Mermaids as market creators: Cultural entrepreneurship in an emerging practice

Sara Malou Strandvad
University of Groningen, The Netherlands

Tracy C Davis
Northwestern University, USA

Megan Dunn
Independent Researcher

Abstract
With the example of the emergence of professional mermaids, this article shows how primarily young, female enterprising performers developed a new aesthetic category, generated employment from it, and in that way created a market for their services and products. To conceptualize this development, the article employs the Callonian program in market studies into research on cultural entrepreneurship, highlighting that markets are constantly in-the-making and innovation processes cannot be ascribed to the activities of singular “hero figures.” This adds to the existing literature on cultural entrepreneurship by calling attention to collective entrepreneurial practices taking place on the fringes of the cultural sector.

Keywords
Michel Callon, cultural entrepreneurship, creative work, gender, market studies, mermaids

Corresponding author:
Sara Malou Strandvad, Department of Arts, Culture and Media, University of Groningen, Oude Boteringestraat 34, 9712 GK Groningen, The Netherlands.
Email: s.m.strandvad@rug.nl
Introduction

Ample investigations into folkloristic narratives from historical sources and contemporary culture research the mythological figures whose lower body is a fish tail and whose upper body resembles a mature human female (Hayward, 2017, 2018; Pedersen, 2015; Robertson, 2013). This article turns the focus from these fictitious figures to mermaids in real life. Since the early-2000s, mermaiding – the verb that practitioners across all gender identities use – has emerged and grown exponentially. Mermaiding is prevalent among cisgender females in developed nations, however practitioners include ciswomen, cismen, and people with LGBTQ identities who incorporate various racial, ethnic, and regional identities into their mermaiding. What unites them is involvement in an online amateur fan culture reflecting lived experiences of costuming, swimming, and being photographed mermaiding in and around water. While mermaiding constitutes a leisure practice for the vast majority of participants, pioneers who innovated a category of performance and forged a professional niche triggered the phenomenon. In their wake, a growing number of self-starters approach mermaiding as a full-time or supplemental occupation. This article focuses on these professional mermaids, asking how they created a market in the period from the start of mermaiding up to 2019.

Cultural entrepreneurship is defined in various ways in different fields of research; most commonly, it refers to how self-employed artists and the broader category of creative workers develop new creative content and create start-up businesses, aiming to make a living from them (Chang and Wyszomirski, 2015; Endrissat and Tokarski, 2017; Hausmann and Heinze, 2016). Whereas most of the literature on cultural entrepreneurship focuses on how difficult it is to generate a sustainable income from these businesses, this article returns to DiMaggio’s (1982) original coinage of the term, which highlights the field-creation that cultural entrepreneurship brings about. Rather than employing a neo-institutionalist or Bourdieusian perspective to conceptualize field-formations, we utilize an alternative theoretical tradition that defines cultural entrepreneurship as market creation. In the case of mermaiding, a heterogeneous network composed of independent professionals, an amateur community, and innovative products and services propelled the phenomenon. To conceptualize this development, this article employs vocabulary from market studies, more specifically the Callonian program that has become influential in economic sociology, which calls attention to how markets are made in open and collective processes where webs of entities are engaged in a particular activity (Cochoy et al., 2016). As Callon (2016) suggests, markets are not outside social relations and innovations drive competition and the development of new markets. Mermaids demonstrate this point: their invention of a new cultural scene happened in tandem with business creations around costumed self-display.

Mermaiding represents a non-institutionalized cultural phenomenon where some leisure practitioners seek to turn professional by generating new business and employment opportunities for themselves. In this respect, it resembles findings of studies about cultural entrepreneurship including filmmaking in Nollywood (Larkin, 2004; Lobato, 2010; Röschenthaler and Schulz, 2016), grime music in the UK (White, 2017; Willment, 2019), and fashion blogging internationally (Duffy, 2017; Duffy and Hund, 2015). This means that business practices “co-exist with, and increasingly draw upon,
huge amounts of amateur and semi-professional cultural activity, much of it existing in an ‘informal economy’” (Hesmondhalgh, 2019: 14; see also Lobato and Thomas, 2015). Mermaidings’ evolving cultural scene – consisting of individual start-ups as well as amateur practitioners and an online fan culture – facilitates comparison with the growing body of entrepreneurship studies that investigates hidden enterprise cultures in the informal economy (Williams and Nadin, 2012) and research about cultural entrepreneurship that arises under digital and deregulated conditions, developing niches for various forms of self-employment on the fringes of the cultural sector.

**Cultural entrepreneurs as heroes, struggling graduates, or amateur self-starters**

In the growing field of creative work studies, advanced across a range of humanities and social science disciplines, cultural entrepreneurship epitomizes a neoliberal and individualizing agenda promoting the idea of the enterprising self. This emphasizes how creative workers take on responsibilities for precarious and unequal work structures within the creative industries, often with distressing findings about mostly unsuccessful coping strategies involving self-exploitation and self-blame (Gill, 2014; McRobbie, 2015).

Meanwhile, the prevalent ideal of the economically successful cultural entrepreneur draws on the Romantic figure of the artist within the Western bourgeois tradition. Retrospective case studies in this mode investigate the careers of visual artists Damien Hirst and Ai WeiWei; film directors Lars von Trier, Pedro Almodóvar, and Nanni Moretti; jazz musician Chet Baker; and Michelin cook Ferran Adrià, using their life histories as illustrative cases of best practices (Alvarez et al., 2005; Bradshaw and Holbrook, 2007; Enhuber, 2014; Hjorth and Holt, 2016; Svejenova et al., 2007). These iconic cultural entrepreneurs – mavericks who challenged, refined, and overturned conventional practices within established fields of art – constitute exceptional examples that affirm a characterization of creative industries as winner-take-all markets, accorded both the trope of the heroic businessman and the myth of the creative genius. None of the retrospective individual case studies of successful cultural entrepreneurs has a female protagonist. This underlines the gendered character of the phenomenon, cements the male identity of the genius artist (Battersby, 1989), and reaffirms the “wholesome, positive and virtuous representation of the entrepreneur as a super-hero” who successfully brings great innovations into being *ex nihilo* (Williams and Nadin, 2012: 896).

Numerous empirical studies of creative work document discrepancies between these popular notions of romanticized cultural entrepreneurship and lived realities. A growing body of research in creative work studies shows instead how the figure of the autonomous artist comes to present a role model for flexible and self-reliant employment under neoliberal capitalism (Banks et al., 2013; Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005; de Peuter, 2014). Cases occupy diverse domains such as classical and popular music (Coulson, 2012; Haynes and Marshall, 2018; Scharff, 2017; Scott, 2012); media work in journalism, film and television, marketing, PR and advertising (Gill, 2002; Gill and Pratt, 2008; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; O’Brien, 2019; Rosenkranz, 2016);
social media (Duffy and Hund, 2015; Naudin and Patel, 2019; Nieborg et al., 2020); fashion design (McRobbie, 1998); craft (Luckman and Andrew, 2020; Naudin and Patel, 2020); and performance or installation art (Harvie, 2013; Kunst, 2015). This research highlights the precariousness of creative careers across a spectrum of fine arts and commercially driven creative industries (Galloway and Dunlop, 2007; Hesmondhalgh, 2019; O’Connor, 2010). Using the figure of the artist as a reference point across different domains means that insecure and challenging working conditions can be upheld and legitimized by the prospect of a future breakthrough; however, this insufficiently recognizes that individuals cannot tolerate precarity indefinitely. As British cultural studies theorist Angela McRobbie demonstrates in her seminal study of graduates from London’s Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, the singular case of world-famous alumnus Alexander McQueen (1969–2010) was repeatedly used by fashion journalists and other industry professionals to overshadow the less glamorous work lives of the vast majority of McQueen’s fellow graduates (McRobbie, 1998: 70f). Whereas McQueen’s case confirms the idiosyncratic storyline of breaking into the industry and changing it, the hardship that creative workers endure is often narrated along the same lines as a rite de passage that one has to go through to build up authenticity and symbolic capital (McRobbie, 1999). Yet this process risks being prolonged into a permanently transitional condition or an endless apprenticeship, not leading to a radically different state of affairs but a status quo of ongoing insecure temporary employment, under-employment, or cyclical unemployment (McRobbie, 2002). A number of real-time studies of the lived experiences of cultural entrepreneurs define and recruit their research participants as emerging from arts and culture programs – the so-called bohemian graduates – focusing on their transition into an over-saturated and challenging labor market (Ashton and Noonan, 2013). Studies with telling titles such as “From ‘Great Expectations’ to ‘Hard Times’” (Hanage et al., 2016) and “From Getting Started to Going Bust” (chapter 5 in McRobbie, 1998) point out how nascent cultural entrepreneurship often fails because creative graduates’ start-up businesses infrequently provide a sustainable living. Notably, studies of struggles and failed cultural entrepreneurship underline the persistence of gender inequalities (Conor et al., 2015; Gill, 2002, 2014; McRobbie, 1998; O’Brien, 2019; Scharff, 2017).

While research documenting precarity and inequalities in creative work is vital to unmask and draw attention to the lived realities of practitioners, it tends to reduce entrepreneurialism to a neoliberal ethos that legitimates these problematic conditions. Instead of pursuing a critical analysis of the discourse and technologies of the enterprising self – or choosing the opposite agenda of singling out and praising a few individuals as entrepreneurial heroes – this article addresses cultural entrepreneurialism by calling attention to market creation developed via multiple innovations made by practitioners who do not possess the socio-demographic characteristics of the iconic male hero figure. Mermaiding, we argue, exemplifies a cultural entrepreneurial activity carried out by participants outside traditional art, craft, and labor institutions. As with rodeo queens and cheerleaders, for example, young women engage in pursuits that are costumed, athletic, and emphasize being looked at (Shields and Coughlin, 2000) while reproducing what could be regarded as “a retrograde and racialized gender script” (Grindstaff and West, 2010: 159). These pursuits may be pejoratively judged as silly, ephemeral, and minimally
skilled, and thus subject to ridicule. From the outset, this pursuit is sidelined from both the genius artist and the successful businessman tropes that assume a priori that the cultural entrepreneur has to be an exceptional (cis-male) individual who has made a business out of an artistic practice. Yet, along with the exacting performative skills required and displayed, mermaiding shows that cultural entrepreneurship may be found in new, unorthodox, female-centered aesthetic phenomena.

To conceptualize cultural entrepreneurship as collective and heterogeneous processes of creating markets, this article employs an actor network theory (ANT) perspective drawn from Callonian market studies. This approach suggests that the development of markets does not follow any pre-established logic but should be considered as an ongoing collective experiment (Callon, 2009) wherein qualities of products are not pre-given but defined through discoveries (Callon et al., 2002). This means that processes of innovation are traceable, and do not need to be ascribed to a single individual’s activities retrospectively (Akrich et al., 2002). Rather than holding on to the idea of entrepreneurship as an individual achievement, innovations and the emergence of new markets can be considered effects of networks of heterogeneous elements, which may become stabilized, fail, or evolve unpredictably. Thereby, processes of composing new markets do not have to be described in terms of either individual agency or effects of social structures, but instead as configurations that are characterized by heterogeneity (Callon and Law, 1997) entailing both human behavior and agency of market devices (Cochoy et al., 2016) and intertwining marketization and social processes (Callon, 2016).

While this theoretical approach appears in studies about cultural intermediaries to describe how their work shapes markets through marketing (Maguire and Matthews, 2012; McFall, 2009; Moor, 2012), this article addresses how cultural entrepreneurs themselves take part in the building of markets. The intention is not to reinvent the hero figure of the entrepreneur while silencing marginal perspectives, which is precisely what early ANT was criticized for doing when focusing on prominent examples of heroic scientists and engineers (Star, 1991). Instead, specifically, the Callonian perspective recognizes agency distributed to a wider set of participants (engaged in making new markets) and supports consideration of cultural entrepreneurship as not only a matter of developing new creative content and setting up start-up businesses to monetize and live from this, but also a process of making a market for these businesses.

Data

The empirical foundation for this article lies in two interview-based studies that investigated the emergent category of mermaiding. One study, carried out by the first and second authors in 2016–18, investigated the specific case of aquarium mermaid performers (Davis and Strandvad, 2020). In this type of work, mermaids appear amidst the aquatic species of aquarium exhibits, thus adding an entertaining element that aims to enhance the experience of visitors, though at odds with the natural scientific mission of aquariums as institutions. For this study, interviewees were identified through online research, performances in the aquariums were observed by the researchers, and interviews were conducted in person in conjunction with site visits. This research was carried out at four different sites (the national aquarium The Blue Planet in Copenhagen, Denmark;
SeaLife Munich in Germany, which is a subsidiary of Merlin Entertainment; Denver Downtown Aquarium in Colorado, owned by the multi-brand dining, hospitality, entertainment, and gaming corporation Landry’s Inc.; and the privately owned L’Aquarium de Paris in France). Twelve performers were interviewed at these four sites (three in Copenhagen, one in Munich, six in Denver, and two in Paris) and interviews were typically several hours in length.

One interviewee in the second study described the work of aquarium performances in a large tank with fish habitat as “kind of like the mermaid holy grail” (Merman Jax, interview, 2017). Nevertheless, this study, carried out by the third author in 2017–19, took a broad approach to how the professional mermaid community arose during the 21st century. Because professional mermaid performing occurred simultaneously in Queensland and California, then quickly concentrated in the US, this study focused on California and Florida (as well as sites in Seattle, Baltimore, New York, Hawaii, and elsewhere), and traced the development of professional mermaids to several other nations (Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Singapore, France, Germany, and the UK). In total, 59 subjects were interviewed; initially, mermaids were approached via the online community forum MerNetwork and then others were contacted by means of snowball sampling. Most interviews occurred over Skype and typically lasted over an hour. Of the 59 interviewees, the majority (46 interviewees) are mermaid or merman performers, but the sample also includes two tail-makers, three underwater photographers, two filmmakers, one illustrator, and five academics involved in the mermaid community. This second study documents an expansive range of employment undertaken by mermaids, including as underwater models, actors, swimming teachers training both children and adults, event planners and party hosts, providers of destination tourist experiences, manufacturers of merchandise, YouTubers, and as performers in circuses and fairs, casinos, bars, and private pools.

While both studies garnered an understanding of the new aesthetic phenomenon of mermaid performances, neither had the topic of cultural entrepreneurship as its focus, nor were informants asked about this. Even so, several mermaid interviewees explicitly self-identified as entrepreneurs and many brought up the topic of how they set up and managed their own businesses. From this emic knowledge about entrepreneurialism, the analysis introduces an etic approach, conceptualizing the cultural entrepreneurship of mermaids as a matter of making a market.

**Mermaid performers as market creators**

Mermaid characters feature in live-action films such as *Queen of the Sea* (1918), *Mr Peabody and the Mermaid* (1948), *Splash* (1984), *The Thirteenth Year* (1999), the Australian TV shows *H2O: Just Add Water* (2007–12) and *Mako: The Island of Secrets* (2013–16), two Philippine TV series named *Dysebel* (2008 and 2014), as well as live performances at the Florida theme park Weeki Wachee Springs from 1947 to the present (Kokai, 2017). However, while the figure of the performing mermaid has a long history in filmed and live media, the existence of self-styled professional mermaids hireable for various kinds of live events commenced in the age of social media and was enhanced by it. New communication platforms facilitated the creation of a global
community, enhanced publicity, helped establish some mermaids as micro-celebrities, offered new revenue streams, and in that way enabled the creation of a new market (Cunningham and Craig, 2021; Senft, 2013).

Three moments are pivotal in the analysis of how mermaids created a market for work around their innovative cultural format. The market for mermaiding started with pioneering performers who invented the category of the professional mermaid and launched businesses, which demonstrates how the development of this new cultural format happened in tandem with various ways of monetizing it, and how the form-fitted tail became an essential device for establishing the phenomenon. In the second generation of mermaid entrepreneurs, differentiation happened among professional mermaids, globally through development of local markets, and through development of various ways of inventing and bundling income streams. Finally, the coexistence of an amateur mermaiding community and the business ventures of professional mermaids is mutually invigorating as well as a persistent driver of precarious work in a non-institutionalized informal economy.

**The pioneer generation: inventing the category and creating employment**

The origins of the freelance mermaid date to the early 2000s: the inaugural performer, time, and place are hard to pinpoint, however Hannah Fraser (Hanna Mermaid, active from 2003) suggests that she was the “first freelance [mermaid], making a job out of it” (interview, 2018). Like Fraser, Linden Wolbert (Mermaid Linden, active from 2005) worked as an underwater model and, on her own initiative, began shooting pictures while swimming in tails then publishing photos online. Fraser started mermaiding in Australia via the surfing community, became involved in ocean ecology activism, relocated to Los Angeles where she started working in film and television, and today she is a celebrity within the community, “the Beyoncé of mermaids” (Merman Blix, interview, 2018). Wolbert, who has an educational background in film and science, moved to Los Angeles to pursue her dream of creating wildlife documentaries. Through this work, she encountered freedivers (athletes who dive without scuba gear), and tried this herself using a monofin (both feet encased in one large stiff swim fin similar to a piscine or cetacean fluke). As she said:

> Then the lightbulbs just started going off, and the implications of what this could mean; the possibilities and the opportunities […] sharing the magic of the oceans with people. I thought, “Oh my gosh, this is it, what if I’m a mermaid,” and that’s really where it began. (Mermaid Linden, interview, 2017)

Wolbert created the ocean educational series “A Mermaid Minute,” funded through Kickstarter and distributed on YouTube, wherein she teaches children about marine ecology while in the guise of a mermaid. Furthermore, she works at children’s events, such as birthday parties, and in collaboration with the water sports brand Body Glove promotes her own line of mermaid monofins for children and adults, purchasable online and at the retail giant Walmart.
Alongside Hannah Mermaid and Mermaid Linden, other mermaid pioneers started appearing in the early 2000s. Melissa Dawn (Mermaid Melissa) received a freediving certification in 2005 then commenced mermaiding with sea creatures in situ. Marina Anderson (MeduSirena) established performances in aqua-burlesque shows (with and without tails) at the Wreck Bar in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, inspired by the aesthetics of the 1940s Hollywood film aqua star Esther Williams (1921–2013). Kazzie-Okelani Mahina (Mahina Mermaid), a freediver and model in Byron Bay, Australia, began mermaiding in 2004, and two years later launched her own brand of mermaid-styled neutrally buoyant monofins called Mahina Mermaid Fins for women and children. She explains how:

people all around me thought it was just whimsical, a bit crazy and I was ridiculed and mocked by many […] there was absolutely no such thing as a “professional mermaid.” No one had ever seen anything like it before” (interview, 2018).

The stories of these initial practitioners demonstrate that they acted as cultural entrepreneurs by inventing the category of the live professional mermaid – a new format of culture based on costumed self-display – and simultaneously enabled and began monetization of this new format by establishing a market for their work (Callon, 2016). This market manifested itself as a gig economy for mermaid performances, where independent professionals were booked for shows, as well as sales of material merchandise that grew into a viable income stream and marketing via online content production, which in turn generated an additional revenue stream for mermaids with large numbers of visitors on their personal websites. In that way, the initial performers managed to bring about further employment through their seminal performance work. They developed businesses in conjunction with their role as mermaid, and thereby defined a new cultural domain and outlined the contours of a new market.

In this process, the tail became the defining characteristic: a market device stabilizing the category of the professional mermaid and making this cultural format available for further explorations (Cochoy et al., 2016). As the tail was a necessary item for all mermaids, tails became a sellable product and tail-making a requested service. Tails became differentiated by myriad styles (varied by color, scale pattern, and fluke shape) and qualities derived from materials (heavy and expensive silicone, lighter and more durable latex, or highly flexible fabrics, each of which radically alters buoyancy). In that way, mermaid entrepreneurs not only developed the domain of mermaiding while creating income opportunities for themselves but also established a demand for additional products and services, thus generating work options for others.

Although difficult at first, validation of the activities of the pioneer mermaid performers happened through repetitions of hiring, payment, and display. Two important practices by highly skilled practitioners expedited mermaiding’s recognizability. Rather than only appearing in pools or shores where only their above-water appearances were visible, photographs of mermaids freediving in the ocean among fish and marine mammals instantiated the image of the magical mermaid “in real life.” Meanwhile, aquariums featured mermaids (sometimes tentatively and experimentally and sometimes as an ongoing promotion), which gave mermaids a spectacular stage where audiences could see their
shows, peering into a simulacrum of the underwater world. Mermaids were not accepted universally: they sometimes met staunch resistance, for example among some freedivers and aquarium biologists. This illustrates that the development of a new market consists of an open process where experiments are carried out to settle qualities of products (Callon et al., 2002), discovering which intrinsic affordances an innovation entails as well as which extrinsically defined value it may have.

The second generation: differentiating businesses and developing income streams

A second generation of mermaid entrepreneurs explored new directions. Katrin Gray (Mermaid Kat), a model, underwater model, and scuba and freediving instructor, established the first mermaid school in 2012, the Mermaid Kat Academy, which operates in pools in Germany and Australia as well as on cruise ships around Asia, complemented with an online shop selling mermaid tails and accessories. Since opening in 2011, the Sacramento Dive Bar in California has staged daily mermaid shows operated by Rachel Smith (Mermaid Rachel); she works full-time training and managing an ensemble of freelance mermaid performers (and guest performers) who all have other jobs alongside their work as mermaids. Stephanie Brown (Raina Mermaid) established Halifax Mermaids in Nova Scotia in 2009, and had a team of 16 part-time employees at the beginning of 2020, mostly booked for private events such as children’s birthday parties. Moreover, Brown works as a consultant in the mermaid industry, has self-published three books on how to become a professional mermaid, administers mermaid conventions, and makes money off others publishing her photographs, yet advised that “most of the money comes from working with kids […] so if you don’t like kids, this isn’t going to work” (Rainia Mermaid, interview, 2018). In contrast, Jack Laflin (Merman Jax), who started the entertainment company Dark Tide Productions in Los Angeles during the early 2010s after having been an independent contractor for several years, specialized in more lucrative corporate and nightlife events, especially for the LGBTQ community. Yet another trajectory is evident in Circus Siren Entertainment in Washington, DC, owned by Morgana Alba, an aerialist who became a professional mermaid; starting out in 2012 with corporate events in large venues, she manages a team that utilizes three portable tanks to offer various performance acts including mermaid shows.

The phenomenon of mermaiding grew as this second generation of professional mermaids developed markets beyond the epicenters of metropolitan Los Angeles, southern Florida, and the surfing mecca of Byron Bay Australia, launching their own new business activities in Canada, western Europe, the Philippines, Singapore, New Zealand, and later Vietnam, Thailand, Hong Kong, and Morocco. Contrary to the common perception of where the creative class thrives (Alacovska and Gill, 2019; Florida, 2002), mermaid practitioners were not connected to a creative hub at any of these local sites, but used a different grid of infrastructures to establish themselves as entrepreneurs, consisting of online resources; swimming pool, aquarium, and seaside access; and the entertainment and hospitality industries.

This second generation accentuates distinctions between performers, highlighting how imitation and differentiation go hand in hand (Callon, 2016: 26). Imitation occurs as
imagery and footage of professionals online inspires new mermaiding participants. At the same time, differentiation happens between enterprises as entrepreneurs build and operate their businesses in diverse ways, introduce innovations to distinguish themselves from others, and accentuate aspects of the range of activities that a professional can do. This develops each practitioner’s particular set of income streams and highlights how being a professional is not one thing but rather an umbrella term for a myriad of enterprising activities. In our research samples, second-generation mermaids and mermen carry out a variety of jobs: they work as underwater models, actors, and stunt performers; live-action underwater performers in aquariums, casinos, bars, resorts, museums, campgrounds, and in portable tanks staged at festivals and Renaissance fairs; and as featured artists and hosts at private and corporate events. Moreover, they are event planners for birthday, bachelorette, and corporate parties; swimming teachers training both children and adults in general proficiency, mermaiding fitness, and mermaid performance skills; providers of destination tourist experiences and portfolio workshops; designers, manufacturers, retailers, and promoters of merchandise; fabricators of custom mer-tail orders; and photographers and social media producers on YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook. Individual entrepreneurs may carry out only one type of work, but usually combine various income streams, including day jobs, to supplement mermaiding, underscoring that “being a professional doesn’t necessarily mean it’s your only source of income” (Morgana Alba, interview, 2018). This means that individuals carry out a range of activities, as veteran mermaid Linden Wolbert explains:

Being an entrepreneur, I mean the amount of plates I have spinning is kind of nuts. I have to maintain my costumes and do special effects work, sewing and seamstress work all the time. I have to stay in incredible shape. I have to eat well and exercise regularly. I meditate. I have to negotiate contracts. I have to design products. I have to be a jewelry maker for all the children; I make jewelry. I prepare all of the glitter tattoos. Everything I do for the parties, there’s a ton of prep involved. People have no idea how much time it takes to prepare for a party, then I actually do the party, then I have to clean up and repair everything after the party because there’s a lot of wear and tear. It’s a ton of work; it’s a ton of work. (Mermaid Linden, interview, 2017)

As this illustrates, mermaid performers prepare carefully and extensively for appearances. They manage contracts; write their own shows (i.e. draft narratives and compose choreography); train as athletes and rehearse as performers; design their costumes, make-up, and props; and many have experience with scuba and freediving protocols to ensure that they and others are safe in the water, all the while promoting themselves online through multiple social media platforms.

While the market for mermaiding remains in flux, the second-generation entrepreneurs managed to define the entities of the market, “both robust enough to stabilize a course of action and yet, flexible enough to (re)adjust themselves to local contingencies” (Cochoy et al., 2016: 7). By developing businesses at various sites, continuing to introduce innovations, such as teaching programs and portable tanks, and bundling income streams in various ways, the second generation accentuates the differentiation of mermaid entrepreneurs while at the same time stabilizing the phenomenon. In that way, the multiple
different activities and versions of the professional mermaid in the second generation cemented and expanded the market.

*The amateur community: symbiosis and sustained competition*

In parallel with the growing number of professional mermaids, a community developed around mermaiding as a leisure practice, gaining momentum especially since 2011 when the online community forum MerNetwork launched and the first annual Mermaid Convention occurred in Las Vegas. Subsequently, regular conventions developed in Belgium, California, Michigan, North Carolina, and Australia, with mermaid swimming competitions held in China, Egypt, Tunisia, the UK, and Germany. Increasingly, amateur mermaids with sufficient means have options for purchasing various tails and pursuing learning programs guided by more skilled practitioners at conventions and workshops, while aspirants with lesser means can follow DIY-tutorials to make their own tails and tune into podcasts that feature interviews with mermaid professionals. This two-sided formation has been productive and mutually beneficial as amateur mermaids represent customers and generate employment for professionals, while the work of professionals inspires amateurs to develop their own practices, sometimes entailing transiting into the realm of professionals. As Stephanie Brown (Raina Mermaid) explains: “I’ve really seen the drastic changes. I mean it’s gone from a handful of people to now there’s the big factories that sell mermaid tails and anybody can buy one […] and you can’t go online without meeting another professional mermaid” (interview, 2018). The porosity between amateur hobby practices and entrepreneurial business activities has led to innovative advancements in technology (particularly tails) and production of knowledge in a vibrant participatory culture. This increased amount of output and visibility enhanced the culture’s prominence and economic development potential, benefiting amateurs and professionals alike. Symbiotically, the mermaiding community developed in unison with the entrepreneurship of professionals and, likewise, the social world of mermaiding appeared in tandem with the business activities of professional mermaids (Callon, 2016).

While this dual formation of the domain of mermaiding has been highly productive, it is not without tension. The amateur community explicitly avows an understanding of everyone being beautiful in their own way, and progressively represents difference, embracing and showcasing diversity in mermaids’ sexualities and gender orientations, ethnicities, body sizes, and ages. On the other hand, the professional realm of mermaiding often projects a more conventional ideal of cis-female beauty. Professional mermaids in our interviews state that this is held in place by clients’ insistence on hiring performers whom they find attractive, for example resembling well-known mermaid figures from popular culture such as Ariel in the 1989 animated Disney hit *The Little Mermaid*. Mermaid performers informed us about clients who expressed disappointment when a black or Asian mermaid showed up at gigs; this resonates with the critical public debate in 2019 about the casting of African-American actress Halle Bailey for the role of Ariel in the upcoming live-action *The Little Mermaid*. While this demonstrates that a racialized mermaid stereotype still exists in mass culture, it also shows that this stereotype is contested and challenged by presentations of mermaids of color; in the
mermaiding community this development towards diversity embraces not only ethnicity but also plus-size mermaids, older mermaids, mermen, and LGBTQ mermaids.

Commercialization in itself did not arise as a controversial topic in our interviews, but other market problems were acknowledged. In contrast to amateur cosplay, where fidelity to mass media characters is at a premium, among professional mermaids de facto copyright of individual performers’ mermaid characters constitutes a controversial topic, as plagiarism can be devastating to the singularized image of any mermaid. In markets with multiple mermaid entrepreneurs there can be fierce competition for pool party commissions, and practitioners may undercut each other both financially and by skimping on safety. What constitutes being a professional who works with the public (especially children), such as having insurance, undergoing background checks, and having certification in first aid, CPR, and lifeguarding, is insufficiently regulated. Both the difficulty of prosecuting copyright violations and enforcing health and safety regulation demonstrate that mermaiding remains a non-institutionalized domain, lacking an educational ladder, professional associations, government support or regulatory programs, venues created specifically for this aesthetic form, and long-lived conventions about its integrity. Existing as a cultural format does not necessarily uplift the image of mermaiding or stabilize its overhead costs as long as mermaiding skills are unrecognized and practices are unregulated. As Adrienne Wilson (Mermaid Enakai Fairyfish) put it:

I’ve heard the parents be like “oh, it’s just a costume” or they’re negative because they don’t understand what we’re doing. They think “oh, this is a college graduate that has a degree, and she’s just sitting around taking pictures for money while I have to work 40 hours a week?” Like, I get what they’re thinking, but they don’t understand the work that it still takes, the marketing, it’s— you’re an entrepreneur, you’re a self-starter, it’s a business. (Interview, 2018)

Lack of acceptance, compounding problems with commercialization, destabilizes mermaiding and undermines it as a viable market. On the other hand, lack of regulation may create opportunities for market entry and persistence.

**Cultural entrepreneurship: more than a matter of identifying the entrepreneur**

As the economist Peter Kilby wittily suggested 50 years ago, research on entrepreneurship can best be compared to Winnie the Pooh and his friends’ concept of the elusive heffalump: “a rather large and very important animal […] All who claim to have caught sight of him report that he is enormous, but they disagree on his particularities” (Kilby, 1971: 1). Like heffalumps, cultural entrepreneurs have been identified from a distance, in retrospect; tautologically successful, their cultural entrepreneurship rests on artistic achievements, economic performance, and formation of new domains. Meanwhile, however, real-time studies of the entrepreneurship carried out by creative workers consistently demonstrate cultural entrepreneurs’ precarious working conditions, persistent inequalities, high risk of business failure, and how the ethos of the neoliberal enterprising self legitimizes and sustains this situation. This, too, is the entrepreneurial heffalump.
This article considers mermaiding in conjunction with the theoretical approach of Callonian market studies, and thereby decenters cultural entrepreneurship away from retrospectively drawn singular cases of undeniably successful individuals. By doing so, the proposal is not simply to substitute a female protagonist for the charismatic male artist entrepreneur, or to align a feminized entrepreneurial subject with post-feminism and neoliberalism (Gill and Scharff, 2011). Instead of attributing collective efforts to an individual – singling out a hero(ine) responsible for the emergence of mermaiding – we suggest that over the last two decades mermaiding illustrates how cultural entrepreneurship can be conceptualized as a collective, heterogeneous, and open process of developing innovations and simultaneously creating markets for these pursuits (Akrich et al., 2002).

Introducing the Callonian perspective from market studies into the analysis of cultural entrepreneurship emphasizes how a variety of agents are involved in making innovations, and how innovations do not necessarily enter an existing market but may create and shape a market (Callon, 2016). The history of mermaiding exemplifies how generating a market for a new cultural format is an ongoing process wherein entities are not defined a priori but constituted relationally and continually as new products and services are introduced, discovered and tested, then potentially stabilized. In that way, this Callonian perspective on cultural entrepreneurship highlights how activities distributed across geographical distance, yet linked through the sharing of iconic images on social media platforms and the emergence of websites such as MerNetwork, feature in innovation processes while they constitute and promulgate a heterogeneous network. With this perspective, the multiple actors involved in processes of cultural entrepreneurship can be acknowledged and the symbiosis between multiple entrepreneurial professionals and an amateur community can be described as a matter of simultaneously pursuing the creation and monetization of new formats. This perspective highlights the creation of markets as a vital component of innovation processes, but also necessitates thinking about how to generate and sustain viable markets, highlighting that stabilization is a key issue. Barriers to entry are reduced by the proliferation of amateur practitioners with access to both bespoke tail fabrication and DIY alternatives, while market differentiation is achieved (including for men, LGBTQ, and body-diverse entrepreneurs) by innovating beyond the children’s party market. Still, full-time employment is difficult to achieve and inherently volatile.

Conclusion

Professional mermaids exemplify 21st-century cultural entrepreneurs operating in an unregulated cultural landscape where they develop new formats that blur distinctions between high and low culture, promote live performances via online presence, and mix contributions from amateur communities with individual business start-ups. To conceptualize the cultural entrepreneurship of professional mermaids, this article employs Michel Callon’s approach in market studies, which provides a framework for understanding the activities of cultural entrepreneurs as a matter of establishing innovations and inventing a market. The analysis of cultural entrepreneurship of mostly young female mermaid performers demonstrates how they forged a new cultural format, created businesses by continuing to innovate this format, and established a market for their activities.
The first, pioneering, generation of self-styled performers invented the category of the professional mermaid as they developed this new cultural format and simultaneously monetized it. An anchor-point in defining the category of mermaiding was the tail, which became a market device that functioned aesthetically (by categorizing, without trademarking, what is considered mermaiding) as well as financially (by developing customers’ need for tails and demand for mermaid performances). The second generation advanced mermaiding by spreading it globally, introducing professional mermaids into multiple new local markets. Among the second generation of mermaid entrepreneurs, a number of new businesses were developed, inspired by the pioneers, but at the same time introducing a range of differentiations such as mermaid swimming schools, portable tanks, and LGBTQ-oriented performances. In that way, this second generation brought forward innovations and differentiation while also stabilizing and consolidating the category of mermaiding. As the phenomenon of mermaiding grew, reciprocity mutually rewarded and inspired professionals and the amateur community, with amateurs animated by professionals and professionals having amateurs as customers. Yet amateurs also provided competition to professionals by imitating their looks, and potentially undercutting the market’s viability, for example by not meeting implicit safety standards. As mermaiding remains a non-institutionalized phenomenon, its overlap with the informal economy of the amateur community means that the market is continually destabilized. In that way, the history of how the mermaiding market arose adds a new chapter to the hunting of the entrepreneurial heffalump: not only have the mermaids-as-entrepreneurs given a mythical creature form, they have also consolidated understanding about it by showing how heffalumps are brought forward by the collective efforts and imaginations of a wider group of friends.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD
Sara Malou Strandvad https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1570-0814

Note
1. It is sometimes referred to as mermaidry, artistic mermaid performance, or being a water ballerina. This article follows practitioners’ convention of utilizing both mermaid and mermaiding inclusively, no matter what the practitioner’s identity position or gender-styled markers.

References


Author biographies

Sara Malou Strandvad is Associate Professor in Arts Sociology at the Department of Arts, Culture and Media, University of Groningen. A sociologist whose research concerns creative work and production studies, her research has been published in Cultural Sociology, Visual Studies, Cultural Studies, and elsewhere.
Tracy C. Davis is Barber Professor of Performing Arts at Northwestern University. She specializes in performance theory, historiography, and research methods. A book on the development of activist practices among nineteenth-century liberals and radicals is in progress.

Megan Dunn is an art writer and the author of Tinderbox (Galley Beggar Press, UK). She has a Masters in Creative Writing from the University of East Anglia and a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Auckland University. She is Head of Audience Engagement and Education at City Gallery Wellington and well-known in New Zealand as a visual arts commentator.