derivatives. However, it should be noted that the products of such range could not bring high profits. Upon completion of setting the main range products, operators now could

start to consider whether they would like to sell some products below the Profitable Core Trade, such as postcards, bookmarks, calendars, and/or notebooks. All these products are considered as marginal sales activities. Such marginal products should be excluded from the business model analysis of MCI, as they would only attract random consumers or consumers who have known the brand.

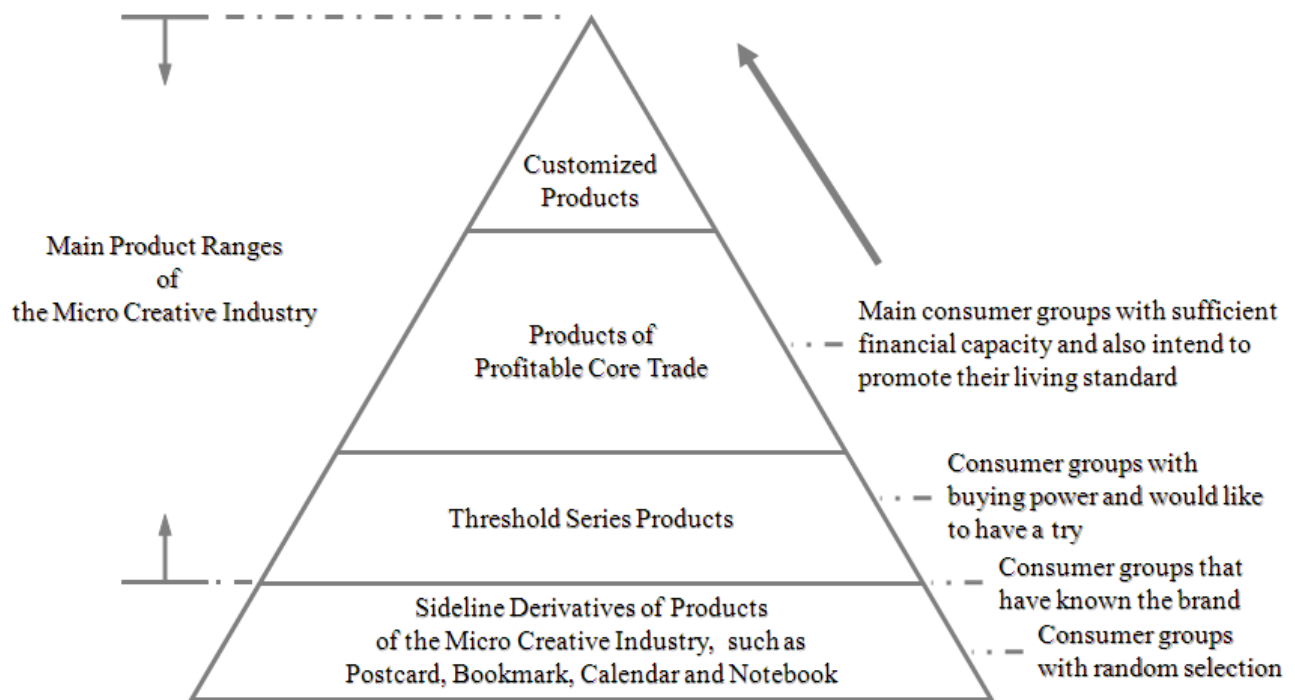


Figure 1. The Concepts of Profitable Core Trade and Product Ranges for MCI

2.3. Marketing Strategies for Micro-Enterprises

As most of the micro-enterprises still operate under a passive approach and applied price competition only, they will be unable to make profits and achieve sustainable business especially when striving to satisfy customers' demands. According to the literature, micro-enterprises may be able to obtain higher value and actual profits if they consider how to conceive and establish appropriate marketing strategies, create good consumer experience processes, and form good brand experience, as based on customers' value proposition [11].

Kotler et al. [15] stated that new consumer groups of young middle class with high mobility and Internet competency are emerging, and they are dominating the future market. Meanwhile, the industrial product market is faced with various issues, such as changes in a consumer's preferences and improved demand for living standard, especially those new consumer groups have the strength of being younger and more productive. New consumer groups would like to experience better things while climbing from their lower social status. Unlike traditional consumers, new

consumer groups are more adaptable to mitigation or mobility, live their life at a rapid pace, and have highly time-efficiency demands. When new consumer groups see something they are interested in, via any information platform or channel, most of them will search the item on their mobile phones. They will also search for relevant information, such as price and quality on the Internet when deciding whether or not to buy something from a store. They make purchase decisions by applying various devices anytime and anywhere. Nonetheless, although they are good at utilizing the Internet, they also love to experience things for themselves, meaning to interact with a brand in a high value engagement. Such consumer characteristics bring about both opportunities and crises to micro-enterprises.

Most of the operators and managers acknowledge that only high touch engagement could make a new difference. In the world of high information connectivity, the key challenges for brands and enterprises lie in how to integrate the Internet and physical elements to form the complete consumer experience. The traditional principles of marketing, which are now subject to digital technology, have been developed into recognition, requirement, query,

action, advocacy, and other main procedures [15]. The marketing techniques for the Micro Industry should be further developed into 'enjoyable, engaging, and experiential consumption' [15], in order to turn prospective consumers into buyers and become supporters of the brand and promoters of the products and concepts.

The products and brands of the Creative Industry involve three aspects, creativity presentation, operational management and marketing, and the promotion and application of digital technology. However, there are gaps in knowledge and awareness among operators of different natures. As most of the operators of the Creative Industry attach more importance to personal creativity, meaning their products that integrate technology and knowledge are quite unique, and are not available for standard mass production. But those operators of the Creative Industry also have little or no ability to establish marketing strategies. When most enterprises have applied digital technology to transmit information and consumption messages, how could the operators of MCI form and operate marketing strategies? There are very few studies in this aspect. The study intends to fulfill this knowledge gap.

3. Interpretive Case Study

This article adopts interpretive case study for the purpose of extending the traditional theories and views of marketing, and discusses how the operators of the Micro Creative Industry (MCI) could establish and apply marketing strategies in line with industry characteristics. Questions in the form of 'how' are used throughout this investigation to understand the experiences, practices, and processes of marketing for the MCI. Theoretical extension through interpretive exploration represents a type of understanding, and the results are expressed and interpreted based on the researcher's subjective knowledge and experience [2,20].

The main reason for adopting case study as the main methodology lies in that, a phenomenon explored still cannot be validated with statistics. In addition, cases relating to MCI are subject to the weakness of poor or insufficient secondary data. Therefore, in this study, primary data were collected by various means (including interviews) from more than forty micro creative enterprises in eastern Taiwan over the past 6 years. With relatively barrier-free communication with the operators of MCI, as well as other marketing experts and scholars in the industrial and marketing fields, which are attributable to the program supported by the government and the regional geographical relationship, this study had accessed and observed the cases in different ways, including: attending activities and lectures, serving as a counsel volunteer, and taking opportunities to invite the operators of MCI to give speeches on a relevant site; hence, constantly updating the development of cases and summarizing relevant research results [17].

4. Marketing Guidelines for the Micro Creative Industry

Most of the operators or managers of the Micro Creative Industry (MCI) have devoted their efforts to create distinctive products that could express the concepts of design and creativity, as well as the enthusiasm of the designers or artisans. When establishing marketing strategies, the operators of MCI have to realize that their products have an invisible 'Identity' that goes beyond brand positioning. The most significant difference between these two notions lies in that 'identity' is difficult to separate from an object and represents the appearance of the object; while brand positioning is subject to adjustment according to the general environment. It would be helpful if the operators of MCI have such awareness and follow the six guidelines of marketing as below:

4.1. The Internet should not be the Primary Marketing Channel for the Products of Profitable Core Trade

The Internet should not be the main marketing channel and tool for MCI, especially for those products in the ranges of Profitable Core Trade. Most operators participating in this study were confused about this strategy at first, meaning how to NOT provide online sales and services in the global digitization trend? When further considered, although the strengths of the Internet, including timeliness, updates, changes at any time, convenience, accessibility, preferential price, and automatic service, are extremely valuable to industrial and mass-production commodities [4], they may be potential weaknesses for the products of Profitable Core Trade of MCI.

When a product is intended to integrate human creativity or carry a cultural symbolic message, it will go through a process of continuous accumulation, but cannot be produced in real-time. However, such nature may conflict with the concepts of the Internet, such as timeliness, updates and changes at any time. Most of the products of Profitable Core Trade are supported by culture and manufactured in long processes, and thus, cannot respond to the instant change or real-time demand of the Internet. Furthermore, based on cultural connotation and complicated processes, the prices of the products of Profitable Core Trade should be determined on an accurate and actual basis, rather than being based on discounts price. Operators of MCI should be aware of the following facts: products must enable customers to experience another level of 'spiritual life', rather than staying among the users of ordinary industrial products. One-to-one relationships must be established between each customer and owner or sales personnel, and not leave customers facing an automatic virtual electronic trading platform, which also contradicts the application of the Internet. In other words, the Internet can be applied as an auxiliary channel to provide existing customers with relevant information services, and introduce potential new consumer groups about the brand, product history, or product profile

[14]. It should not be used as the main marketing channel for the products of Profitable Core Trade. Most of the MCI operators and managers in the website of <https://www.inmall.com.tw> (currently in Chinese version) have done a lot of their efforts to follow this guideline.

4.2. The Internet should be Properly Applied to Communicate and Deliver the Brand Concepts

Extending the Guideline 4.1 above, the most important contribution of the Internet to MCI lies in communication with consumers and delivery of the production concepts and brand story. Story-telling and affection should be the essence of communication and delivery. For most of the industrial products, operators communicate with consumers only regarding the 'quality' of a product via online advertisements. However, quality should not be the actual selling point for those products of MCI, because quality is just a basic requisite. Thus, online advertisements and messages should contribute to maintaining and extending brand spirit, culture continuity, creative ideas, and affection, which are important elements in the products and brands of MCI. Furthermore, the operators of MCI have to be aware that affection must be created and maintained on an ongoing basis, as 'affection' would fade away gradually in real life. A short video or a few lines of touching words will extend such brand essence.

Traditional online marketing strategies attach importance to 'efficiency' and is of the view that each cent should be spent on the target consumer groups [6]. However, in communicating and delivering its essence via the Internet, operators of MCI have to recognize that there are two values of their products: personal product value and other individual's product value. People who are familiar with the brand must be much more numerous than people who actually use or buy the product if the second value is to be maintained. For those products of MCI, if they were used by someone but cannot be identified with their brand, the value of the brand will be reduced to some extent. Taking certain internationally renowned and innovative porcelain products for example, most people would contact and appreciate them at a specific location, and even understand the story and creativity of the product via the Internet, but they may not intend to buy them because of the expensiveness. The Internet can have an effect on other individual's product value, as it allows potential consumers to know about the brand and even expect or anticipate owning or using such products in the future. The products of MCI must maintain close connection to non-mainstream or niche markets and make such markets become the promoters. How to thoroughly disseminate relevant information through the Internet is a successful factor in the digital era. As many as possible of the MCI operators and managers in the website of <https://creative.hccc.gov.tw> (currently in Chinese version) have done a lot of their efforts to follow this guideline.

4.3. Do not Relocate or Sell the 'Starting Place' Easily

Most operators of MCI conduct business in their original

residence in the early stage of entrepreneurship, thus, the starting place of a micro creative brand may be located in a relatively remote or inconvenient region, as a large work space is required (much larger than the residential space of most people). This study found that a large number of operators will try to relocate, and even sell their original workshop or exhibition space to move to urban areas, in order to access a greater consumer market and reduce their transport costs in the early stage of product marketing [19].

However, relocating or selling the 'starting place' represents a kind of crisis for MCI. The exhibition and sale of the products of MCI should preferably be conducted in a specific cultural or regional background, as the maintenance of a local or regional origin could affect and even improve the value recognized by customers. This maintains the origins and inherit nature of the brand. If this concept is ignored by a brand, it would transfer the valuable MCI business model back to the business model of a traditional industrial brand, which is only in pursuit of the reduction of costs.

A large number of operators of MCI keep asking 'how could I adjust my strategy to access consumer groups and markets, as well as maintain the starting place?' It is advisable that operators could temporarily rent or borrow a show room or counter space in a location with large flow of people for a certain time period (such as holidays or weekends) in the beginning. This would allow customers to access their brand and learn the characteristics of the brand. When customers would like to buy any product, they should be instructed to go to the starting place. In this way, customers may obtain an in-depth understanding of the brand due to specific cultural or regional characteristics, and thus, further recognize or even become loyal to the brand. There is a significant case for this guideline. A gourmet coffee farmer, whose coffee farm is 90 kilometers from the Hualien City, Taiwan, named Yuli. Originally the operator would like to sell her starting place for approaching the city market. When followed this guideline, the operator can keep her parents' house and progress the business.

4.4. Carefully Control the Increased Demands

This guideline relates to two aspects, including output control and control over the quality or appearance of the products of MCI. The main purpose of traditional marketing is to pursue greater market shares because a company still can obtain profits due to a large sales volume even if the profit is low. This is the nature for marketing industrial products. However, the products of MCI should be deliberately controlled with the main purpose of bringing the product value more prominence due to its rarity. To manage the product quantity into a rare rate is a specific strategy to maintain control through intentional resistance to demands. The operators of MCI must make their customers understand the reason for the rarity of the product, and be prepared to wait.

The traditional principles of marketing are to anticipate

customers buying products easily and in the case of increased demands by customers, additional products would be prepared as far as possible [8]. For products of MCI, operators must understand how to set-up a necessary obstacle when people are looking forward to products with eager expectancy, and maintain such obstacle. The greater the obstacles, the more eager customers will be. Such obstacles may be economic (selling price), cultural (know how to appreciate, wear, and use), operational (how to find the store), and time (it will take some time to obtain a product of MCI).

In the aspect of control over the quality or appearance of a product, this study found that some customers will give certain suggestions or opinions to the operators of MCI for product improvements and may even propose unreasonable requirements for modifying the product. For the purpose of traditional marketing, customer's demands should be prioritized. However, experts and scholars remind the operators of MCI that their original design, creation, and production should not be modified according to any customer's requirement, especially when such original design, creation, and production have been subject to careful considerations. Otherwise, the original design will be ruined. Only by following this guideline can help MCI to maintain consistent style of its brand, and guarantee its truthfulness, attraction, and even charm. The operators should stay true to themselves and not follow customer's requirements, which are not in line with the features and characteristics of the product. Most of the cases show that the aesthetics of a product would be decreased and also originality will be lost, if operators change the appearance or style of a product according to customer's opinions.

There is another significant case for the guideline 4.4 and 4.5. An aboriginal knitting bag maker who tries to make the knitting bags by seasons. Initially, there are some customers' requests for customizations. When followed, they caused other customers' complaints because the changes only suited for very few individuals. When the operator observed this condition, he changed back to his original form of product design, and made respects again for his MCI.

4.5. Produce Limited and Advanced Commodities, and Gradually Raise the Selling Price

By following the Guideline 4.4, Guideline 4.5 is an extended solution for 'output control'. Upon consumers' recognition of the products and brands of MCI, demand for products would increase gradually. When the Guideline 4.4 is applied (careful control of product output), many operators stated that if the 'demands for products' are real, we should respond to such demands because this will definitely affect the sustainability and profit of business. How to respond to the demand under Guideline 4.4? The operators of MCI should perform the following two steps: first, launch the next new advanced product in a limited quantity and raise the selling price; second, always set a predicted price higher than the actual selling price of a product of MCI. For Guideline

4.5, Step 1 is explained as follows.

Upon gaining control over the products of Profitable Core Trade by operators, certain customers may require to increase the outputs, especially when they failed to buy them. Meanwhile, the operators of MCI will find themselves in a dilemma: on one hand, profits will be increased if output is increased; on the other hand, the value of the product will be diluted due to increased output. When went through the condition deeply, it is understood that the rarity of the product will be relatively decreased when each customer buys the product, which will also affect the brand value of MCI.

To date, experts and scholars have proposed an operational solution to respond to the demands, which would not affect brand value relatively. First, the operators of MCI have to control the output quantity of their product in a certain time period with a certain range. If a batch of products are sold out, customers should be informed that such items would be unavailable due to constraints, but the next version will be launched soon and will be available for purchase. Operators should raise the selling price when launching the next version in order to make customers aware that the new version has incorporated new characteristics, new elements, and new techniques. Therefore, the selling price must be raised. Furthermore, this new version is still subject to a limited quantity. Increased demands could be satisfied by operating according to such process as the value of the product would be gradually increased. Moreover, various topics of advertisement could be continuously created for marketing. The above notions and processes show why the average price of MCI products should be raised continuously. They also indicate that operators must simultaneously improve the inherent value of their products and services.

4.6. Raise Predicted or Expected Price

The selling price of Profitable Core Trade products will increase gradually with the passage of time if the operators properly execute the Guideline 4.5. The operators of MCI can continue to conduct this final guideline if a positive rise in price is observed in order to achieve the possibility of sustainable development.

In traditional marketing, all brand operators try to attract customers with a low threshold price. Nonetheless, for the products of MCI, the threshold price rule should be broken because the value will be created if the commodity price, as predicted by consumers, is much higher than the actual selling price upon purchase. This is psychological warfare between price and value. This involves the concepts in two aspects: first, when the price of a MCI product is overestimated due to its unique creativity or cultural connotation, its consumers will feel honored. In particular, when a MCI product is given to someone as a gift, the recipient will also appreciate it because the price is overestimated. If a brand only wants to increase its sales volume and profits by launching products that are affordable

to common and ordinary people, it will quickly move farther away from the product range of MCI.

Second, it is necessary to launch certain threshold products to attract new customers. However, operating a MCI brand means that the strategy for developing new consumer groups have to be changed. The growth and existence of MCI should not rely on those pleasing customers who cannot afford the selling price of the products, but target existing consumer groups that resonate with the life style and cultural identity inherent in the growth of the global economy. On one hand, such existing consumer groups are willing to buy the products of MCI to reward themselves and improve their living standard or quality; on the other hand, they relatively want to show their unique taste, and reduce the use or purchase of industrial products. It is obvious that sustainable existence and development are likely to be achieved only when people who can afford the real price and pay equivalent consideration to the products of MCI.

5. Conclusions

Currently, for promoting and marketing the products of the Micro Creative Industry (MCI), there is still no concrete effect to be observed in former studies conducted in various countries. The operators of MCI should no longer rely on the traditional marketing principles and strategies to achieve constant development. As most of the firms were transferred from traditional manufacturing or craft industries, they are subject to the forms of Original Equipment Manufacturers (OEM) or Original Design Manufactures (ODM), and are unfavorable for their brand development. Thus, a new set of concepts in line with industrial characteristics must be formulated in order to facilitate these firms to implement their transformations.

By following the trend of digitization, the operators and managers of MCI have to adopt effective and novel strategies, such as selling limited edition of products, and gradually raising the selling price, to derive substantial profits. In fact, as consumers are located all around the world, the operators of MCI must seek opportunities to extend their exposures in a systematic and strategic manner to increase value.

This study proposes six marketing guidelines for MCI based on more than forty long-term case studies by counseling and interviewing the operators of MCI and experts in the relevant fields. More effective application and integration of the six guidelines will bring synergy for the development of MCI. It is expected that this article can provide a valuable reference for the academic community and operators.

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