

KNOWLEDGE SHARING IN ECOPRINT SMES: INNOVATION AND SUSTAINABILITY IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract: This study explores the lived experience of knowledge sharing among ecoprint artisans in South Sulawesi, Indonesia, and its implications for innovation and sustainability in creative small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Using a phenomenological approach, in-depth interviews and participant observations were conducted with local artisans to uncover how tacit and explicit knowledge are exchanged and interpreted within their communities of practice. The findings reveal that ecoprint knowledge is predominantly tacit and embodied, transmitted through observation, imitation, and shared experience rather than formal documentation. Knowledge sharing occurs within strong community networks grounded in trust and solidarity, facilitated by both physical workshops and digital platforms. Openness in sharing, especially of failures, acts as a catalyst for collective innovation, while the process itself reinforces environmental, economic, and cultural sustainability. This research contributes to extending knowledge management theory beyond corporate settings by demonstrating that in creative, sustainability-oriented SMEs, knowledge sharing functions not merely as a managerial process but as an ethical, communal, and generative practice that sustains both innovation and heritage.

Keywords: *knowledge sharing, innovation, sustainability, ecoprint, sme*

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1. Introduction

The global economic landscape today is profoundly shaped by the agility and resilience of small and medium enterprises (SMEs), which serve as key engines of job creation, economic diversification, and regional development (Malesu & Syrovátka, 2025). Within this dynamic, the creative industry has emerged as an increasingly vital sector, contributing significantly to global GDP while reinforcing cultural identity amid growing homogenization (Mahrinasari et al., 2024). Among its most compelling subsectors is ecoprinting, a form of sustainable textile art that uses natural materials, such as leaves, flowers, and bark to create patterns and colors on fabric. Beyond a production technique, ecoprinting represents a paradigm shift toward more conscious modes of consumption and creation, emphasizing ecological responsibility, sustainability, and artistic uniqueness (Thakur et al., 2025).

The success of ecoprinting SMEs is deeply intertwined with a rich and often tacit body of knowledge encompassing botany, natural chemistry, artistic composition, and sustainable business practices. This reliance on tacit knowledge, however, exposes a critical yet

underexplored vulnerability: how can such vital, predominantly uncoded knowledge be effectively shared and cultivated to foster collective innovation and ensure the long-term sustainability of this creative ecosystem?

The field of knowledge management has long asserted that an organization's ability to create, share, and leverage knowledge is a primary determinant of its competitive advantage and innovative capacity (Drucker & Noel, 1986). Foundational frameworks such as Nonaka and Takeuchi's (1995) Socialization, Externalization, Combination, and Internalization (SECI) model offer a dynamic understanding of how tacit (experiential, intuitive, hard-to-articulate) knowledge is converted into explicit (codified, transferable) knowledge. Yet, much of this scholarship originates from studies of large, structured corporations in technology and manufacturing sectors contexts characterized by formal hierarchies, R&D departments, and codified operational systems.

Applying these corporate-oriented models to creative, craft-based SMEs like ecoprinting presents an academic challenge. Such enterprises operate under fundamentally different logics: their organizational structures are flat and flexible, innovation often arises through serendipitous experimentation, and learning unfolds through social practice, mentorship, and apprenticeship. In this context, knowledge sharing is not merely a strategic transaction but a socio-cultural practice rooted in trust, reciprocity, and collective identity (Canales García & Sarracino Jiménez, 2025; Guo & Ahn, 2023). Consequently, applying traditional knowledge management frameworks without critical adaptation risks misrepresenting how value is genuinely created and sustained within these communities.

Although previous studies have recognized the role of knowledge sharing in promoting innovation and sustainability among SMEs (Ceptureanu et al., 2025; Krara et al., 2025), most still concentrate on manufacturing, information technology, or modern service sectors (Maskudi et al., 2024; Salehi & Sadeq Alanbary, 2024; Zhang et al., 2024). Few have examined how knowledge sharing unfolds in creative industries grounded in local wisdom, such as ecoprinting an inherently hybrid domain that integrates artistic, cultural, and ecological dimensions (Wulansari et al., 2024). In these communities, knowledge circulation often occurs through social networks and collaborative practices rather than formal mechanisms, making social capital, trust, and solidarity the central enablers of learning (Mayasari & Chandra, 2020).

To address this multifaceted gap, this study aims to conduct an in-depth phenomenological exploration of the lived experience of knowledge sharing within the ecoprinting SME community. The phenomenological approach is deliberately chosen to capture the richness, tacitness, and meaning-laden nature of artisanal knowledge. This inquiry seeks not only to describe how artisans share tacit and explicit knowledge within their communities of practice but also to understand how they interpret these collaborative acts as catalysts for innovation and business sustainability.

Theoretically, the study will contribute to the knowledge management literature by providing a contextualized and nuanced understanding of sharing practices in non-corporate, creative, and sustainability-driven settings. Practically, it will offer actionable insights for artisans and entrepreneurs on how to strengthen their communities of practice and preserve local knowledge systems that enhance both creative innovation and socio-environmental resilience. The urgency of this research thus lies in two interrelated goals: first, to bridge the gap between conventional knowledge management theories and the lived realities of value-based creative enterprises; and second, to document how tacit knowledge transforms into sustainable innovation within ecoprinting SMEs, a sector that symbolizes the balance

between art, culture, and ecology. Ultimately, this study seeks to illuminate how knowledge sharing operates as a foundational mechanism for strengthening competitiveness while fostering social and environmental sustainability within the global creative economy.

2. Research Method

This study employed a qualitative methodology guided by a phenomenological approach, designed to deeply explore the lived experience and ascribed meaning of knowledge sharing among ecoprint artisans. The research was situated within the rich textile craft ecosystem of South Sulawesi, Indonesia, a context chosen for its deep-rooted traditions in natural dyeing and artisanal production. The sample size was determined by data saturation, where no new themes emerged from subsequent interviews. A final sample of 5 senior artisans, central to the knowledge sharing processes in their communities, was selected through purposive sampling. This method ensured information-rich participants, with the sample size being determined by the point of data saturation, where no new essential themes emerged from subsequent interviews.

Primary data were gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, a method chosen for its efficacy in eliciting rich narrative accounts of personal experience. These interviews were supplemented by participant observation in workshops to provide contextual richness and triangulate findings. Data analysis followed a phenomenological reduction process, including the identification of significant statements, meaning clustering, and synthesis of essential themes. The trustworthiness of the findings was meticulously ensured through established techniques such as member checking and thick description, ensuring credibility and transparency of the findings, while the entire research process adhered to strict ethical standards, including informed consent and the guarantee of participant anonymity.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Results

Table 1. Informant Profile

No	Code	Gender	Age (year)	Years of Business	Location
1	ARA	Female	54	3	Gowa
2	MR	Female	50	7	Soppeng
3	UC	Male	39	3	Makassar
4	RP	Male	32	5	Makassar
5	CS	Female	50	7	Soppeng

Sources: Primary Data (2025)

In-depth analysis of data, interviews, and participant observation with 5 ecoprint artisans in South Sulawesi revealed four interrelated central themes. These four themes collectively form the essence of the lived experience of knowledge sharing within their community.

Theme 1: Reading the leaf and feeling the fabric: The dialectic of tacit knowledge in everyday practice

This first theme captures the essence of how artisans experience ecoprint knowledge as something inherent in the body and senses, not simply information that can be written down. Participants consistently described their key knowledge as a feel in the hand or intuition that is difficult to verbalize. This tacit knowledge includes the ability to read the color potential of

a leaf simply by looking at its texture, sensing the right moisture level for the fabric for mordanting, or intuitively knowing the ideal steaming duration based on the day's weather. The process of sharing this knowledge is described as a challenging dialectic between physical demonstration and the limitations of language.

Efforts to transfer this tacit knowledge almost always occur through informal apprenticeships and direct observation. A senior participant explained,

"I could just tell a newbie, steam for two hours. But that means nothing. She has to see for herself how the steam rises, how the color of the leaves begins to bleed into the fabric. My hands know when to stop. I can't write it down in a book; she has to stand beside me, feel the heat, see the color. Her knowledge is transferred through her eyes and taste, not through her ears." (*MR, 50 years old*)

This quote illustrates that for artisans, the experience of sharing tacit knowledge is an intimate, contextual process, and heavily dependent on physical presence and shared experience.

Theme 2: Shared kitchen and WhatsApp group: Community solidarity as a sharing space

The second theme highlights the experience of knowledge sharing that does not occur in a vacuum, but rather within a community framework founded on solidarity and trust. Participants do not view each other as pure competitors, but rather as fellow practitioners in a relatively new craft within South Sulawesi mature textile ecosystem. This sharing space manifests itself in two main forms: physical and digital. Shared kitchen, the term participants use for collective workshops, serves as the primary venue for socialization and technique demonstrations. Meanwhile, the WhatsApp group serves as a backbone for quickly sharing information, such as photos of experimental results, supplier contacts, or exhibition information.

Trust is the foundation of all these interactions. Artisans feel safe sharing failures or new discoveries due to the strong norm of reciprocity.

"In the WhatsApp group, if someone receives new leaves from their village, they always take a photo and ask, has anyone tried this? Then others will comment. There's no such thing as stealing their knowledge. We're all pioneers together. If our friends' products are good, the reputation of South Sulawesi ecoprinting will also rise. We progress together, that's the point." (*ARA, 54 years old*)

The experience of sharing knowledge, then, is experienced as a communal practice that strengthens social bonds and collective identity, rather than as an individualistic transaction of knowledge.

Theme 3: Failing together, succeeding together: Innovation as a natural consequence of openness

This theme captures the importance artisans attach to knowledge sharing as a primary catalyst for innovation. Innovation in the ecoprint context is not seen as the result of formal R&D, but rather as a natural consequence of a culture of openness and collective experimentation. Interestingly, participants emphasized the importance of sharing stories of failure more often than success. A failed experiment by one artisan can spark ideas for others to try different approaches, ultimately leading to new techniques or color combinations. This innovation process is both incremental and collaborative.

"I used to be frustrated because the color of teak leaves kept fading. I shared it in the group, complete with photos. Someone suggested trying vinegar, but it didn't work. Someone told me to change the water, but it didn't work. Then, a friend suddenly said, try steaming it longer than usual, instead of boiling it. I tried it, and it worked. We all use that technique now. So, innovation was born from one person's problem, but it became a problem for us all." (*CS, 50 years old*)

For the participants, knowledge sharing is a collaborative process of trial and error, where risks are shared and successes are celebrated as collective triumphs. This removes psychological barriers to experimentation, which in turn accelerates the pace of innovation across the community.

Theme 4: Preserving heritage, nurturing the future: Knowledge sharing as a sustainability practice

This final theme explored the deeper meaning participants associated with knowledge sharing, namely as a practice to ensure sustainability across three dimensions: environmental, economic, and socio-cultural. Knowledge sharing is not just about the "what" (technique) or "how" (process), but also about the "why" (purpose). Environmentally, they shared knowledge about identifying and wisely using local plants without damaging the ecosystem. Economically, sharing knowledge about pricing strategies, digital marketing, and business management was seen as a way to ensure that this craft could provide a viable livelihood for all community members, not just a select few. However, the deeper meaning lies in the socio-cultural dimension. By sharing, they felt they were preserving and passing on a new heritage, adapting local wisdom about natural dyes (which already exists in the Bugis weaving tradition) into modern craft forms. MR summarized it reflectively:

"When I teach young people, I don't just teach them how to arrange leaves. I tell them about the trees, about how we should be grateful to nature. This is our way of preserving our ancestors' heritage of natural dyes, but with a new style. If I keep this knowledge to myself, ecoprinting here could die with me. By sharing, we nurture the future." (*MR, 50 years old*)

Thus, the experience of sharing knowledge is interpreted as an act that goes beyond short-term business interests; it is an investment in ecological sustainability, economic resilience, and cultural heritage for future generations.

3.2. Discussion

The primary objective of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experience of knowledge sharing among ecoprint artisans in South Sulawesi and to uncover the meaning they attribute to this practice in relation to fostering innovation and enhancing business sustainability. The in-depth analysis of the artisans' narratives, culminating in the identification of four central themes, namely, the primacy of tacit knowledge and embodied learning, the crucial role of community solidarity, the perception of innovation as an emergent outcome of openness, and the framing of knowledge sharing as a fundamental practice of sustainability, provides a rich empirical foundation. This discussion systematically interprets these findings by integrating them with established theoretical frameworks and recent scholarly discourse, illuminating how the unique context of a creative, craft-based, and sustainability-oriented SME ecosystem offers profound nuances and powerful extensions to conventional knowledge management paradigms.

In addressing the first research question, which sought to understand how ecoprint artisans experience the process of sharing tacit and explicit knowledge within their community of practice, our findings unequivocally underscore the overwhelming dominance of tacit knowledge transfer. Artisans consistently articulated their most valuable insights not as codified rules or procedures, but as embodied sensations and intuitive understandings—a feeling in the hands, a reading of the leaf, or an innate sense of the right steaming duration. This experiential knowledge, deeply rooted in direct interaction with natural materials and processes, finds robust theoretical grounding in (Polanyi, 2006) seminal work on tacit knowledge. Polanyi's assertion that we know more than we can tell resonates profoundly with the artisans' struggle to verbalize their craft, highlighting that the essential value lies in the implicit, rather than the explicit. This perspective is further enriched by more contemporary discussions on embodied cognition in creative practices, where knowing is actively constructed through sensory engagement and motoric skill (Groth Camilla, 2017). The artisans experience suggests that learning in such a domain is not simply about acquiring information, but about the education of attention (Vickhoff, 2023), where the body becomes the primary instrument of knowing, internalizing patterns and rhythms through repeated, mindful action. This contrasts sharply with sectors where explicit knowledge can be easily digitized and transmitted (Yeboah, 2023).

Consequently, our findings reveal a knowledge conversion dynamic that significantly reconfigures (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995) influential SECI model, challenging its often-assumed balanced cyclicity. While all four modes of knowledge conversion are theoretically present, the ecoprint artisans experience is overwhelmingly centered around socialization (tacit-to-tacit conversion). The shared kitchen emerges as the quintessential space for this mode, where knowledge transfer occurs through direct observation, imitation, and shared practice. An apprentice learns by watching the master's precise hand movements, feeling the fabric's texture, and internalizing the subtle cues that signal optimal processing stages. This is not merely an alternative mode of learning; it is the fundamental, most effective, and most valued pathway for knowledge acquisition. The other SECI modes, particularly externalization (tacit-to-explicit), are often experienced as problematic. Artisans struggle to articulate their feelings into explicit instructions, suggesting that attempts to codify this knowledge inherently reduce its richness and contextual efficacy. This underscores a critical theoretical contribution: in highly tactile, intuitive, and craft-based industries, the socialization quadrant is not merely one stage among others, but the gravitational core of knowledge creation, around which other conversions orbit and from which they derive their meaning and substance. This dominance of tacit knowledge and socialization distinguishes it from the more formal knowledge management approaches studied in technology-driven firms (Natek & Lesjak, 2021)

The second theme, shared kitchen and whatsapp group directly addresses the experience of knowledge sharing within a communal context, highlighting that it is deeply embedded within a vibrant Community of Practice (CoP). Our findings strongly corroborate (Wenger, 1998) foundational conceptualization of CoPs, where shared engagement in a domain, mutual relationships, and a common repertoire of practices drive collective learning. However, the unique contribution here lies in foregrounding the exceptional role of trust as the indispensable bedrock of this CoPs efficacy. The artisans' narratives reveal not just cognitive trust (belief in competence), but, more profoundly, affective trust, a genuine sense of care, camaraderie, and shared fate. MR's assertion that we advance together, encapsulates this deep-seated belief in collective progress. This level of interpersonal trust is paramount in

facilitating the open exchange of vulnerable knowledge, such as detailing failed experiments, admitting uncertainty, or asking for guidance. In an environment where tacit knowledge is paramount and easily hoarded, such trust becomes the ultimate enabler, reducing perceived risks and fostering a culture of mutual support that transcends competitive concerns. This observation aligns with Matsuo (2025) who emphasize the criticality of trust in fostering knowledge sharing in collectivist cultures. The emergence of digital platforms like WhatsApp groups also extends the physical shared kitchen into a continuous virtual space, facilitating what (Leonardi, 2015) terms ambient awareness. These digital platforms are not merely tools for efficient communication; they serve as dynamic extensions of the social fabric, reinforcing affective bonds and ensuring the CoP's vitality beyond direct physical interaction. This continuous, low-level engagement maintains social cohesion and keeps the knowledge flow active, thereby enhancing the community's overall social capital (Kim, 2021; Putnam, 2000). Our study thus reinforces and expands the CoP literature by demonstrating how deep affective trust, coupled with seamless digital integration, creates a uniquely resilient and generative learning ecosystem, particularly relevant in craft-based communities navigating a digital age.

Moving to the second research question, which explores the meaning artisans attribute to knowledge sharing, the third theme, failing together, succeeding together offers a powerful and counter-intuitive perspective on innovation. For these artisans, knowledge sharing is not merely a mechanism for incremental improvement; it is the very essence of how innovation emerges. Their experience suggests that innovation is not a planned, top-down outcome but an emergent property of a complex adaptive system, where autonomous agents (artisans) interact through shared norms of openness. Critically, the meaning of sharing extends beyond successes; the open articulation of failures is paramount. A failed experiment, when openly shared, ceases to be a private cost and transforms into a valuable public good. It acts as a collective learning data point, preventing redundant errors and spurring divergent thinking that leads to new solutions. Ibu Aisyah's narrative about collaboratively solving the bleeding teak leaf problem vividly illustrates this distributed innovation process. This contrasts with traditional innovation models that often focus on formal R&D or intellectual property protection (Chesbrough, 2023). Our findings align with (Hersleth et al., 2023) who argue for the importance of informal learning networks in driving innovation in creative SMEs.

This unique approach to innovation has profound implications for understanding absorptive capacity (Kang & Lee, 2017). While absorptive capacity is typically conceptualized as a firm-level capability to acquire, assimilate, transform, and exploit external knowledge, our study highlights the robust functioning of collective absorptive capacity within this CoP. The community's willingness to openly share both triumphs and setbacks significantly accelerates the collective learning cycle. Individual absorptive capacity is amplified and subsumed within a broader community-level capability, where the distributed intelligence of the network drives faster problem-solving and knowledge application. This collective absorptive capacity is particularly potent in mitigating the inherent uncertainties of working with natural materials and processes. Therefore, this research contributes to the absorptive capacity literature by empirically demonstrating how, in tightly-knit, trust-based communities, individual absorptive capacities are not isolated but synergistically combined, transforming individual failures into collective successes and accelerating systemic innovation through shared learning (Yildiz et al., 2024). This form of innovation is thus democratized and communal, deeply embedded in the daily practice of sharing, rather than being the exclusive domain of designated innovators.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, the fourth theme, preserving heritage, nurturing the future reveals that knowledge sharing is imbued with a powerful normative and ethical meaning that transcends purely economic instrumentalism. For the ecoprint artisans, sharing knowledge is perceived not merely as a strategy for business growth or innovation, but as a fundamental practice of sustainability across multiple dimensions. MR and CS reflective statement that by sharing, we are nurturing the future encapsulates this deep conviction. The practice of sharing is explicitly linked to ensuring: ecological sustainability (disseminating responsible harvesting practices and non-toxic mordants), economic resilience (sharing business acumen to empower all members), and social-cultural perpetuation (mentoring the next generation to preserve the craft's heritage and adapt it for contemporary relevance). This integrates the three traditional pillars of sustainability (environmental, economic, social) and adds a crucial cultural dimension, echoing the broader discourse on cultural sustainability (Purvis et al., 2019).

This finding challenges a significant portion of the management literature that often frames knowledge sharing as a value-neutral, strategic asset to be managed for competitive advantage. Instead, for the ecoprint artisans, knowledge sharing is a deeply moral and social obligation, constitutive of their identity as responsible producers and community members. This aligns strongly with the theoretical underpinnings of sustainable entrepreneurship (Binder & Belz, 2015) and ecopreneurship (Rodríguez-García et al., 2019), which emphasize embedded social values and environmental purpose alongside profit motives. From this lens, knowledge sharing becomes a primary mechanism for expanding the real freedoms and capabilities of individuals within the community. By sharing techniques, artisans enhance their capability to produce and earn a livelihood. By sharing business acumen, they expand their capability for self-determination and economic agency. By sharing ecological wisdom, they expand their capability to live in a way they value in harmony with nature. Our study, therefore, contributes an empirical case that enriches the sustainable entrepreneurship literature by demonstrating how knowledge sharing is not just a strategic choice, but a deeply embedded, normative practice that directly contributes to the expansion of human capabilities and the realization of a holistic vision of sustainability. The essence of their enterprise lies not just in the beautiful products, but in the generative, shared process itself, forming a virtuous cycle of communal growth and perpetuation.

4. Conclusion

The findings reveal that knowledge sharing is not only a technical or managerial process but also a social, cultural, and moral practice deeply embedded in the artisans' daily lives. First, the results show that the most important knowledge in ecoprinting is tacit and embodied. Artisans rely on intuition, sensory experience, and physical practice, such as reading the leaves or feeling the fabric. This type of knowledge cannot be easily written down or transferred through manuals; it is learned through observation, imitation, and participation. Therefore, the process of knowledge sharing happens mainly through socialization (tacit-to-tacit transfer), rather than formal documentation. This challenges traditional models of knowledge management that emphasize codification and suggests that in creative, craft-based industries, direct experience and shared practice are the most powerful learning mechanisms. Second, the study highlights that knowledge sharing is sustained by strong community relationships and trust. The artisans shared kitchen workshops and WhatsApp groups act as spaces for both social and learning interactions. Mutual trust encourages members to share not only successes but also failures without fear of competition. This finding supports the

idea of a community of practice, where collaboration and empathy play a crucial role in maintaining collective learning. The digital extension of this community through social media strengthens continuous interaction and allows knowledge to circulate beyond physical meetings. Third, innovation in the ecoprint community emerges naturally from openness and collaboration rather than formal research. When artisans openly share both achievements and mistakes, they collectively learn and experiment, leading to new techniques and creative outcomes. This process demonstrates a form of collective absorptive capacity, where knowledge is acquired, interpreted, and applied collectively. In this way, innovation becomes a shared social process rather than an individual or competitive one, showing that openness and trust can significantly accelerate creative development. Finally, the artisans view knowledge sharing as a form of sustainability practice. It supports environmental care, economic resilience, and cultural continuity. Sharing information about sustainable plant use, eco-friendly dyeing methods, and fair pricing ensures not only business survival but also ecological and cultural preservation. For the artisan's, sharing knowledge is a moral responsibility, an act of gratitude to nature and their community. It helps sustain traditional wisdom while adapting it to modern creative industries. Overall, this study contributes to understanding knowledge management in creative and sustainability-oriented SMEs. It shows that innovation and sustainability are achieved not through competition or formal systems, but through empathy, trust, and a willingness to share. In ecoprint communities, knowledge sharing is both a means and an end, a process that creates learning, fosters innovation, and preserves cultural heritage. In essence, the artisans' practice illustrates that sustainable innovation is rooted not in technology or capital, but in human connection and shared purpose.

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