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Identity affirmation through ‘signature style’: A study of toy car designers

Kimberly D. Elsbach

ABSTRACT

I describe findings from a qualitative study of toy car designers that shows how creative workers may develop and express ‘signature styles’ through their work. The display of these signature styles – that were not advertised, stamped on products, or even recognized in official corporate marketing communications – allowed designers to affirm their creative, professional identities while designing commodity products within the practical constraints of a corporate context. Findings further revealed that creative workers used signature styles, primarily, to affirm the identity categorizations of ‘idealistic’ and ‘independent’. I discuss how these findings extend our understanding of ‘identity work’ among creative workers, and may improve our ability to effectively manage these workers in corporate settings.

KEYWORDS

creativity ■ design ■ identity management ■ individual identity ■ signature style

Introduction

In recent years, large corporations have increasingly sought out creative workers (e.g. designers, engineers, artists, and writers) as a means of competitive advantage. Richard Florida’s (2002) best-selling book, *The rise of the creative class*, argues that this group of workers (i.e. ‘people who add economic value through their creativity . . . [including] knowledge workers, symbolic analysts and professional and technical workers’, p. 68) will be

essential to the success of the next generation of corporations as ideas, rather than skills and experience, become the commodity most difficult to come by.

At the same time, corporate leaders and managers commonly lament the difficulties in managing creative workers (Fletcher, 1999). As Tim Bell, Chairman of Lowe Bell Communications in the UK, noted:

It can be fantastically frustrating working with creators. They're petulant and difficult and refuse to pay attention and have different priorities. Dumb insolence is a classic characteristic of creative people and they are very dismissive of everybody else.

(Quoted in Fletcher, 1999: 40)

Creative workers, it seems, are often unhappy working in corporate contexts, and routinely make their supervisors unhappy as a result (Gruber & Wallace, 1989).

Creative workers' dissatisfaction in corporate contexts may be explained, at least in part, by a common dilemma facing these workers. On the one hand, researchers have found that professional creative workers commonly perceive themselves as having distinctive, creative, professional identities, and view their creative work as a means of affirming those identities (Feist, 1999; Fletcher, 1999). Such identity-affirming creative work typically involves an *individual* creative act or output (i.e. creating an individual work of art that is recognizable as one's own, producing a product design that carries one's signature style, or solving a problem using a creative and non-normative process that is of one's own design – Petkus, 1996). Kasof (1995: 320) confirms this solitary nature of creative actors in an exhaustive review of individual creativity. As he notes:

Many studies show that persons considered to be creative are, in various fields, generally more solitary and unsociable in their work and in their lives than are their less esteemed peers.

On the other hand, creative workers who work in large, corporate contexts, and who produce 'commodity' products (such as toys, houseware, and apparel, that are produced in large numbers, through standardized production means that ensure consistency in look, quality, and performance, and are readily available to consumers) are required to work within a number of pragmatic guidelines, including rules about weight, size, cost, safety, and features.¹ As Jeremy Isaacs, General Director of the London Royal Opera House – who employs numerous creative workers to design and build sets and costumes for its opera and ballet productions – put it:

The problem of employing creative people in an organisation which in any sense is an industrial one is that their creativity sometimes needs to be tempered to the constraints within which the organisation is able to work . . . they have to be creative within the budget that you can afford and on a timetable that enables you to plan.

(quoted in Fletcher, 1999: 68)

Together, these findings suggest that some of the pragmatic business requirements placed on corporate creative workers may be at odds with the common means by which these creative workers affirm their professional identities (i.e. producing individually distinct outputs). In response to this dilemma, scholars and popular business writers alike have expounded on the effective management of creative workers (Fletcher, 1999; Urabe et al., 1988). While a comprehensive review of all research on the management of creative people is beyond the scope of this article (see Katz, 2003; Shalley et al., 2004, for reviews), advice typically follows two general themes: 1) build organizational environments that support creative thinking (e.g. decentralize supervision, create cross-functional collaborations, open communication channels – Barrett, 1998; Oldham & Cummings, 1996; Shalley et al., 2000) and 2) reward behaviors known to lead to creative output while removing punishments for these same behaviors (e.g. reward risk-taking, and learning of information outside one's area of expertise, and remove punishments for failures and non-conformity – Egan, 2005; Shalley, 1995; Shapero, 2003; Soriano de Alencar & Bruno-Faria, 1997; Zhou & George, 2001).

Yet, most of this research begins with the assumption that creative workers will be satisfied with producing products that fit the needs of consumers and will be willing to adhere to the practical constraints imposed by budget, safety, and marketing needs. Further, the increasing trend in scholarly advice toward the use of groups or networks (versus individuals) to produce creative output (Hargadon, 2003) assumes that creative workers will be satisfied and fulfilled working in a collaborative environment. Finally, most of these studies do not address the importance of identity affirmation to creative productivity, even though some recent research has shown that self-verification in groups can increase their creative output (Polzer et al., 2002). These perspectives appear to discount the importance of individual, creative vision for creative workers and the associated professional identities that these workers hold. As such, *the theoretical goal of this article is to extend theories of creativity management by improving our understanding of identity affirmation among creative workers in corporate settings.*

Literature review and research question

In pursuit of my theoretical goal, I next review extant research regarding the identities of creative professionals from the fine art and music industries, as well as research on the affirmation of creative identities from studies of the fashion industry and industry critics. This review illustrates what we do and do not know about identity affirmation among creative workers, and ultimately leads to my research question.

The professional identities of creative workers

Based on current organizational research (Pratt et al., 2006; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007) the professional identities of creative workers may be defined as the *person-based and role-based self-categorizations that creative workers use to define themselves at work*. Sluss and Ashforth (2007: 11) define role-based categorizations, or what they call 'role-based identities' as the:

... goals, values, beliefs, norms, interaction styles, and time horizons typically associated with the role (Ashforth, 2001) – independent of who (what kind of person) may be enacting the role. For example, the role-based identity of a manager may include assigning tasks, monitoring performance, offering feedback, liaising with other departments, and doing strategic planning.

Sluss and Ashforth (2007: 12) go on to define person-based identities as the:

... personal qualities [e.g. traits and abilities] of the role occupant that bear on the enactment of the role-based identity.

This definition suggests that a creative toy designer, for example, may define him or herself as 'manager of all new designs for dolls' (a role-based categorization), and 'detail oriented in doll apparel' (a person-based categorization).² Based on this definition, I examined research on fine artists and musicians that suggests some of the person-based and role-based categorizations used to construct creative workers' professional identities.

Person-based identity categorizations by creative professionals

One person-based categorization that seems essential to the professional identities of many creative workers is that of 'solitary' or 'independent'

creator (Feist, 1999). It is common, for example, for professional fine artists to put high importance on creating individual works of art (e.g. paintings, musical pieces, books, plays) that are recognizable as the products of a singular creator (Petkus, 1996). Such solitary work may be an essential dimension of the identity of a professional artist, in part, because an artist's stature and name recognition in his or her field is one of the only means of asserting professional status. That is, unlike other professions, such as law, medicine, or engineering, there are no credentials, licenses, or governing bodies that certify an artist as professional. Instead, artists need 'recognition from, and acceptance by, other well-established professional practitioners' (Bain, 2005: 35) to maintain their professional status. As a result, a professional artist is less likely to gain status if he or she is known only as part of a group or as a partial contributor to an artistic output.

Another person-based categorization that is often linked to creative professionals is that of individual 'idealist', as opposed to a 'pragmatist' (Bain, 2005). In this manner, professional artists commonly report that they consider the personal aesthetic and intellectual satisfaction they gain from creating to be the most important motivation for creative work, while meeting practical needs, such as satisfying a client or paying the bills, to be secondary. In a study of Scottish jazz musicians, for example, Macdonald and Wilson (2005: 409) reported that several of these musicians showed disdain for their audiences' needs and preferred to play for themselves. As the drummer lamented:

Oh, [the audience] is not intelligent enough to understand [our music] . . . To me the best playing experiences I've had have been away from audiences because any of that stuff goes out the window, and you're only playing for the sake of the music. Because you really want to play the music.

Finally, related to the categorization of 'idealist' is the person-based categorization of 'non-conformist' (Feist, 1999). That is, professional creative workers tend to think of themselves as pushing back against pressures to conform to established norms and accepted practices. As Bain (2005: 30) notes in his study of professional fine artists:

This tendency to rebel against established norms – to repeatedly question, challenge, and defy the limits of acceptability – may have become the defining feature of what it means to be an artist in contemporary society.

Role-based identity categorizations by creative professionals

In terms of role-based categorizations, Bain's (2005) study of professional artists suggests that these creative workers view 'showing' one's work in galleries and exhibitions to be an essential role-based dimension of their identity. The categorization of being a 'show-er' is important to the identity of these professionals because it demonstrates that their art is legitimate and valued by society in general. Further, this categorization separates the professional artists from the non-professionals. As one artist in Bain's study noted:

There's four mothers in my son's class at school who view themselves as artists. They're not professionals. They don't show . . . When you've committed your lifeblood, the core of your very being to making art, and somebody casually says that she's an artist, it really wears you down.

(Bain, 2005: 33)

For a creative professional outside of fine art – say a web designer – the role of 'showing' might translate to having one's creative work incorporated into a product that is put into use or up for sale. That is, an important role-based categorization for creative professionals may be to 'make identifiable finished products'. If one's web designs never make it to the Internet, then one may not have fulfilled this role as a creator. In support of this notion, Fletcher (1999: 42) notes, in his study of corporate creative professionals in Great Britain, that 'creative people are judged and prefer to be judged by their output rather than by their personality'.

Affirming professional creative identities in corporate contexts

The above research provides some insight about the types of identity categorizations that may be important to creative professionals (e.g. independent, idealistic, non-conforming, and 'showing'). Yet, as noted earlier, these same categorizations may be difficult to affirm in a corporate context that values teamwork and imposes practical limitations on product design. The question remains, then, 'Just how might a creative professional affirm his or her creative identity in a corporate context?'

Although little organizational research has examined the affirmation of professional creative identities in corporate contexts, related studies on corporate identity and brand-name products (Cappetta & Gioia, 2006; Cornelissen et al., 2007; Olins, 1995), as well as studies of professional critics (Annamma & Sherry, 2003) provide some insight about the challenges of

making such identity affirmations. A closer look at this research suggests at least two means by which creative workers in corporate contexts might affirm their professional identities through their work: 1) by developing an individual name-brand through their products, and 2) by having their products recognized by expert observers.

Developing an individual name-brand through products

Research linking name-brands to corporate identities shows how organizational products may embody both the organizational brand and the organizational identity (Cappetta & Gioia, 2006; Olins, 1995). As Cornelissen et al. (2007: S6–S7) note:

[Corporate identity] is seen not just as involving the visible outward presentation of a company [through corporate logos and products], but also the set of intrinsic characteristics or 'traits' that give the company its specificity, stability, and coherence . . .

In this vein, studies of corporate identities of fine fashion houses have examined how clothing, photos of models in clothing, logos, and store design serve as 'defining artifacts' that are 'closely associated with the identity of a company . . . [and] convey specific meaning about its *raison d'être*' (Cappetta & Gioia, 2006: 210). For example, logos and signature product styles such as the interlocking double 'C' of Chanel, or the classic Chanel suit are clearly identified with the corporate brand and signal the 'classic' and 'professional' aspects of the organizational identity.

Yet, beyond being linked to organizational identities, organizational products may also be linked to individual identities, particularly those of product designers. In this manner, popular press accounts of fine fashion houses have shown that products created by a select number of high-profile designers may also carry the name, logo, or signature style of that *individual designer*, in addition to the organizational name (Zimbalist, 2008). In this manner, fashion designer Tom Ford has created clothing bearing his label for both the Gucci and Yves Saint Laurent fashion houses (Beckett, 2008). Similarly, traditional sporting goods company Adidas has combined its own label with the label of fashion designer Stella McCartney to produce a higher end line of sportswear (Beckett, 2008). In these cases, the individual fashion designer develops a 'signature line' of apparel that is affirming to his/her own identity, as well as the identity of the firm that produces the line.

Developing such a signature brand and style may help these creative workers to both affirm personal identity categorizations (e.g. a personal

brand can reflect that the designer is idealistic and independent, and denote his or her non-conformity), as well as role categorizations (i.e. the brand-name identified with a major business suggests that the product will be seen and used by a wide audience of consumers and indicates that the creator is clearly a 'show-er').

Recognition by expert observers

A second way that creative workers in corporate contexts might affirm their individual professional identities is by being recognized and/or praised by expert observers. To understand how such recognition acts to affirm individual identities, we must first understand how creative workers may perceive their identities in *relation* to an expert observer.

Research on *identity orientations* describes how individuals perceive their identities in relation to specific others and suggests that individuals' self-evaluations are based on how well they fulfill their interpersonal roles with these specific others (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Brickson, 2005). For example, a college professor may perceive herself as having a *relational identity orientation* with her students. As a result, the professor may perceive that her success in helping her students to learn course material is important to affirming her identity as a teacher.

In a similar manner, studies of industry critics suggest that creative workers may have relational identity orientations with expert observers, such as industry critics (Annamma & Sherry, 2003; Kirschbaum, 2007). As a result, critical recognition becomes an important affirmation of artistic identities for new and emerging artists. As Kirschbaum (2007: 188–9) notes in his study of jazz musicians:

... an artist's career would correspond to his or her talent development and *recognition* [emphasis added] ... The way a new musician is recruited, introduced to the field and advances in his trajectory may be objects of appraisal by his peers, record critics and producers ... [This] symbolic capital conveys the legitimacy of one's practices and persona [i.e. identity] within a field.

Thus, the role-based identity categorization of being a 'showing' artist may be affirmed by merely being reviewed by an industry critic, while the person-based identity categorizations of being 'idealistic' or 'non-conforming' may be affirmed by critical reviews that recognize how a particular artist's work is unique and distinct from most others. As an example, a wine maker may perceive that her role-based identity as an 'established vintner' is not affirmed unless famed wine critic, Robert Parker, has reviewed her wines in

his magazine column. Further, this wine maker may not perceive that her person-based identity as a 'non-conformist' is affirmed unless Parker comments on her use of organically grown grapes in her wines.

Kirschbaum's (2007) research also suggests that expert observers need not be formal critics to be part of a relational identity orientation with creative workers. In this vein, Edinger (2002) found that emerging visual artists often developed and affirmed their artistic identities in relation to other high-status artists and educators, as well as industry critics. Edinger found that this developmental relationship was as important as artists' own creative processes in determining their artistic identities.

Summary and research question

In sum, the above findings from studies of professional artists and musicians suggest that creative workers may define their creative professional identities via person-based categorizations, such as being independent, idealistic, and non-conforming, and role-based categorizations such as being a 'showing artist'. Further the above findings from studies of the fashion industry and professional critics suggest that creative workers might affirm their creative identities by developing an individual brand-name, and/or being recognized by expert observers.

Yet, this research is limited in that it is grounded, primarily, in studies of creative workers who are able to gain elite status in their industries (e.g. fine artists, musicians, fashion designers), and thus may be capable of developing individual brands and being reviewed by critics. By contrast, a much larger number of professional creative workers are employed in commodity-based industries, in which elite status is not common (if it exists at all), and individual recognition by critics or experts is a rarity. Research on these types of creative professionals is scant at best, and provides little guidance for managers hoping to help creative workers to affirm their creative identities in large corporate contexts. This research gap leads to my central research question:

Research question: How do professional creative workers who produce commodity products for large corporations affirm their creative identities through their work?

Methods

I used exploratory qualitative methods, including interviews and non-participant observation, to develop theory about the identity affirmation

tactics of professional creative workers. Because my research question focused on describing 'how' these tactics were carried out, I chose to use a qualitative, case study approach of investigation. As Lee (1999: 38) notes, qualitative research is well suited for 'describing, interpreting, and explaining'. Further, Marshall and Rossman (1995) suggest that qualitative case study methods are appropriate for exploring poorly understood organizational phenomena or describing in-depth processes within organizations. Given my focus on understanding the under-researched process of identity affirmation by creative professionals, and my interest in exploring this process in-depth, a qualitative case study approach appeared most appropriate.

Research context

This study, carried out from 2003–07 as a part of a larger study of toy designers, focused on designers of a specific brand of widely sold toy cars. I will refer to the brand of toy cars by the pseudonym 'CoolCars'. CoolCars is a US-based brand associated with thousands of different models of 1/64 sized toy cars, including original designs and replicas of actual full-size automobiles. CoolCars are available worldwide and attract a large number of adult collectors, represented by numerous collector clubs and an online website, in addition to traditional child consumers. At the time this study began, CoolCars had been producing toy cars for 35 years. CoolCars are designed in a US-based, dedicated design center of a large, multinational toy company. At the time of the study, the company employed over 30,000 people in 43 countries and territories and sold products in more than 150 nations throughout the world. The design center housed over 200 toy designers, all of who worked on the development of new toy prototypes. No manufacturing was performed at this site, and while marketing professionals and other administrative employees visited the design center to confer with toy designers, no administrative employees (other than clerical staff), were housed on site.

The physical layout of the 22,000 sq. ft design center was an open plan design. Designers working in specific toy areas (e.g. cars, action figures, games, etc.), were geographically co-located within this large open space. The only enclosed spaces housed special machinery, lab space, and digital video production rooms, plus a few offices for senior staff. One could see and hear the work of toy designers across the large open floor plan, and prototypes in progress often occupied large spaces in the design center, both horizontally and vertically. Designers could easily see what others were working on in the public and private work spaces (unless individual designers took efforts to enclose their private cubicles).

Participants

Participants included 10 CoolCars designers (all male, average age = 39.7, average work tenure = 13.4 years). There were no female CoolCars designers at the time of this study. All participants were actively engaged in designing new toy prototypes, and held the titles of staff designer (two), project designer (four), or designer (four). Staff designers were considered to be at a higher level of status than project designers or designers, and typically oversaw the management of project designers and designers in their toy group.

Data sources

According to Yin (2003) there are six primary sources of data used in case study research: documentation, archives, interviews, direct observation, participant observation, and artifacts. These six sources provide different types of information (e.g. documents are exact, while interviews may be targeted). Because my research questions were specific, and because I wanted to understand how the context of corporate professional environments was important to my findings, I focused on interviews (which may be targeted), and direct observation (which provides contextual information in a real-world setting) as my primary data sources. I also had access to the artifacts themselves (i.e. the finished CoolCars toys), as a source of evidence. As I explain later, artifacts allowed me to confirm what CoolCars designers reported about CoolCars collectors (i.e. they could identify a designer's cars without any name marking).

Interviews

I interviewed all 10 designers in person at the design center. Interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes and were tape recorded and transcribed. The interviews followed an open-ended format, with questions changing to follow interesting leads and new themes that arose during the interview. I used Kvale's (1996) framework of conversational, qualitative interviewing as a guide to ensure that my interviews produced data most relevant to my research question. According to this framework, conversational, qualitative interviews should have seven characteristics related to the way interviews should be conducted by the interviewer. These seven characteristics are summarized by Lee (1999: 63–4):

- [1] focal concepts [of the interview] should reflect the everyday experience of the interviewee . . .
- [2] the interviewer's role is to interpret the meaning of what is said and how it is said . . .
- [3] qualitative, as

opposed to quantitative, knowledge of the interviewee's world is sought . . . [4] the study [should] seek rich and nuanced descriptions of the interviewee's world . . . [5] descriptions of specific situations and action sequences [should be] elicited . . . [6] the interview's flavor should be one of openness to unexpected phenomena . . . [7] the interview [should] focus on particular themes.

Based on these guidelines, I developed an open-ended interview protocol that focused on the themes of identity affirmations related to work activities of toy designers. Interview questions focused on what the toy designer did on a day-to-day basis, his current work group and projects, past work groups and projects while at the same company, most fulfilling and enjoyable creative tasks at work, his creative identity and how it was affirmed or not affirmed at work, specific projects that were affirming to creative identity, and tactics to maintain creative identity at work. Finally, I asked designers about their interactions with other toy car designers at their workplace, and their interactions with collectors at large toy conventions. I asked about how designers discussed each other's work and designs and how the comments of other designers and/or collectors were related to their own identities. For each instance of identity affirmation event reported, I asked participants to describe the whole event, from beginning to end, including discussing how and why their identities were affected. These questions followed characteristic #5 of Kvale's guidelines (i.e. eliciting descriptions of specific situations and action sequences). If participants brought up a topic or line of discussion that was not in the interview protocol, I pursued it and allowed the interviewer to explore the issue. This procedure was in line with Kvale's characteristic #6 – openness to unexpected information and phenomena.

Observation

I observed the 4 CoolCars designers for approximately 10 hours over the course of five days (one day a week for five weeks). Observation consisted of both silently shadowing designers, as well as conversing with them about what they were doing and what others were doing. I had open access to everything that happened in the design center, and was invited to observe meetings, brainstorming sessions, focus groups, and prototype testing. Much of the time I would position myself in one of the large common work areas in the design center, so I could easily observe many designers working at the same time, as well as observe interactions and collaborations taking place in these work areas. I also observed individual designers by walking around the design center and checking into their work periodically, as well as observing from a distance for prolonged periods of time. I kept field notes during

observations and also recorded more notes after each observation period. The focus of my observation notes was behaviors and interactions related to individual identity affirmation.

Artifacts

Finally, I was able to examine the finished products (i.e. the actual CoolCars toys) produced by the designers in my study. After I had determined that CoolCars designers were affirming their identities through the design of 'signature' CoolCars (I discuss this in detail in my findings later) I asked each designer to provide me with one example of a 'signature' toy car, and also to show me other examples of signature cars they had made. I then went to a local toy store, and looked for other signature cars that I could identify based on my understanding of the signature styles of different designers. I was able to follow up with two designers and confirm that the toy cars I had found in a retail store, were in fact, designed by them. This exercise provided confirmation of what CoolCars designers reported about their interactions with serious collectors (i.e. that collectors could identify signature styles in finished products).

Analysis

Using an identity grid developed by Elsbach and Flynn (2009), I asked all 10 of the CoolCars designers to plot their creative identities based on the dimensions of 'creative approach' (along a continuum from 'idealistic' to 'pragmatic'), and 'creative output' (along a continuum from 'component design' to 'comprehensive design'). Nine of the 10 of the CoolCars designers self-identified themselves as those who were strongly idealistic in their approach, and desired to control the process of design from initial idea to finished product. Because of this creative identity, I expected these nine CoolCars designers to be most threatened by management requests to modify their creative designs, and most likely to be motivated to produce finished products that maintained their individual creative vision.

A research assistant and I then searched the transcribed interviews and observation field notes from these nine designers for evidence of identity affirmations. We used an iterative method of moving back and forth between the evolving theory, the data, and the extant literature (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Our analysis relied primarily on the development of 'meaning categorization' (Lee, 1999: 91) to identify themes or trends in the data related to identity threats and affirmations related to routine work behaviors. According to Lee (1999), developing meaning categorizations requires a conceptual structure that serves as the basis of categorizing. This conceptual structure may come

from the data themselves or from existing literature. Because we focused on 'theory elaboration' (Lee, 1999), we derived this conceptual structure from existing literature on creative identity described above. Our conceptual structure included both a description of creative identity based on the artistic identity literature, as well as a set of behaviors that may affirm identity based on research on fashion designers and industry critics.

After developing the initial conceptual structure, our analysis proceeded in two stages, similar to the data analysis process depicted by Pratt et al. (2006). First, a research assistant and I analyzed the observational and interview data looking for common statements and groupings of statements that would comprise specific meaning categories of reasons for identity affirmations at work. Based on the literature on fashion designers and industry critics, we anticipated finding some specific behaviors or tactics that designers might use to affirm their identities and used these as a starting set of coding categories (i.e. ability to control the creative process, being recognized for individual contributions, having distinguishing features make it into finished products, developing a personal theme or style in finished products). We developed a coding scheme based on these a priori categories, and then independently coded the data into these categories. We measured inter-coder agreement to determine if our coding scheme was unambiguous and robust. Our inter-coder agreement was high (95%). We discussed and resolved all discrepancies. In the second stage, we performed second-order meaning categorizations, to look for categorizations that could further consolidate and simplify our meaning categorizations. That is, we searched for tactics or behaviors that were very similar in terms of their meaning to and for designers (e.g. including distinguishing features in finished products, and developing a personal theme or style in finished products could be combined as a category of 'developing a signature style in finished products'). We again independently coded the data into these categories. Again, our inter-coder agreement was high (95%) and we discussed and resolved all discrepancies. The data analysis process is depicted in Figure 1.

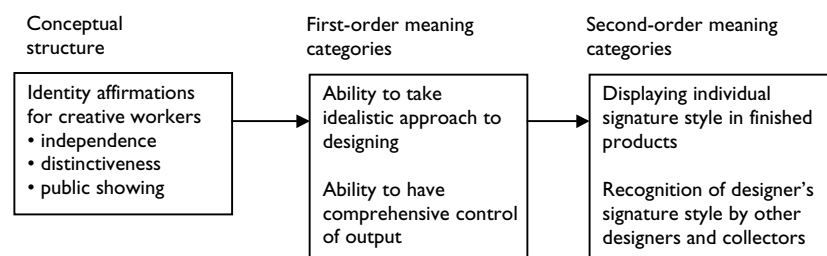


Figure 1 Qualitative data analysis process in a study of CoolCars designers

Findings

In general, findings from this study suggest that the ability of designers to display and have recognized their individual creative styles – what I call 'signature styles' – in commodity products was important to affirming their creative professional identities. In line with this general finding, I describe three specific findings regarding the identity affirmation of CoolCars designers suggested by the data: 1) CoolCars designers desired to affirm the identity categorizations of 'independent' and 'idealistic' through their work; 2) the affirmation of the categorizations of 'independent' and 'idealistic' was often achieved through the display of CoolCars designers' unadvertised signature styles in their work products; and 3) the recognition of these signature styles by other designers and collectors helped to affirm CoolCars designers' creative professional identities. I summarize evidence of these findings in Table 1 and discuss it below.

Table 1 Summary of interview and observational data

<i>Data type</i>	<i>Source of identity affirmation</i>	<i>Identity category affirmed</i>	<i>Example</i>
Interview	Displaying one's signature style in products	Idealistic	It's really important to keep to your original concepts because that's what makes the toy good, and that's what you want representing your work. And in the beginning, the whole feel of the toy starts off as the designer's. But so many times there will be a little bit of marketing input and then you will test it a little bit and then based on the results of that test the color, the theme might change, various things like that so it is less and less one individual's vision what the final thing is. It is not as pure probably as many of us would like it to be. One of my best friends has a good analogy in that often times it ends up being a sofa bed. Not a great sofa and it is not a great bed. And I don't want to make sofa beds or have people think I make sofa beds.
		Independent	There's this one designer X, he literally goes out into a corner, builds something and comes back with something that is completely his own. Doesn't ask for any help, doesn't want any help. Very competitive, very secretive, extremely independent but boom the ideas come out.

Table 1 continued

<i>Data type</i>	<i>Source of identity affirmation</i>	<i>Identity category affirmed</i>	<i>Example</i>
Interview	Recognition of one's signature style by other designers and collectors	Idealistic	One of our longest-working designers, we recently gave him a recreational vehicle and sent him out on a world tour of toy stores and Wal Marts, and let him sign autographs, because he has such a following. And for him it's great to see that people still love his original designs and that they don't want him to change, because he is Mr CoolCars. We can't do that for everyone, but we did it for him.
		Independent	We try to highlight the best stuff, the best of the best and there are lots of ways of doing that. We have public meetings where we get together. I try to show the highlights of this stuff that has been done and tell why that is great and it is not to diminish anything that is not on that list it is just, look at this stuff, it is just unbelievable. And it is a way of giving individual recognition and letting individuals shine. And that is important that we can recognize what an individual is doing and that his individual contribution is valued.
Observation	Displaying one's signature style in products	Idealistic	Talking to a designer during observation, I asked about his cars. He said, 'My cars have an old-fashioned hot rod feel to them, with very loud colors and bold graphics. They tend to have rounder vs. squarer features. If you looked at a hundred cars of mine, you could see how they all have this same feel. It's kind of a 1960s mod-style of graphics on a hot-rod. They all have that same feeling. I like being able to look at my cars in the store and see the XX style so vividly. At least it's vivid to me.'
		Independent	In a meeting with several designers, one notes, 'If I'm working on a car that has my signature style, I'm going to be more careful about taking input. I will take input, but only in a way that preserves my style.'

Table 1 continued

<i>Data type</i>	<i>Source of identity affirmation</i>	<i>Identity category affirmed</i>	<i>Example</i>
Observation	Recognition of one's signature style by other designers and collectors	Idealistic	In conversation with one designer, he said, 'What I really hate is when marketing says that a design I've done is something that is already out there. That totally ignores the raw thermonuclear power that designers have for creativity. It just looks similar because it's my style, but it's a totally different design. A fellow designer would never say that. He'd say "that's a cool take on your style."'
		Independent	In a meeting with a group of designers, one remarked, 'What's really great is when one of the engineers in Malaysia comes up with a way to preserve my style in the car and still meet their manufacturing specs. It shows that they recognize the importance of my style and will work to keep it preserved in the final product.'

1) Affirmation of the identity categorizations 'independent' and 'idealistic'

The data suggest that, for most CoolCars designers, it was important to affirm their identities as 'independent' artists who took an individual and 'idealistic' approach to their work. Further, many suggested that they desired to affirm these identity categorizations even though it was difficult to do in a large corporation, like the one for which they worked. For example, one designer described the difficulty of affirming his idealistic approach to work:

The problem at this company is there are too many opinions, there are too many important people, there are too many 'A' personalities that want to be heard that maybe don't even have anything valuable to say but need to be heard as compared to a creative person who is often the outsider who is often quiet, often doesn't want to scream and yell, who doesn't think they need to scream and yell and think that their ideas should be respected and they should be given credit for being intelligent and creative, which is why you were hired to begin with.

Similarly, another designer noted how difficult it was to affirm one's independence as an artist in this large company:

I believe I know why [Xcar] is successful at the heart of it. [Xcar] I honestly believe is what it is because it [was designed without management scrutiny]. They weren't looking at that as being a key driving toy – it was one of many toys and it kind of went under the radar a little. Actually they were talking about killing it. I designed an entire product line, the play set, the car, the whole thing. [Someone said] 'No, it is a horrible idea let's just make one.' Then they tested it and kids really responded to it and that is when all hell broke loose because now it came up onto the radar screen. At that point luckily it was too late so they couldn't change it so it made it out the door pretty much as it was originally envisioned and it was a success because to me it was a singular idea that was executed to be that idea and nothing else.

Observational data confirmed these interview statements indicating the importance of 'independence' and 'idealistic' as identity categorizations for CoolCars designers. For example, one day I noticed a group of drawings by several different designers tacked onto a wall in the design center. A designer told me these were last year's designs. I asked why they were here, and was told that the designers liked to post their favorite designs here, and that it was the one place where their designs were shown in their original form (i.e. these were drawings much like those seen of actual automobiles in the design phase, and were signed by the artists who made them).

In looking at these drawings, I noticed that each was made by a single designer before any modifications to the design were imposed. As such they represented each designer's independent and idealistic work. The fact that the designers themselves displayed these drawings prominently underscored the importance of these independent and idealistic designs to affirming the designers' identities. That is, rather than displaying the finished cars here, the designers chose to display their original renderings.

Together, these findings suggest that, despite their work in large corporate context producing commodity products, most CoolCars designers sought to affirm their identities as 'independent' and 'idealistic' creators. Further, they were able to recognize this need in other CoolCars designers. These findings confirm research described in the introduction suggesting that independence and idealism were common identity categorizations held by creative workers.

Interestingly, there was no evidence that designers attempted to affirm the identity categorizations of non-conformist and 'show-er'. It's possible that merely being employed as a CoolCars designer was enough affirmation that the designers' work was being 'shown' in public, and these designers did not perceive the need to underscore that through their individual creative

visions. Further, it may have been difficult for these designers to affirm a truly non-conformist identity through their finished work because they knew they had to meet certain guidelines in order to get their work out the door (e.g. size, cost, and material limitations).

2) Individual creative vision displayed through unadvertised 'signature styles'

A second finding to arise from the data was that CoolCars designers were able to signal and affirm their creative identities as 'independent' and 'idealistic' by developing 'signature styles' that were not advertised, stamped on finished products, or even formally recognized in company communications, but were, nonetheless evident to other CoolCars designers, as well as to select groups of CoolCars collectors.

For example, in my interviews, many designers discussed their idealistic approach and described how their signature styles showcased that approach. As one designer noted about his ideology of doing the 'unexpected' in a stylish way:

You can tell my designs because they are very organic, I guess, fairly modern looking. A lot of times people say it looks like a turtle or they try to equate it to an animal of some kind . . . they've never seen anything like that. Styling is definitely my favorite part of the creative process and I like to make sure things are unexpected . . . not in a bad way. I wouldn't just do something to make it unexpected and it still looks kind of bad. I like tactility, you want to look at things and want to instantly pick them up.

Similarly, during another interview a designer noted how his distinctive idealistic approach was evident in his designs:

My designs are very well known among other designers in this industry. I have a very distinctive style and use of color and line that is instantly recognizable as mine. It's a very 'mod' style. No matter what I'm designing, I like to put my own style on it and approach it in the same creative way. I put these designs on other products [toys other than CoolCars] sometimes, and people still notice them, and ask me if I did that design.

Observational data provided similar evidence of the affirmation of idealistic approach through signature styles. For example, while observing

one CoolCars designer who was rendering original designs, I noticed a familiar feature (an elongated set of fins above the rear wheels) included in his new design. I asked about this feature, and the designer noted that this was a signature feature of his designs that reflected his personal ideology of 'cool'. As he remarked:

I like to think of my designs as sophisticated and ultra cool. I guess that's how I want my cars to be perceived. It's important that this cool style comes across in my cars, because that's sort of who I am as a designer.

In the same manner, interviews and observation of CoolCars designers at work revealed that many designers took great pains to make sure their signature styles came across in their original forms, untainted by others' modifications. In this way, designers affirmed the identity categorization of 'independent' through their designs. For example, in an interview, a CoolCars designer discussed the need for independence of one of the most senior designers. He then noted how this independence was evident in his signature products:

I mean, people that do have signatures, like [Designer X], I guess he's the iconic signature person, you can tell it's his car designs when you look at them, mainly because they look dated in a way that he does. Like I think personalities like that tend to not want to take on help because they own that whole arena of whatever they're doing.

Similarly, during my observations another designer noted that, whenever possible, he attempted to include a representation of his face in his cars. This designer had a distinctive beard and a rather round face. He showed me a couple of examples of car designs that included his face, and they were instantly recognizable. After identifying the cars by this 'face' feature, I also noticed several other design features that were consistent in his signature style (e.g. cube-shaped car bodies, interesting window shapes). This combination of features was unique to his designs and it was easy to tell if these features were modified or remained in their original form. Further, the inclusion of his own face as a part of his signature style made it clear that these were his independent designs (who would put someone else's face in their designs?). As this designer remarked:

I guess I'm one of those people who don't want to let go of my designs. And, at least in this one line of cars, I've been able to keep most of my

designs intact from the original renderings to the finished product. You can look at the drawings and the finished cars and see that it's my original design.

3) Recognition of signature styles by expert observers

A final finding to arise from the data was that the recognition of signature styles by fellow designers and CoolCars collectors was affirming to designers' identities. First, CoolCars designers reported that they enjoyed the recognition they got from fellow designers and collectors at CoolCars conventions. In general, several indicated that these were some of the few times they felt validated as individual artists. As one designer recalled:

Again a lot of our guys they are revered not only here inside the building but these guys are gods when they go to the [CoolCars] convention. You've heard of jokes about Star Trek conventions and how fanatical those people are, the [CoolCars] collectors are equally as fanatical and they have autograph sessions and things. One of the great stories was there was a dinner associated with the [CoolCars] collector convention and some of our designers were sitting at this thing saying we could probably autograph a dinner roll and auction it off and they did and they raised like \$50.00 for an autographed dinner roll. And that was so cool for them to have that kind of recognition of their work. For their artistic work, in particular.

More specifically, designers reported that recognition from CoolCars collectors often helped to affirm identities as independent and idealistic creators. As one designer noted about recognition of individual ideology:

It's really great when someone from the industry comes up to you at a show and comments on some design you did in the past. The fact that they recognized the design as yours – even though your name wasn't on it – says that you have a following in the trade. Those moments make it all worthwhile as a designer, because you know people are following your work.

Interviews and observation also showed that recognition by other designers, both inside and outside the company was important to affirming CoolCars designers' identities as idealistic. For example, during one observation period a more senior designer noted that another designer's style (designer X's style) was so well known it was called 'X-esque'. As he noted:

His cars have a distinct triangular shape and small window openings. Everyone knows his style. He'll often ask me if a design is 'X'-esque' enough. So I know that he's trying to get that look in at least some of his cars.

Similarly, in an interview with a senior CoolCars designer, he noted that:

We recently did a design competition for all the CoolCars designers. And even though not all of the designers got a car in the final line, at least all of them got to put up their ideas and drawings of their ideas, and they got voted on. And in that voting, everyone gives feedback about how well each designer executed his particular style. That's important to a designer. Maybe more important than even getting the car in the line.

Finally, there was evidence in both interviews and observation that recognition by other designers was important to affirming the identity categorization of 'independent'. As one designer noted in an interview:

When other designers look at my work, they might not like it, but that is beside the point. It is a singular vision and they can recognize that, and that is why it is unique and why it is strong.

Discussion

The goal of the present study was to determine how professional creative workers, who design commodity products in large corporate contexts, might, nonetheless, affirm their creative identities through their work. Findings suggest that corporate creative workers desire to affirm their identities as 'independent' and 'idealistic' artists, and that they may do so by designing commodity products that bear their 'signature' styles, although these signature styles are not advertised or officially recognized in any way. Further, findings suggest that recognition of these signature styles by expert observers, such as other designers and product collectors, helped creative corporate workers to affirm their professional creative identities.

Together, these findings have implications for theories of professional identity in organizations, and for the management of creative workers who value those identities. I discuss these implications below. I finish with a discussion of the limitations and directions of future research suggested by the current findings.

Theoretical implications: Understanding 'identity work' among creative workers

Findings from the current study shed light on the nature of professional creative workers' identities and on the identity affirmations – or what is more generally defined as 'identity work' (Beech et al., 2008; Watson, 2003) – in which these professionals engage. Watson (2003: 129) defines such identity work as:

[the] mutually constitutive processes whereby people strive to shape a relatively coherent and distinctive notion of personal self-identity and struggle to come to terms with and, within limits, to influence the various social-identities which pertain to them in the various milieu in which they live their lives.

Thus, identity work may be used to affirm both personal identities held by individuals, as well as social identities perceived by others. As Watson (2003: 130) goes on to note:

The identity work that people do is not most usefully understood as primarily an 'internal' self-focused process. Instead, it is better understood as a coming together of inward/internal self reflection and outward/external engagement . . .

Extant research on identity work has examined a variety of professions outside of the creative industries, including health care providers (Pratt & Rafaeli, 1997; Pratt et al., 2006), legislative staffers (Elsbach, 2001), investment bankers and consultants (Ibarra, 1999). These studies reveal that professionals are likely to engage in identity work if they perceive that observers may mistake their 'true' identities at work. For example, Pratt and Rafaeli (1997) described how nurses might wear street clothes versus scrubs to affirm their identities as rehabilitators versus caregivers if they felt that these two identities might be confused. Similarly, identity work has been described in studies of new or 'freshly minted' professionals (Ibarra, 1999; Pratt et al., 2006), who wished to competently enact the skills and traits of their professions if they perceived that their professional status might be questioned. In this manner, Ibarra's (1999) study of management consultants and investment bankers illustrated how, as a means of affirming professional identities, new hires symbolically portrayed the professional identities they were expected to hold through the use of language and informal behaviors they saw in seasoned practitioners. Comparable identity work has also been observed in established professionals who wish to maintain existing status

and/or distinctiveness in their professional identities (Fineman, 1997; Thomas & Linstead, 2002; Watson, 2003). For example, Thomas and Linstead (2002: 80–1) found that managers relied on labels such as ‘specialist’ or ‘team leader’ to affirm their identities as managers and to differentiate themselves from lower level staff. Finally, researchers have found that individuals commonly used artifacts, such as photos, mementos, or equipment to physically mark their identities at work (Dittmar, 1992; Elsbach, 2004; Pratt & Rafaeli, 1997).

In a similar way, the current findings illustrate how creative workers in corporate settings may display and affirm desired professional identities both to self and others in corporate environments which may threaten these identities (i.e. as noted in the introduction, merely being employed by a large corporation is contrary to the identities of many who consider themselves ‘artists’). Yet, the current work goes beyond this established finding by describing how professional workers may affirm unique individual identities (versus broad professional identities). Further, this work suggests that key targets of this identity work may be expert observers. I discuss these two theoretical implications below.

Individual name-brands and identity

A first theoretical implication of the above findings is that creative workers may affirm a creative professional identity by displaying and having recognized their individually identifiable products. This finding suggests that signature objects or artifacts may be an important means of signaling professional identity, and is consistent with earlier theorizing suggesting that individual creators (e.g. fashion designers) may develop an individual name-brand by producing a ‘signature line’ for a larger organization (Cappetta & Gioia, 2006). Yet, this finding suggests that, unlike most professionals previously studied (i.e. healthcare providers, managers, consultants), creative professionals may be more inclined to affirm their unique person-based identities, rather than their professional role-based identities. These findings suggest that models of professional identity may need to be extended to recognize the industry differences that may predict how professionals balance person-based and role-based categorizations in defining their identities (Ashforth, 2001).

In addition, the current findings demonstrate that creative workers may establish a signature line of products even if these products are commodities that do not bear their names. Specifically, findings show that an individual creator may affirm identity categorizations related to his or her creative ideology and independence by developing a design style that signals this

independent and idealistic approach (e.g. 'organic', 'cool', 'mod', or even '[designer name]-esque'), and by including this signature style on a number of products over time.

This finding supports recent research suggesting that individual observers may commonly look to objects or artifacts as identity cues from individuals (Elsbach, 2003, 2004), and that such cues may be an effective strategy for interpreting individual identities. In this vein, recent psychological research has shown that observers are surprisingly consistent and accurate in their use of cues from the physical environment (e.g. bedroom and office decor), or from physical artifacts (e.g. personal webpages) to evaluate their displayer's personality (Gosling et al., 2002; Vazire & Gosling, 2004). The current findings suggest that not only are physical artifacts useful for interpreting personalities, but also for interpreting professional creative identities.

Finally, the current findings provide insight on the complexity of identity work. As Beech et al. (2008: 963) note:

Representations of self and identity claims are made within social settings which strongly influence what is 'allowable' in the performance of self. Cultural and normative control mechanisms socialize people into adhering to particular forms of body, dress, language, and rules of interaction. However, there are possibilities of 'slippage' and disruption of norms. It is possible to recognize, challenge, and resist categories and boundaries between them. Whilst some people may adopt the norms of a social category, others may resist and others may 'act' – in other words make a pretence of conformity whilst actually resisting in subtle ways.

The current findings suggest that CoolCars designers may have been treading the boundary between 'allowable' performance of self, and subtle resistance to performance rules. Individual signatures are not attached to CoolCars products and individual name-brands are not developed and promoted by the company. Yet, these same designers were able to develop a recognizable (at least by dedicated collectors and other designers) signature style through their work on toy car lines over which they have substantial creative control. By engaging in consistency in their design style over time, CoolCars designers were able to engage in individual identity work without violating the rules against individual name-brands. Such individual identity affirmation may be critical to creative workers who appear to define themselves more by person-based categorizations than broad role-based categorizations. Further, such identity work shows how individuals who have

compelling reasons to engage in identity work, but seemingly little access to resources allowing them to do so (Beech et al., 2008), may in fact be able to affirm desired identities through more subtle means.

At the same time, not having their names attached to their products may allow creative professionals more freedom to experiment with a variety of styles and to break the normative guidelines of their artistic domains. Research on creative worker identities has shown that idealistic and purist notions of artistic identities can produce strong cognitive boundaries around the 'right way to act', and as a result, limit the ability of creative professionals to engage in specific types of creative behaviors. For example, Curran's (1996) study of 'rock' and 'jazz' drummers revealed that these two well-defined identity categorizations limited the ability of drummers to exhibit innovative styles of drumming that crossed over into the other domain. As Curran (1996: 58) notes:

Musicians are widely considered to be 'artists' – creative people who perhaps are not as concerned about, or constrained by, boundaries or rules as are non-artists. It is clear [from the current study of drummers] that drumming artists . . . are heavily constrained by the boundaries they create and are not at all liberated from these lines that bind.

As a result, some artistic anonymity may allow creative professionals to develop a number of styles without cries of impropriety by their loyal fans. This finding further demonstrates the effectiveness and flexibility of un-advertised signature styles as an identity work tactic.

Expert observers and identity work

A second theoretical implication of the current findings is the importance of expert observers to the identity work of creative professionals. In particular, current findings confirm research described in the introduction about the relational nature of expert observers and creative artists. That is, CoolCars designers appeared to rely on recognition by experts, such as fellow designers and CoolCars collectors, to provide external verification of their professional identities. Further, the current findings suggest that these expert observers need not be formally trained or certified critics, but may merely be avid consumers or collectors.

These findings suggest that, despite their 'idealistic' identities, creative workers may, nevertheless, desire direct contact with and feedback from the end-consumers of their work. What seems to be important is that these consumers are knowledgeable about a creative professional's work (i.e. are

able to recognize it and appreciate its differences from that of other designers). This notion runs contrary to the stereotype that creative workers create only for themselves, and not with their audiences in mind (Macdonald & Wilson, 2005), and suggests that knowledgeable audiences may, instead, be critical to the identity work of creative professionals who are not allowed to attach their names to their products.

Practical implications: Managing creative workers in corporate settings

The current findings have a number of implications for the management of creative workers in corporate settings. First, these findings suggest that creative professionals – including those who work in corporate settings designing commodity products – maintain professional identities that center on person-based categorizations that define their independent and unique style. As a result, creative professionals may perceive that their identities are most affirmed in settings in which they are allowed, at least at times, to produce distinctive, individual work products. By contrast, such workers are less likely to be satisfied if their work outputs are solely produced in team contexts and do not display individual styles. These findings run counter to recent theorizing on creative work suggesting that group contexts may be best for producing creative output (e.g. Amabile, 1996; Monge et al., 1992; Paulus & Nijstad, 2003; Sternberg, 1999), and suggest that more attention may need to be paid to affirming the individual identities of creative workers in corporate settings.

Second, the current findings suggest that identity affirmation for creative workers may come not only from those within their work organizations, but from external consumers – especially educated collectors of their creative products. This insight further suggests that managers of creative workers may wish to develop and support relationships with outside collector groups through websites, collector 'shows', and opportunities for collectors to meet with creative workers face to face. Collector groups have become increasingly important to the survival of niche market players, such as toy designers, as competition for their typical customers (e.g. children) has intensified (Wray, 2008). Further, such interactions may not only benefit creative workers, but also collectors. Research on collecting behavior has shown that there are many different motivations for collecting, including providing 'a statement of who they are' (McIntosh & Schmeichel, 2004). As a result, collectors may be able to support and affirm a desired sense of self through the acquisition 'expert status' gained from meeting with designers of collectibles and talking with them about their designs (McIntosh & Schmeichel, 2004: 88). Thus, encouraging and supporting interactions

between collectors and creative workers produces a synergistic relationship in which both parties' identities may be affirmed.

Finally, the current findings provide practical insight about the importance of developing an individual name-brand for the long-term job satisfaction of creative workers. Because development of an individual name-brand through unadvertised signature styles requires time (i.e. only after many products bearing the signature style have been produced can expert observers begin to recognize this signature style), creative workers may be motivated to remain with a single employer longer, to ensure that their signature styles become recognized. Allowing individual designers to have personal control over a portion of their designs, spread out over time, may thus, be in the best interest of managers hoping to keep these creative workers with their firm.

Limitations and directions for future research

As an exploratory study, designed to build theory in an understudied area, the current findings are limited in their generalizability. In particular, the small number of designers that were interviewed and observed limits the generalizability of current findings to organizations that use 'artistic' designers to produce commodity products (i.e. housewares, or non-couture fashion). It is not clear how designers who do not view themselves as 'idealistic' artists would differently affirm their identities in such organizations, or how designers working in firms where finished products almost never bear the signature of a single creative worker (e.g. automobile design) would develop signature styles. Research on creative workers suggests that these individuals may choose to do work outside of the organization as a means of identity affirmation (Fletcher, 1999).

Further, my focus on responses from 'serious' collectors neglects the role of average consumers and other audiences in affirming the identities of creative workers. Research on the role of broad-based consumption in identity affirmation (see Zukin & Maguire, 2004, for a review), suggests that consumption of designer goods is increasingly viewed as an identity signal by those who consume these goods, and that seeing one's designs used by the masses may be affirming to the creators of these goods, even though the goods aren't identified as being by their creators.

In sum, the current findings provide a conceptual framework for understanding the identities of creative workers. This framework suggests that creative workers desire to be recognized as individual artists with signature styles, and that recognition of these signature styles by even small groups of collectors and other creative workers may be essential to affirming and maintaining their self-concepts.

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Notes

- 1 It should be acknowledged that creative workers, who are employed outside of corporate contexts, may also have practical constraints placed on their work. Fine artists, musicians, performing artists, and the like often have to deal with the needs and wants of consumers (e.g. the public won't purchase artwork that is too large for their living rooms), promoters (e.g. we don't have a concert hall that can accommodate a full symphony) and even private benefactors (e.g. your script must have a role for my aspiring-actress daughter).
- 2 It should be noted that Sluss and Ashforth (2007) recognize that role-based and person-based categorizations may *appear* to overlap in the enactment of a role. For example, a role identity that involves supervising others, may be combined with a person-based identity of openness, and result in a person enacting the role of supervisor in an open and transparent manner. While this combination of identity categorizations in the enactment of the role may appear to blur the two types of categorizations, they are, nevertheless defined as distinct dimensions or inputs to an individual's identity.

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