Making it in London and Scotland: a comparison of creative identities in career development and brand building

There has been an increased focus on art enterprises as business organisations (see Fraser, 2000; Rentschler, 2002; O’Reilly, 2004; Schroeder, 2005) and current research is focusing on entrepreneurship and the value of innovation on business, identifying creative producers, including artists and craft business owners, as their own micro businesses that can convert creative value into commercial worth (Buck, 2004; Fillis, 2004). In line with this, we define creatives as workers who depend on artistic motivation as their primary resource for economic production. Creative careers are very much overlooked in the management literature yet they demonstrate some unique labour market activities as their primary resource for economic production. Creative careers are characterised by multiple jobholding behaviour/ sources of income, non-standard time management and production cost structures; career autonomy; intuitive decision making; high levels of tolerance for uncertainty; low financial reward and; unconventional ways of defining career success. We therefore explore creative career trajectories, relying on empirical data about the careers of visual artists in London and craft business owners in Scotland, examining how they are shaped through time and the characteristics of successful creatives. We argue that existing literature fails to adequately capture the dynamic nature of the markets in which they operate nor does it take into account chance events and the complexity of the influences on careers, rather it focuses all too often on a linear and static view of the market. An analysis of creatives’ careers needs more of an emphasis on the other skills they need such as: an awareness of internal priorities, sensitivity to both planned and unplanned situations, an ability to evaluate and act on options when presented and interpersonal communication skills which may maximise the positive impact chance events have on the career. Moreover, the need to market an artistic identity is found to be essential in professional success.

Background

We find that the use of the term ‘career’ allows for a more fluid and dynamic understanding of the market, based on the structure of a ‘community’ and the nature of an individual’s (or collective’s) progression. This follows from the Chicagorean concept of status passage and career where the concept of ‘status passage’ or ‘career contingency’ is used to signify the passage of an individual through various stages in a life course (Glaser & Strauss, 1971). However, this concept has been expanded greatly within sociology to incorporate the study of occupational and organisational mobility, and the process of socialisation and career progression. Careers are characterised from this perspective as highly interdependent upon communication processes, notably as negotiation of joint plans of action and of identity, role and status. Careers, work, and identity are seen as interrelated aspects of the self as a social object, developing over a life course (Strauss et al., 1964).

Research on creative careers and career paths tend to focus on the tension between artistic and business identities. Throsby and Thompson’s (1994) study, for example, addressed this tension by noting how many artists had to pursue non-artistic paid work in order to survive thereby denying their artistic identity. Because the arts/crafts market is unregulated, anyone can call themselves a creative producer and therefore an endorsement or valuation process is necessary to filter the bad from the good. This comprises of a network of experts (artists, curators, academics, art teachers, critics, collectors and dealers) who make up a constantly shifting series of subgroups that negotiate the value of a work. In artistic careers, these experts participate fatefully in establishing (or equally fatefully in not doing so) success. As Giuffre (1999) discusses, artists’ careers are not fixed in status but are rather a series of transitions through positions in a larger art world network, which is continuously
changing shape. This view fits in well with Bourdieu’s (1984) conception of an ‘artistic field’ as a network that is continuously changing shape as actors reposition themselves relative to each other. As Currid (2007) discusses, cultural value is not just an economic act but instead part of an intense social process of valorisation and legitimisation, as art is a taste-driven product it relies on subjective evaluation by these gatekeepers. Legitimisation is particularly important when the product is innovative as is the case for cultural products (Elfring & Hulsink, 2003: 410). Economic value therefore emerges from within the social system (Currid, 2007) and the work must be framed and positioned as artistic in the market by the experts. Branding is found to be a useful tool to examine the process through which this value is constructed as it takes into account the full range of meanings artistic products communicate, both tangible and intangible. As the creative careerist takes personal responsibility for their career development outside the bounded traditional employment relationship, the concept of social capital becomes far more important (Bourdieu, 1984). The majority of creatives must recurrently seek jobs and information regarding new job opportunities and so will often depend on their personal and professional contact networks for information about the next lead in their career trajectories. A small number of authors (Fillis 2004; O’Reilly 2005) have recently suggested that career-management skills including skills and competencies as well as broader aspects of the artist’s identity and characteristics will also have an effect on the creative’s career outcomes. So while entrepreneurialism, social capital and networking have been connected to creatives’ careers in the literature, there is a lack of work that demonstrates the links between aspects of the creative producer and success with the market. How effective creatives are in navigating their boundaryless careers and accessing the market is a question that has not been examined yet in any systematic way. This study considers two samples of two different categories of creative producers in different regions of the UK thus giving insights from across geographies and output categories.

Research Context and Methodology

The data comes from two qualitative empirical studies primarily based on semi-structured interviews with key informants in the London art world and Scottish crafts sector. The respondents within these samples whilst appearing very different in location and in their category of creative output share many common characteristics. Each location was investigated individually by the authors separately and the results compared to give deeper insight into the career trajectories of a greater sample of UK creatives developing microbusiness brands. A total of 17 interviews were conducted with artists in London at different stages of their career trajectories (emerging, mid-career and established) to get a longitudinal perspective and a further 13 with dealers, curators, critics and collectors to better understand how artists have their work legitimised. In Scotland, an initial sample of 12 individuals working in the craft sector representing a variety of the product/skill categories within the craft sector of makers at various stages of their careers was selected and long interviews conducted. After this first sample had received initial analysis and processing further interviews were conducted to test and develop the data already possessed. Menger (1999), notes that one of the most striking features of artists’ careers is their temporal aspect. Taking a longitudinal life-passage approach allowed us to consider the construction of an artistic identity in a more holistic way which takes into consideration subjective objectives. We therefore used biographical and narrative methods which Fillis (2009; 2011) specifically recommends to examine entrepreneurial marketing. In addition, in order to gain a sense of the environment, a significant amount of information was also collected from observational methods in attending art events such as auctions, art fairs, studio visits and openings. The researchers collected and assessed data gathered from their experiences at these events, much of which consists of multimedia materials produced by creatives, critics and individuals/
organisations involved in the promoting or understanding the work of the producers studied. Such materials included printed matter, web pages, videos and other ephemera.

Main findings

Career as Identity

The data made it clear that becoming a creative producer is less about ‘becoming’ one and rather more about ‘being’ one. According to their retrospective accounts, from an early age, creatives ‘knew’ they wanted to pursue artistic careers although they may have had very few ideas as to what that entailed. This conception of a career as a creative as the ‘natural’ course to take was the standard response to questions as to how they started their careers. Self-definition as a creative is therefore more than just a job, it is an important part of the individual’s character and a way of defining themselves. Making art is characterised in this discourse as ‘fulfilling,’ so the career is essentially a conduit in order to achieve a way of life, more of a vocation than a career. In that sense, it is much more about personal development than it is about making a living, a good thing, as the literature informs us that most creatives struggle to do so (Menger, 1999). The key point here is that throughout the career, a strong artistic identity is constructed and this identity is centred on the Romantic discourse of creativity that helps withstand the lack of financial rewards. Creative producers invest considerable self-worth in their work, which is why O’Reilly (2005) argues that the creative process is self-orientated as much as it is product-oriented. Just as Belk (1988) found there to be a diminished sense of self when possessions are lost or stolen, creatives also seem to experience a diminished sense of self when failing to create work (whether due to lack of time, money or inspiration) and in failing to achieve recognition or sales as they are not just selling a product but a part of their identity. The work is subsumed in the artistic identity and is consumed as such on the market, especially at the top end where we speak of ‘a Picasso’ for example.

The Need for Social Capital

Although being a creative producer comes from a very personal conception of oneself as discussed above, the career trajectory very much hinges on the social relationships made. This is widely acknowledged in both the art world and entrepreneurial literature, emphasising the social structure of the art world and the value of networks in professional success (Becker, 1982; Elfring & Hulsink, 2003). An ability to network is therefore essential for a successful career as a creative producer. Gossip, word of mouth and permanent access to information are key to survival which is why the sector has such a wide range of social activities: exhibition openings, gallery dinners, after-show parties and all-day events. In this highly sociable environment, art melds with social life, important contacts are made and deals done in the course of what appears from the outside to be a purely social occasion. In order to establish themselves, these creative entrepreneurs must build up social capital through networking, however there is a decision to be made in terms of which groups to network with which can have implications on where the work will sell, for instance on whether they want to be mainstream or cutting edge, commercial or bohemian. In order to operate within the market, the work must be framed and contextualised as a creative product and creatives must therefore characterise themselves as ‘creative producers’. So there are a multitude of decisions that creatives need to make in terms of how they want to be perceived, how they want their work to be seen and where it will be seen. These concerns with controlling the career trajectory, raise the need for a whole host of skills. The notion of the artist as entrepreneur (Fillis, 2004) in the literature seems to be valid, especially in terms of the risk-taking behaviour creatives display, often sacrificing short-term gains for the hope of long-
term glory. Moreover, in order to successfully emerge, there is a need for creatives to create a coherent narrative and image of their work in line with self-marketing and personal-branding. They also need to be able to negotiate with a range of actors, for example dealers, in order to navigate their career trajectories. Finally a knowledge of the market and pricing, in particular, is necessary in order to sell advantageously.

**Fluidity of the Career Trajectory**

The fluidity of the creative career trajectory becomes apparent due to this need to build up social capital to achieve success. The majority of these creative careers tend to be characterised by a fight for survival in a highly competitive market, particularly in the first few years of the career. There is a large drop-out ratio in this period, when after between two to sometimes as long as ten years of struggle after art school, social, economic and familial pressures can force the creative to exit the career trajectory and move on to another career. Many of these may still continue making work but only as amateurs not professionals, as soon as they take fulltime work in other employment they find themselves cut out of the social circle of the art world, losing their social capital. Those that do stick it out and start to receive some critical recognition, generally find that after years in the darkness, things suddenly take off. This is due to the network structure of the market, it takes a few years to be noticed as experts are weary of trusting their own tastes and a pyramid of approval is therefore needed to be able to break through. Once a creative gets an endorsement, whether from a dealer, collector or curator, things generally happen very fast, and in combination (sales, shows, etc) as others jump on the bandwagon. As things pick up in speed in terms of having to juggle different projects, the pressure switches from being recognised to staying recognised, keeping up the momentum. Moreover, this leads to a certain limitation in terms of artistic freedom as now artists are expected to follow on from previous work and if they venture too far from their brand image, the work may become difficult to sell or place. This is why the career needs to be continually managed by the artist in line with the identity and image they have constructed.

In the span of a 50-plus-year career, there will usually be a number of ups and downs for an artist to navigate. After gaining some measure of success in terms of both critical and financial recognition, the first drop in the career trajectory is a defining point in the creative producer’s career as how that failure is managed will establish to a large extent whether they will have a lengthy career or not. The difficulty is not when the creative first starts achieving some measure of success but sustaining it, there is a need to constantly expand the potential audience in order to keep going upwards and this requires ever-higher levels of productivity and distribution which may not be achievable. This is another major point at which creatives exit the career trajectory, as their career-identity which has been built up through years of recognition is hit, the subsequent down-turn can be too much to deal with and many will give up. This is why it is important for creatives early on to take a long-term perspective and be aware of the vagaries of the market and factor this into their career identity, thus the significance of a subjective, vocational identity. Success is never completely secure as it is never long-term, partly as a result of the creative process itself, there are stronger moments and weaker moments and the producer cannot always keep up the creative surge and partly due to the vagaries of the market based on what is fashionable. As a result the creative can’t necessarily tell at what stage anything will happen and the career is characterised by a chronic insecurity that comes from this fluid career trajectory. The creative has to just keep working and trying to create opportunities to show and sell, in the hope that maybe something will happen but it is in many ways unpredictable, there is nothing mapped out.
Conclusion

By developing a holistic, temporal perspective of creative producers’ career trajectories we seek to demonstrate that these careers are not fixed, linear trajectories but evolve based on career contingencies within constantly changing networks. Previous analyses of the creative sector do not convey that this fluidity (and therefore fragility) is one of the most important features of the arts market. As creatives are essentially working on a freelance project basis, they have no idea whether they will be making enough to survive in six months time, it’s a “constant gamble” which necessitates the balancing of many different projects, jobs, relationships, perceptions and ultimately identities. In order to maintain some sort of coherent identity as ‘creatives,’ they need to have their practice at the heart of their self-identity. This can cause major tension as it means that the marketing and reception of the products created on the market is directly linked to personal identity, so success is ego-boosting while failure is soul-destroying. Also, these are not 9 to 5 jobs, as the artistic identity becomes more and more central to the artist’s overall identity, it becomes hard to differentiate the life from the career. In the long term as well as a career, being a creative becomes a lifestyle.

We can therefore see that successful creatives must be able to manage their careers amidst constant insecurity and uncertainty due to the fluid structure of their career trajectories. An ability to network is also crucial in order to continually re-establish oneself as high levels of visibility and exposure are necessary to continue generating the attention which ultimately leads to sales. In this ambiguous environment, creatives must have a deep-rooted confidence to keep going as well as a long-term perspective on their careers. Finally, due to the social nature of the art world, the ability to act on chance events and encounters, maximising their positive impact is essential, as is the ability to deal with failure which every artist will encounter at one point or another. Marketing in this sector is demonstrated to be a complex process involving a variety of actors and neither linear nor completely rational, it must be continually adapted in line with the macro socio-cultural context. As such it is neither linear nor completely rational, but must be continually adapted in line with the social, cultural and temporal context. Successful artists are shown to be adept at responding to the environment and strategic in terms of their marketing behaviour, negotiating their positioning in the market through managing certain key relationships. By examining marketing through a career lens, this paper demonstrates the importance of considering identity in marketing. While identity has been widely discussed in the marketing literature in terms of consumer behaviour and brand identity, the case of the entrepreneurial creative producer demonstrates how the marketing of the product is inextricably linked to the identity of the artist.

More generally, artists’ careers provide valuable case evidence on boundaryless careers (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996) and this research could inform a range of other careers, moving beyond a simplistic discussion of degrees of boundarylessness which is found in the careers literature. This analysis of creative careers shows that while the career trajectory itself may be somewhat boundaryless, the notion of oneself as an artist is extremely bounded and self-worth emerges from within this identity. So although artists generally need to juggle a number of different jobs in order to survive financially, it is clear that their artistic identity has been constructed in such a way that they consider themselves ‘artists’ and not ‘teachers’ or ‘gallery assistants’ or whatever the other job facilitates their creative practice. Moreover, this artistic identity is key to sales and must therefore be nurtured and managed throughout the career in order to build a brand that embraces both fulfilment of self and economic exchange. This research therefore acknowledges the complexity of branding narratives, recognising the value of personality in branding.
Works Cited


