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Designing under uncertainty: professional identity and market discipline in creative industries

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Abstract

Creative industries are characterised by a high degree of uncertainty about how new products, embodying subjective aesthetic attributes, will be received in the market. While scholarly attention is increasingly given to how contracting practices, firm and industry structures have evolved in response to such uncertainty, the personal experiences of creative workers have been less studied. The role of professional identity in individual efficacy and personal resilience has been well-explored, but predominantly in stable, tightly regulated and organisationally well-defined fields such as medical services. By contrast, this study examines the experiences of fashion designers and graphic designers, two fields widely-recognised for specialist expertise but unregulated, intensely competitive and characterised by high uncertainty. The study finds strong support for Caves' (2000) contention that the 'nobody knows' effect - the fickle character of market reactions to creative products - is indeed a common source of ontological angst for the designers studied. However, this is attenuated for fashion designers by team-based work and the frequency of product releases. Graphic designers, by contrast, are less socially-situated, with less professional mutual-assurance and scope to share the psychological burden of perceived failures. Graphic designers also face additional identity challenges from the more fluid boundaries of their professional fields owing to digitisation. The study finds little evidence for a hypothesis, drawn from Caves' (2000) 'art for art's sake' notion, that designers regularly struggled with compromises between commercial imperatives and their aesthetic sensibilities. Rather, most have developed a professional identity that enabled them to feel fairly at ease with realising, in Caves' terms, 'contracts between arts and commerce'. Yet incorporation of market measures of success into one's professional identity also compounds experienced uncertainty, and designer temperament and narrative tactics will impact personal professional resilience under those conditions.

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Introduction

Creative industries, classically defined as the industries which have a production function with artistic creativity as a key input in the production process, and with an art product or a creative product as the main output, emerged as a defined sector some twenty years ago. Creative industries have since gathered increasing attention from scholars, media and policy-makers alike. This is in part because there is a rising recognition of their economic significance, and partly because the creative industries are often thought to complement urban and regional renewal policy goals, are relatively low-polluting, and have intrinsic cultural cache for many stakeholders. This sector encompasses independent artists, performing arts, music, film, media, architecture and design, advertising, photography and crafts and it is imbued with a set of distinct characteristics, naturally varying depending on the specific creative field, but on a whole diverges significantly from other industries (Caves, 2000; Hesmondhalgh, 2007).

Creative industries have partly led, and are partly a product of, major economic changes over recent decades. Whereas products used to differentiate and compete based on utility and objective specifications, the widespread dissemination of technologies of quality control in mass production, and faster capabilities for emulation of industrial products, has seen sustained falls in production costs and rising average quality. Together with the increase in off-shoring of remaining (but diminishing) labour-intensive elements of mass production from the 1990s, the imperative to promote 'value adding' became more salient in both business and public policy discussions (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). Companies increasing came to compete through the subjective differentiation of their standardised products - customer perceptions and experiences - rather than objective product attributes. Whilst this has had its influential critics, such as Klein (2002), aggregate consumer welfare has been much enhanced, and seen consumer expenditure increasingly diverted to services, giving rise to the so-called 'experience economy' effect, and also created new demand for products that are differentiated by distinctive material, form, concept and origins. This has ultimately led to a recognition of creativity as constituting '*the decisive source of competitive advantage*' (Florida, 2002: 4), and also entails an important epistemological shift in the understanding of value.

Specifically, the creative industries are characterised by deep ambiguity and uncertainty as opposed to more traditional industries where goods are utilitarian and often comparable based on measurable standards (Lampel, Lant & Shamsie, 2000). Although creative actors or enterprises might have access to substantial amount of data from the past, the extrapolation of such knowledge far from guarantees success. Rather, with regards to market success, predictability in these industries remains very low - a point that Caves (2000) has famously named the '*nobody knows*' property. Additionally, creative actors themselves are subject to tensions as they are catering to two seemingly paradoxical imperatives; economic viability and the need to constantly create new products, genres and formats (DeFillippi, Grabher & Jones, 2007). The creative process is far from straight forward and the management of said process is therefore not viable on a command-and-control basis (Lampel, Lant & Shamsie, 2000).

This has profound implications for the organisation of work in the creative industries, and is a frequent reason for failure by more traditional industries enterprises that venture, through expansion or acquisition, directly into the creative industries. Moreover, for all firms that need to 'add value' to their product line-up, they face challenges in adapting established managerial practices and organisational cultures to working with 'creatives', either within the boundaries of their own enterprises or across firm boundaries as procurers of design services or collaborators with creative enterprises. Caves' (2000) seminal account of the creative industries identified seven dimensions across which creative industries could generally be differentiated from other industries, of which the most salient for this study are the aforementioned '*nobody knows*' effect, and what he referred to the '*art for art's sake*' dynamic. By this Caves was referring to the high level of intrinsic motivation of many artists in the cultural industries, which meant that their primary motivation was not financial, with complex implications for business. Whilst high intrinsic motivation implies less need for monitoring, as in the command-and-control hierarchical firm, financial incentives were also less likely to be effective, and professional identity much less aligned with the interests of employers and clients than their own cultural and creative reputations.

This research tests empirically the extent to which graphic designers and fashion designers exhibit professional identity dilemmas in facing commercial

imperatives that might require them to make significant compromises in terms of their own aesthetic judgement.

Caves' framework was developed principally with a view to explaining the distinctive contracting practices, and organisational features at the firm and industry level for what we might classify as the 'cultural industries': music, visual and performing arts, literature and cinema. He gave less direct consideration to 'design', which often involves creative workers working to a brief from a client outside the creative industries. The exception to this is fashion design, which functions rather like the music industry or publishing in that specialised enterprises develop new creatively differentiated products directly in consumer markets. This suggests the possibility that such relationships - directly client-centred, or mediated through the larger scale of retail markets and distribution systems, may impact on the extent to which designers' professional identities are reconciled to commercial compromise. This, in turn, raises open questions about the broader organisational contexts in which creative work is carried out, professional identity affirmed, adapted or suppressed. The creative industries are at the forefront of changes in the nature and organisation of work, in what has come to be referred to as 'the unbundling of the firm', and the rise of 'free agent' or 'gig' economy. Taken together with the increasing importance of subjective, relative to objective, forms of knowledge in an era of 'selling sensibility', a study of the professional self-identities of fashion and graphic designers may elucidate broader insights into the phenomenology of contemporary creative work. Academic and managerial interest in decision-making under uncertainty also has sharply increased, making insights from the creative industries of wider value. For our purposes, the primary focus is the uncertainty around the market performance of new creative products, and the implications for designers' professional self-identity when confronted by unexpected failures.

The paper is structured as follows; we first examine the historical phenomenon of mass professionalisation, and its inter-dependence with enormous growth in higher education systems. We look specifically at the rise of design education as a precursor to the discussion of our empirical investigation of designers' professional identities. We then explore conceptual issues around professional identity. We then introduce the analytical strategy and have a brief section on how the data was collected, following by our

findings. In the discussion section we reflect on how different imperatives inform professional identities and constitute boundary conditions. We conclude the paper by suggesting avenues for further research.

Background: Professionalisation and design education

One of the key socio-economic transformations of the twentieth century was mass professionalisation; specialised knowledge-oriented professionals rising from some four percent to twenty three percent of the US workforce during the century (Baker, 2014: 133-134). This was associated with mass participation in much-enlarged higher education systems, and a massive expansion in the scale and reach of professional qualifications and institutional ecologies of professional certification (Wilensky, 1964; Abbott, 1988). The model for such developments was provided by long-established professions, with their own distinctive identities, such as medicine and law and has been extended and deepenebed to many ancillary and emergent fields (eg. see McGillivray, 2008; Lloyd & Hallet, 2010). In addition, a growing cadre of general professionals, having an identity stake in a particular field of knowledge (see Abbott, 2001) that they had studied formally at tertiary level, who went to work for enterprises, which for the first seven decades of the 20 century, generally became of increasingly large scale. Baker (2014: 152) posited that underpinning professionalisation of the workforce historically has been a symbiotic process between education, technology, and job skill upgrading. "... the schooled employee of the schooled occupation in the schooled workplace does not just come about because of changes in the individual's skill sets; it is broad cultural change occurring over a considerable time period." (Baker, 2014: 128). Baker (2014) argues that often ignored, by both human capital theory and 'education as myth' critics of the growth of higher education systems, is "... the power of education as an institution to not only train and allocate students, but also to transform understandings and expectations for peoples' capabilities, the nature of work, and even what constitutes usable knowledge for economic value." This perspective accords with our understanding of the transformational character of the creative industries as an economic phenomenon, and raises interesting questions about how individuals' self-concept, and the horizons of one's professional potential, are

transformed through educational experience. We will return to those issues in the theoretical discussion of professional identity that follows below.

The status of design, as fields of knowledge to be taught in higher education institutions, as opposed to be learned through apprenticed practice - as architecture once was - is still contended (Romans, 2005). Many have seen this as a Faustian bargain, with the intellectualisation of design resulting in both the divorcing of design from craft, applied practice, and materiality, and its distancing from subjective virtues such as beauty (Coyne & Snodgrass, 1991). Pable (2009: viii), reflecting Schon (1983), stated that when design practices "...came under the wing of the university setting from their former place among the artistic crafts, a trade-off was made: conformance to the objective method of knowledge discovery was accepted in return for the embrace of legitimacy." Discourse of 'design sciences' became more prevalent; subjective knowledge (such as intuitive aesthetic judgement) was diminished and even stigmatised. The reason for this may not lie solely in a fetish of 'scientism', although the postwar American intellectual environment has been sometimes described as such. The modern university was an overtly meritocratic institution, increasingly committed in its processes to fairness and - over time - accountability. Subjective knowledge judgements were vulnerable to challenge on grounds of procedural objectivity. Furthermore, the gradual shift of human capital formation (training of all kinds) from an on-the-job training (OJT) apprenticeship model to educational institutions, and regulation of such training systems, had both efficiency and equity imperatives, in addition to market demands for an increased supply of such skilled human resources. Apprenticeship-based learning was vulnerable to the tactical withholding of professional status, so as to continue to exploit the trainee as cheap labour.

The shift to educational institutions also saw once-trades 'elevated' through their association with the discourse of design. Sign-writing, illustration, technical drawing, for instance, could be folded into design programs, with open questions professional identities and whether any meta-identity associated with being a designer takes hold over time. Furthermore, the question of creativity as an educational goal, the pedagogical means to realise that, remains vexed even today (Andreason, 2005, Boden, 2004; Turner, 2006, Sawyer, 2003). The long-standing influence of a conception of creative

genius, salient since the era of European romanticism from the late 18th century, is a factor in this. Weisberg (1993) provided an influential exploration of the myth of the creative genius and its implications. Such notions effectively 'black-box' creativity, enhancing the aura surrounding the artist or designer, but also discouraging many from creative pursuits and even compounding self-image as not being 'the creative type' (Brown, 2009; Kelley & Kelley, 2013). Fisher's (1997) survey of designers found however that a substantial majority thought both that creativity could be learned, and that techniques existed to enhance their own creativity. This affirms a place for design schools, but also reflects a somewhat auto-didactic orientation amongst designers, and which manifests as a continuing self-education orientation tied to practice.

Concerns about the intellectualisation of design were expressed from its earliest institutionalisation in the higher education academy. In the late nineteenth century William Morris and other influential adherents of John Ruskin expressed wariness about the very discourse of 'design', seeing it as both a cause and symptom of the diminished status of handiwork and material. The architect W. Lethaby, for instance, expressed concern about the crafts being destroyed by a system that divorced design from work. (Forty, 2000: 138-140) Forty's (2000: 138) account of architecture's entry to the academy suggests the dematerialisation of architectural practice was complete: "... what architects learned in their training ceased to be 'practice' and became 'principles', in other words a wholly dematerialised and cerebral version of the art; and what students 'produced' from their training was not 'architecture' but drawings - commonly referred to as 'designs'. The separation between architecture as a mental product - which was taught - and architecture as a practice engaged with the material world, now emerged for the first time as a visible fact of life." Design became a "pure and self-sufficient activity within itself"; the category 'design' "... allowed architecture to be taught, rather than learned by experience." (emphasis in original, Forty, 2000: 140; see Rowe, 1987 on architecture as design thinking and processes).

Yet certain design fields continued to be widely taught in a more applied, craft-based way, by a variety of other educational institutions; with rather less intellectualising of design. In both fashion design and graphic design a range of educational institutions came to provide training in many countries. In Japan, for instance, elite art schools offered full degree programs; often

more conceptual and art-centred rather than applied and limited explicitly commercial orientation. However, Japan's best known fashion program - Bunka Fashion School - expanded rather late into offering degree courses and its non-degree three year applied program remains the preferred offering for those students keen to be a designer. It retains a strong applied, material and technique-centred orientation, reflecting its origins as Japan's first substantial Western-style sewing school, despite iconic designers such as Rei Kawakubo, Issey Miyake and Yohji Yamamoto being graduates. Prominent foreign fashion schools, which Bunka ranks alongside, are generally considered to be stronger in design per se, while not as grounded in precise material practice.

Despite Forty's account of the intellectualising of architectural design, other critics have accused design schools of generally failing to conceptualise and articulate design principles. Levy (1990: 45), for instance, argued that within higher education institutions there was an "... embarrassing condition, where just about anyone is considered eligible to teach design.", resulting primarily from "... the almost total lack of constitutive knowledge of the subject, object, and project dimensions in the existing design paradigm." Levy argued that: "Design, as a distinct discipline, has rarely sought to develop knowledge constructs within which the activities of thinking, planning, creating, and producing artefacts could be shown to be tributary to epistemic principles." Design was, in this view, still conceived by many as material object-centred tacit-knowledge, grounded in a nineteenth-century craft tradition. If there is indeed truth in Levy's assertion, it raises the possibility that academies may be producing graduates with vocationally-oriented identities, already less inclined to struggle with an 'art for art's sake' tension with commercial imperatives. Indeed, Levy (1990: 43) writes of 'socially accredited problem-solving', and goes on (p 45) to be critical of what he saw as the too-tight coupling of design education and industry, even in the late 1980s.

We see, in the diverse ecology of educational institutions offering fashion and graphic design-related education in a number of countries, grounds for hypothesising that there simultaneously have been tendencies formally to downplay subjective elements in appraisal of student work, while also pursuing industry orientation. Education institutions are in competitive markets themselves, and students' choices obviously will have a somewhat

calculative vocational orientation. Pable (2009: viii), writing on the status of interior design as a field of study and profession in the United States, wrote of there being two distinct publics that needed to be addressed. One was public institutions, "... a public that prefers to validate objective knowledge in lieu of subjective knowledge" (2009: x), deeply wary of any discussion of beauty. The other, a larger general public who, through their own market behaviour, showed an increasing desire for well designed and beautiful objects and spaces (see also Norman, 1988). The regulating public - state institutions and related stakeholders - privileged objective knowledge over sensibility - effectively compelling educational institutions to follow suit. This, for Pable (2009: x), was clearly evidenced with the development of licensing of interior design practice and professionals in US jurisdictions, which privileged health and safety codes and other objective elements at the expense of subjective elements of practice. Obviously, neither fashion design nor graphic design have these kinds of functional imperatives. Rather, we anticipate a different objective logic will be imposed on subjective design, especially in the fashion field, and from the industry itself: market performance.

Theoretical framework: professional identity work

Professional self-identity is enabling. For Crossley & Vivekananda-Schmidt (2009: 603), it "... is a pre-requisite for accepting the responsibilities and obligations of the professional role and it can be key to developing the confidence to work as a qualified professional." A professional identity is an individual's subjectively constructed image of who he/she is as a professional (Slay & Smith, 2011). Professional identity, more so than organisational identity, implies the particular type of work individuals do and typically denote a specific type of training or set of skills that one possesses (Pratt et al., 2006; Stockhausen, 2005)). Consequently there is an emphasis on 'doing' as a differentiating factor from other people and an underlying notion of being unique as a result of what you can do. Professional identity can also be viewed as a distinctly social identity allowing for individuals to become part of a certain community based on a shared methodology or certain type of work (Van Maanen & Barley, 1984). However, whether it is viewed as a role identity or social identity, professional identity is of great importance in that it organises

the subjective ontology (see Caza & Creary, 2016). It constitutes a key way for individuals to assign meaning to themselves and thus shapes attitudes, affect, work and behavioural guidance (Siebert & Siebert, 2005; Ibarra, 1999; Duttgon, Roberts & Bednar, 2010). Among other workplace studies, Arthur *et al* (1989) showed that professional identification had a positive effect on performance outcomes. It has also been found to determine moral decision-making and behaviour (Leavitt et el., 2012). Professional identity noticeably plays a key role in shaping behavioural as well as psychological processes and its workplace significance is palpable. Beyond behavioural effects, a strong identification with a profession also serves to reduce uncertainty and provide self-enhancement (Hogg & Terry, 2000). Grey (1994: 482) notes that, for better or worse, occupation has become a major source of identity and may be 'a place where the self may become that which it truly is or desires to be' (see Bauman & Raud, 2015).

Professional self-identity is a state of mind, fundamental to the development in professionalism in an individual and community of practice, with direct consequences for individual professional efficacy. Yet its development is also dependent on those with authority in training and subsequent employment situations giving the nascent professional meaningful opportunities for such growth. Crossley & Vivekananda-Schmidt (2009: 603) examined, through a survey instrument, the impacts of delayed development of this state of mind in those transitioning from medical school students to a clinical context. They observed how excessive restrictions on 'peripheral participation' in professional activities could result in problematic delays in the formation of professional self-identity. Authority can grant or with-hold opportunities for the junior professional to develop their own authority, in terms of both their own self-construct, and in the eyes of peers and seniors. Professional self-determination and economic identity are at stake (Antonova, 2014) Ibarra (2000) wrote of *provisional selves* and experimenting with professional identities. We posit that healthy self-narrative tactics, following Giddens' (1991) dictum that "a person's identity is not to be found in behaviour...but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going", at times of perceived professional setbacks may contribute to individual resilience. This is not only personally important: families and societies as a whole have considerable resources invested in the education and career development of knowledge-rich workers.

One way to conceptualise identity is through the theoretical notion of Identity Work (Svenningsen & Alvesson, 2003). Identity work, as opposed to a more essentialist conceptualisation, emphasises the dynamic nature and the 'on-going struggle' associated with answering the question: *Who am I?* (Brown, 2015). As such, identity work is the work we engage in when we continuously maintain, strengthen or modify the constructions that are productive in terms of having a sense of coherence and distinctiveness. Svenningsen and Alvesson (2003) argue that in any given organisational context, individuals will strive for comfort, meaning and integration as well as a seek to integrate/balance one's definition of self and a work situation. Organisational discourses, role expectations and narrative self-identities are all part of this identity work.

This study employs two ways to explore identity work. The first is through narratives centring around working practices. For instance, stories of interesting work tasks, work situation where the interviewee felt successful or had a feeling of failure. The second way is through reflexive meetings with others, ie stories of interactions with other professionals from similar industries and dissimilar industries alike. These narratives constitute the unit of analysis (object of analysis) and are considered voices in what Hazen (1993) refers to as the polyphonic organisation. They continuously create meanings whereby professionals in and around organisations articulate and negotiate individual, group and organisational self-perceptions. In this particular context, the stories expressed in an interview situation are considered a performance and thus the narratives are identity work.

Method and Data

Method

The empirical material for this study has been collected through a series of ethnographic observations and semi-structured narrative interviews in the period November 2017 - September 2018. Specifically, 16 interviews have been conducted with an equal gender mix of designers all based in Tokyo and in the age range 27-37. Given the relatively tight networks of designers in Tokyo, all interviewees were accessed based on snowball sampling (or referral sampling) allowing not only for access, but also heightening the degree of trust

between the interviewer and interviewee allowing for a candid exploration of topics that may otherwise have been off limits. For the sake of operationalising the construct centred on subjective knowledge (aesthetic judgement) centred design, and in order to gauge the level of homogeneity among designers, this study focuses on two specific types of designers: fashion designers and graphic designers.

Narrative analysis

The collected narratives are analysed thematically (see Riessman, 2005), while paying additional attention to the plot and discursive strategies how these relate to various actors (Czarniawska, 2004). All empirical material has been transcribed in NVivo12 and subsequently coded into a number of first-order categories such as emotion, career and education. These descriptive categories were then collapsed or expanded depending on population. We have worked iteratively with the empirical material refining the categories into more analytical concepts (such as ownership, imperative and tensions) and these form the basis of the findings and analysis.

Limitations

As in the case of all research endeavours, this paper has limitations. Our sample size hardly allows for the production of generalisable knowledge, and the snowball sampling technique may unpredictably bias our findings. However, it does open a window of exploration into a previously understudied field and our hope is that it may inspire further research.

Findings

The commercial imperative

'*When I was young and designing a controller told me "we have to sell and you are a designer, not an artist!". I really agreed with that and I still do. Cause if you are an Artist you just do whatever you want and try to find someone to buy your stuff. But in the fashion industry there is a market and there is shop and employees sell it. So we have to make it sell.*' (Fashion Designer)

Contrary to expectations, we find less evidence, in our particular sample of fashion and graphic designers, of the 'art for art's sake' effect, experienced

as the pain of artist aspirations foundering on the rocks of hard commercial reality. The anticipated tension was not evident as often assumed in popular critical accounts of commercial imperatives.

All designers narrated themselves as different from artists, but particularly in the case of fashion designers, the very explicit differentiation between being an artist and being a designer entailed a clear value on the ability to command a positive market response and co-workers often perpetuated this perception and even policed this imperative as a boundary condition. Strikingly, the degree to which commercial success was important to fashion designers became clear in their respective work practice narratives of success and failure where commercial success would be a source of prestige, peer recognition and positive career effects.

"There was a situation when I worked for Babylon and I made a really casual and easy design and nobody expected it would sell really well and I didn't think that way either. But it actually sold a lot more than we thought and for many weeks it was the top selling piece in the shops. We had to re-order and re-order and re-order many times. Because of this I became pretty famous inside the company - a lot of people said "oh you are the one who did that design, it was great!". Later when I was interviewing for another job (...) they asked me what I did that sold the most and I told them about the piece and how much it sold and when I described the design they say "oh I remember that piece, that sold amazingly well". So they remembered the design and that was cool." (Fashion Designer)

Given the rather distinct absence of an art vs commerce tension, the respondents naturally did not adopt any strategies to accommodate (as previous studies have elucidated (Eikhof & Haunschild, 2007; 2008). This reconciliation of art and commence is, rather, appearing to be an integral part of the professional identity of fashion designers and, more modestly, for graphic designers too.

Team player vs lone wolf & 'Nobody knows'

Our data suggests that fashion designers predominantly work in teams where other designers are present and that graphic designers tend to be more solitary in their work-style – sometimes by choice and sometimes not. This constellation has profound effects in our narratives and is particularly evident

in the dealings with uncertainty. Uncertainty - in this context uncertainty of market performance – was a salient theme among most designers in our sample and thus supportive of Caves (2000). Fashion designers, however, experience a higher perceived frequency of failure (for well understood reasons associated with higher output, work scope and measurable success criteria) whereas graphic designers, despite encountering it pretty rarely, seemed less resistant to the prospect of perceived failure.

'*A while back I had to design this one piece and it was supposed to produce a lot and sell a lot. So it was my responsibility to make it sell a lot. I made the design and we all talked about it in the team and all thought it was good. So I chose the fabrics and we talked about that in the meeting and everybody said it was good. Then it became a sample and everybody involved said "This will sell a lot!". So when everybody said that, I thought that was gonna happen and I felt relaxed and good about it being produced in large numbers. But when it actually got in the shops, it didn't sell at all. Nobody expected that. Everybody thought it would sell well, but it didn't sell at all. That time I felt a little bit like I failed. But I don't think it's all my fault because we talked about it. Even though I was the person in charge of the design, I asked a lot of peoples opinion, I checked last year sales of the corresponding design, I talked to shop assistants and the controller so I did a lot of research in the company. But yeah, I fucked up.*
Did anybody scold you for that?
No no, nobody said anything. It happens to everyone' (Fashion Designer)

This story of work failure along with several other accounts illuminates the total acceptance of uncertainty as basic work premise for the fashion designers. When being physically close to colleagues (typically situated by the same desks), the role identity is continuously reinforced through informal chat and the continuous interfacing with industry peers both serve as to reinforce ontologies of design work, bolster the perception of role of the designer and crucially also constitute mutual reassurance or "hedging" of responsibility. In this instance the fashion designer as 'a team player' characterised by collective responsibility emerges, leading to significant resilience toward potential failure.

'*I really prefer working where there are other designers so I can consult them whenever I am in doubt or want another opinion. When I am alone sometimes I think too much about problems and I become unable to solve them. It's easier with other designers around.*' (Fashion designer)

Graphic designers, as represented in our sample, do not have the same opportunities to share responsibility and therefore have much more at risk. They tend to own failures as well as success, and typically express stronger emotional feedback to failure.

'*When you are responding to a brief from a new client it is very hard to know if you are doing the right thing or not. It's like, sometimes people just don't like what you do. That can really hurt*' (Graphic designer)

In terms of professional identity, boundary conditions are hardly policed in the case of graphic designers – by peers and subjects alike. Consequently, graphic designers often struggle with self doubt, imposter syndrome and anxiety due to a lacking shared ontological narrative. This may compound uncertainty about how to progress a career.

'*I feel like I am at a bit of a crossroad at the moment. I mean everything is going just fine, but I feel like I don't have any particular field of expertise. It's fine to be more of a generalist I think, but I can't call myself an expert in brand design or an expert in UI/UX design. I am just thinking a lot about that at the moment. I just don't feel that I have any deep level of knowledge in any of those areas. I feel like I know the basics. For example, I have done a fair bit of brand identity design, but I don't think I know a lot about branding. If you someone on a project of brand identity design, I think it's obviously very valuable to know a bit about the brand strategy side as well or about different brand architectures.*' (Graphic designer)

Although a more fluid identity has its costs it also enables graphic designers to continuously re-invent themselves and even transition to related fields with relative ease. One respondent would seamlessly switch from "graphic designer" to "visual artist" to "business consultant" depending on the given social context and argued that this flexibility allowed for him to further his ambiguous career.

Discussion

In this final subsection we focus on our findings from a comparative perspective and discuss implications with regards to theory and practice. We also suggest explanatory models, conclude our findings and offer perspectives

for future research.

Firstly, we find ample evidence supporting the 'nobody knows' effect (Caves, 2000) and approach it through a prism of professional identity theory. Up until now it has been examined almost entirely from the perspective of managing business risk, through project/product portfolio mix, firm and industry structure (vertical and horizontal integration), and contracting perspectives (bundling, risk sharing with distributors etc.). Subsequent empirical research will give still greater attention to the uncertainty around successes and failures, to the socially-situated dynamics of professional identity reaffirmation around success and failures, especially given the theoretical presumption that a strong identity provides judgmental certainty to the individual professional (Hogg & Terry, 2000).

The great uncertainty associated with the 'nobody knows' effect had very different impacts in our two groups of designers. In the face of said uncertainty, fashion designers showed remarkable resilience and we attribute that to several factors: a clearly defined and policed professional identity, strong professional identification and a highly institutionalised field. Fashion designer informants generally reported a stable professional field with little role ambiguity and a clear division of labour. The very organisationally embedded roles were characterised by distinctively supportive social proximity that curiously allowed for a salient attribution bias; in case of success the designer would claim ownership whereas in the case of failure, the collective responsibility became key to the narrative. This, we argue, is a central mechanism through which resilience is narrated and embodied.

Consistent with Caves' (2000) identification of a 'motley crew' effect, and a distinction between nonetheless required 'hum drum' and creative work, some designers expressed frustration with organisational requirements to undertake the former as well as the latter.

> '*it's too much to help the sales at the shops. I was hired as a designer, not as a shop assistant. You know, as an employee, after I became* 35 *I have experience and I still have to do that stuff [help in shop]. It really makes me feel like a student in the company sometimes and that I am wasting my time.*' (Fashion designer)

Lastly, the digitisation of the fashion industry has yet to fundamentally disrupt the design practices of the industry that are still tied to the materiality

of fabrics, the particular possibilities of form somewhat unique to each fabric, and the longstanding 'analogue' practice of designing with various materials and tools.

Graphic designers, on the other hand, showed a significantly more fluid understanding of what their creative and professional domain is, both in their self-narratives and in their objective past work experiences. Their work practices were less stable and significantly more solitary – although informants may initially understand themselves as being an illustrator, commercial artist or graphic designer, the digitisation of practice made slippage into web design, then to user interface design, and into photography and videography unsurprising. Graphic designers in the study showed many signs of doubt and personal uncertainty, if not outright anxiety, about the shifting boundaries of the field, client expectations, opportunities, the frontiers of one's technical expertise (aesthetic judgment is more readily extendable), and the individual professional identity, self-narrative and professional personal branding. The prevalence of ontological angst among them constitutes a powerful argument in the debate surrounding, an often romanticised idea of, the professional life of digital nomads. This angst, however, may in some instances represent a powerful driver in continuous learning, which was a salient trait among the more successful graphic designers.

With regards to agency and structure, the professional identities diverge and empirically represent two distinct positions. In the case of fashion designers, the structure is largely dictating the construction of a highly institutionalised professional identity with clear boundaries. Such a professional identity is arguably relatively easy to inhabit as the individual need not construct a career path or re-invent a professional self-image from scratch. Rather, what to do, how to act and, to a certain extent, how to succeed, are ultimately answered in shared professional identity narratives enabling fashion designers to navigate at the workplace and in their career at large. In the case of graphic designers, however, the empirical material suggests that agency is the main factor shaping behaviour. The ambiguous and malleable boundaries of the graphic designer identity enables individuals to be orchestrate their own career trajectory and re-invent themselves, their work-styles or even migrate into related professional fields without completely losing a value proposition. The cost of all this freedom, however, comes in the absence of guidelines and can make the navigation in

everyday work life stressful. The majority of our graphic designer respondents had difficulty adhering to a professional label and would often use several different labels such as "UI/UX designer", "graphic designer" and "event designer" when narrating their professional selves.

Another implication of our findings is the absence of a meta-level designer identity encompassing both graphic as well as fashion designers. Not only did our respondents not adhere to a shared designer narrative, but few cross-socialised in our sample. Even though no distinct 'designer' identity emerged from the narratives, there was a commonality in the perception of being 'a creative' particularly when interfacing with aforementioned 'hum drum'.

'*Generally I think that people working with design are a little bit special. There is a sense that it is someone not doing a normal job. If I talk to a normal office worker I feel that we as designers are a little bit special. From their perspective as well I think that when I say I am a designer they think "wow, that is a stylish person". It feels like there is a thin mental wall between us when I talk with office workers, regardless of gender. It seems like they are sometimes apologising for not understanding fashion even though it is completely unnecessary to do.*' (Fashion designer)

The integration and policing of a commercial logic in the professional identity construct of fashion designers is indeed a surprising insight and adds to our current understanding of creative actors within the creative industries. The classical understanding of creative professionals typically rests on a view of them in a fundamental struggle to navigate a tension between arts and commerce (Caves, 2000). Our findings may, in part, be a reflection of the particular sample: more designers were working for mid-market fashion labels, and the graphic designers were free agents rather than in-house in low-end firms. Some respondents did identify prominent firms that they would prefer not to work for, or recount previous instances in their professional careers where they were told by in-house merchandisers or clients that they did not need to be too discerning aesthetically. In the case of fashion designers, dealing with the trade-offs between aesthetic effect and costs in the selection of materials at the design stage, is something that is experienced from very early on in training. Fashion design students, and/or their families, are often financing their own education, including materials, and a calculative

consideration of costs will influence some students' outlooks even as they pursue a career in an aesthetic field. Indeed, several respondents spoke explicitly of financial costs as a factor in their choice of training institution and student experience.

Where the 'art for art's sake' property was evidenced though was in the broader meaning of Caves' construct relating to the intrinsic motivation of creative workers. None of the respondents in the study identified money as a factor in their professional motivations or satisfaction. On the contrary, fashion designers would be quick to note that it was not a profession from which one should expect to become wealthy.

Based on the relatively strong professional identity anchored in a commercial logic, combined with one account of uncharacteristically long periods of low paid work as a design assistant, the notion of professional identity as institutionalised self-exploitation did indeed emerge. However, all fashion design informants would frequently change jobs, and sometimes even test the labor market without actual intention of changing jobs, suggesting a dynamic labor market where fashion designers have bargaining power of their own.

Conclusion

In this study we have attempted to introduce professional identity theory to the empirical field of the creative industries. In so doing we have explored stories of work practices and, through those, elucidated key differences between graphic designers and fashion designers with regards to their respective narratively-constructed professional identities.

Our findings challenge the longstanding perception that designers have strong intrinsic motivation but are difficult to manage, and more interested in personal fulfilment than an organisation or client's imperatives (Fisher, 1997). We find intrinsic motivation indeed to be strong, but a commercial imperative completely accepted by our respondents. In the case of fashion designers, commercial orientation has been naturalised as a core distinctive feature permeating their professional self-perceptions, as well as policing boundary conditions of what "a real fashion designer" is.

Further, while finding ample evidence to support strong market

uncertainty, in concurrence with Caves (2000), the implications of said uncertainty on individuals navigating an agency-driven field (typically graphic designers) were caused ontological angst due to highly ambiguous and fluid professional identity conditions. Professionals working in a structure-heavy field (mostly fashion designers), however, had developed strong resilience in large part due to a clear, albeit somewhat rigid, professional identity.

However limited this study is by its relatively small sample size, the topic of agency versus structure in relation to professional identity formation has emerged as promising avenue for future research. Further, a careful examination into the professional identity of fashion designers working at market extremes, ie. low-cost mass production companies, and at high level *haute couture* houses, would provide very useful accounts and allow for more field-level insights and a stronger sense of the level of homogeneity/heterogeneity. Lastly, we suggest studying other creative professions, such as architects, where education and certification may have a stronger impact on professional identity construction.

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