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Identity and Branding in the Boundaryless Career: An analysis of visual artists' career trajectories

Abstract

This research focuses on artists' careers and the ways in which they create and manage their artistic identity and brand in order to add value to their 'product.' There has lately been an increasing focus on art enterprises as business organisations which firmly locates discussions of the artist and the art market within the business and marketing literature. However, in the existent literature the visual arts are predominantly researched from the perspective of their economic value or of consumption. Although artists' careers are considered relevant to branding and marketing theory, identifying how these are constructed and managed, and identity negotiated through this process is an area that needs further development. Qualitative analysis of artists' career trajectories will illustrate how artists fit into the model of the boundaryless career and how they navigate this career structure through project networks; recognizing the importance of relationships for artists to build up their social capital in order to construct and develop their professional identities and have their art valorised through this social process.

Background

Artists' careers are very much overlooked in the management literature yet they demonstrate some unique labour market activities: the overwhelming majority of artists have to balance multiple jobholding behaviour and sources of earnings, allocation of time and costs of producing their work; they must take personal control of their career management where responsibility for career development lies with the individual not the organisation, make continuous decisions as whether to follow the public or private market path and who to work with and sell to; have high levels of tolerance for uncertainty as there are no set career trajectories to follow and; as the economic situation of being an artist is generally unfavourable, have different ways of defining career success. This study aims to draw on the careers literature from a marketing perspective because in the case of artists, the product they create is inextricably linked to their career and their identities.

The Boundaryless Career

In her study of Australian artists, Bridgstock (2005) finds that artists fit into the 'new careerist' model of the boundaryless or protean career in which getting ahead no longer means steadily ascending a corporate ladder. Terms such as 'boundaryless career' (Arthur, 1996) and 'protean career' (Hall, 2004) refer to different aspects of this apparently new phenomenon – the need for the individual to enhance their human capital by actively navigating their career, where the individual's own personal career choices and search for self-fulfillment are the unifying or integrative elements in his or her life. As such artists are an ideal group to study for future research into this new pattern of career. Within the last several years, there has been a call for research that includes not only a subjective viewpoint of careers (Hall 2002) but also the extension of career research beyond the confines of a particular organization (Arthur and Rousseau 1995). Thus the present research contributes to careers research by exploring a subjective element of careers and the clarity of professional identity which transcends organisational boundaries and to marketing research by understanding how this relates to the process by which artists access the market.

Branding and Identity

Boundaryless career theory suggests that as traditional boundaries of hierarchy, function and geography are eroding, in their place has emerged a new set of boundaries which are more subjectively and psychologically defined, so a clearer sense of identity is necessary to navigate and shape the "boundaryless" career (Lips-Wiersma & McMorland, 2006; Dobrow and Higgins 2005). It therefore emphasises pragmatic choice and the maximizing of opportunities for personal fulfillment on the basis of subjective dimensions and the development of 'Brand Me' (Lips-Wiersma & McMorland, 2006). Artists' careers can provide a further understanding of this as they are caught between two worlds, the critical world from which they derive psychological success and the financial market from which they derive economic success; as they negotiate these two spheres, artists must create a brand image that embraces both the fulfillment of self and economic exchange.

Goffman (1959)'s work has dealt with the dynamics of self-presentation and has paved the way to the importance of image as a conveyor of an identity. In line with this Plattner (1998), finds that some artists make work primarily because their identity and self-respect are defined by their work. Schroeder (2005) continues in this tradition, acknowledging the relevance of artists' image management on branding theory and turns to artists for insights into brands, marketing and strategy in his research. However, there is still little research in this field and although Shroeder has demonstrated that

artists are brands and that they successfully manage these brand images, there is still little understanding of how these images are constructed and managed and identity negotiated through them.

Svejenova (2005) finds that an artist must fabricate authenticity in his/her work through the duality of identity expression and image manufacturing, negotiating it through social construction and the influence of several 'milieus' such as careers, market and industry structure, amongst others. Several studies have acknowledged the importance of authenticity for careers but they have failed to specify the process by which authenticity-driven careers are shaped over time, and the manufactured, negotiated and socially constructed nature of authenticity. The importance of understanding identity as the produce of an unfolding, dynamic process has also been highlighted by careers researchers, and leader development (Hall 2004). More generally, careers researchers have proclaimed the need for understanding the evolution of career phenomena over time through longitudinal methods (Hall 2002). This study aims to contribute to the stream of boundaryless career research by shedding light on the process of career creation through the marketing lens of branding and identity construction. By focusing on the agency and career trajectories of artists, rather than on traditional structural accounts of creativity (e.g. Becker, 1974, 1982; Caves, 2000; Hirsch, 1972; Peterson, 1997), it also attempts to fill a void of individual accounts of creative work in sociological and organizational studies of art (Blau, 1988). This research also connects to the wider movements in economic sociology to analyse and construct organizational fields and address the social construction of markets of all kinds (DiMaggio 1991).

Networks

In her discussion of the individual and situational antecedents of identity development, Ibarra calls for empirical, organizational research that investigates the connections between networks and identity (Ibarra 1999; Ibarra 2003). Networks may provide a key means by which people can explore their possible selves and construct and develop their professional identities, acquiring the ability to process feedback about the self (Hall, 2002). Professional identity development, such as through the exploration of possible new identities (Ibarra, 1999) or self-awareness processes (Hall, 2002), occurs over the course of time. Given that networks in the context of careers by definition unfold over time, the element of time necessarily plays a key role and necessitates a longitudinal view rather than a snapshot view of an individual's network and professional identity at a single point in time, thus the necessity of looking at artists at different stages in their career trajectories.

As the new careerist takes personal responsibility for their career development outside the bounded traditional employment relationship, the concept of social capital becomes far more important (Burt, 1992; Bourdieu, 1984). Individuals in boundaryless careers 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 (Bridgstock, 2005). Svejenova (2005) notes that this is particularly important in the creative industries where the creation of careers takes place in project networks and we must therefore recognise the importance of interaction between both the artist and audience and the artist and collaborators. Such interactions can have an impact on the identity of the artist and the shaping of his or her career. Studies of how artists use their social and professional networks to develop their careers are not numerous, but there is some empirical evidence that artists' social capital does have a strong impact on whether they continue to be employed in the arts and how successful they are in the field (Giuffre, 1999). Although "knowing whom" seems to be

considered important, there are no studies to date on the source of this notion in the artist's psyche and whether and to what extent they implement it in their personal career management, how artists accumulate and implement that social capital and indeed which other career skills they use in their personal career management as well as which sources of information they access to hone their skills. A small number of authors (Fillis 2004; O'Reilly 2005) have recently suggested that career-management skills including both skills and competencies as well as broader aspects of the artist's identity and characteristics will also have an effect on the artist's career outcomes. So while entrepreneurialism, social capital and networking have been connected to artists careers in the literature, there is a lack of work that demonstrates the links between aspects of the artist and success. How effective artists are in navigating their boundaryless careers and accessing the market is a question that has not been examined yet in any systematic way.

Methodology

The methodology takes a qualitative, exploratory approach, appropriate for a first investigation of a topic where little previous research exists (Miles & Huberman 1994). The main source of data collection is semi-structured interviews of artists and other key informants as well as continuing literature review. The interviews, with key informants working in the art world in London, focus on artists' career trajectories, including insights into accessing the art world. As generally considered appropriate for qualitative research, potential respondents were identified through purposive sampling (Silverman, 2001) to represent as wide a range of hierarchical and functional positions within the arts market as possible. A total of about 30 interviews will be conducted. The cases will be analysed by looking at the way the artists have developed and how they have constructed and managed their identities and brand image in order to gain legitimacy. The main limitation of this methodology is that much of the information on the workings of the art market emerges spontaneously from the interviews, rather than being elicited through direct questions. Also, the same questions are not necessarily asked of all respondents. This makes the results valuable as unforced views of the respondents but it also means that it is not always strictly comparable between two cases.

In order to obtain information about the arts market and gain a sense of the environment, a significant amount of information will also be collected from observational methods in attending arts events such as auctions, art fairs and art openings. In the case of observational study, observation involves making sampling decisions in where the researcher decides to focus and as such, observations made are incomplete records of the actual activity, only a portion of that which is actually going on. What is recorded in field notes influences the types of findings and inferences that one is able to make during data analysis and is therefore not neutral. This is why it will be important to make sure to cross reference any findings from observational data with information from interviews and the secondary data (Silverman, 2001).

Results and Discussion so far

Findings so far suggest that the way artists construct and control their identity and brand can indeed provide a better understanding of how to work in a world where the boundaryless career is becoming more and more widespread. Part of being an artist, especially in the case of emerging artists, means being able to juggle various projects in order to survive financially:

And then I would always kind of do some temping part time, so I would kind of office temp for a bit, for a few months and then when I had shows coming up I was

able to kind of move between kind of then taking a few months off to work on a show. (B.1)

I've not had a job in my life, never, (...) job, I never did regular teaching I just did odd days, I'd just float in for a day and then float out again, it doesn't feel like a job. I mean in other words I have no pension, except for the state pension, to put it at it's simply. And I think a large proportion of artists must be in that position. (F.1)

This financial insecurity is a constant problem:

But that's the thing you work as an artist you don't have a salary, you're never going to have a salary you know, unless. It'd be nice sometimes, I would sacrifice some earnings to know that every year I would make 15K or something, that would be great but just to kind of have that security but maybe the insecurity is something that kind of drives you to keep making stuff I don't know. I don't know how much longer I can kind of hack this kind of total uncertainty all the time, it's just kind of terrifying but there you go. (C.1)

This insecurity leads to the necessity of having a clear sense of identity and the need for having other criteria apart from economic to define success. Even emerging artists need to have a strong sense of belief in themselves and their work:

I mean you kind of have to have belief in yourself, it's kind of mad, it's an absolutely insane thing to do to be an artist, I mean from the beginning, it is cause you've got to just totally believe in what you're doing and sacrifice. I don't know, you know, I, just working in a shop as co-manager I could get £19K a year, I wasn't earning anywhere near that until probably a few years ago, and now it's only around that but I'm doing something that I love you know. (C.2)

*You need self-honesty in making art, in how you make your career decisions, in a world that is highly fluid you need to have one constant and it has to be you because otherwise you're f***ed. (D.1)*

In fact the issue of control came up a lot in the interviews, controlling who sees your work, who buys your work and which work is sold when, are all constant problems to be dealt with:

And then also realising that being a young artist doesn't necessarily mean you have to be pushed around, (...) I remember googling myself on the internet and seeing my work at art fairs in Rotterdam and Shanghai without any permission asked, I didn't know. Now there's a picture for instance of a piece of work showing in Rotterdam last year, that work I don't like, I liked it at the time, it was good but now it has nothing to do with what I do, I was so pissed off when I saw that picture because I thought "God this is on now and I'm not responsible for it, I don't want to show it because I've moved on from that and I don't want people who I might work with in the future to see that and think that's what I do." You know, so there's lots of decisions like that that you want to be involved in, and I didn't like what happened there. (A.1)

The fear here is that a curator, gallerist or collector the artist wants to work with in the future may make the wrong impression of his work and write him off. So there is another balancing act to be done between taking the opportunities offered but also staying in control of your image, short-term versus long-term. Most artists tend to adopt a long-term view of their careers, sacrificing economic security in the short-term for critical attention in the long-term which will then hopefully lead to higher future earnings:

I probably know I'd make money in the short term but I'm not interested in the short term (...) and so it's even odd and it sounds to me to be very arrogant to say things like "hey guys let's keep things under 10[K] for as long as possible" but actually that's true because I'd much rather sell lots of things and get it to good places and wait for a sort of auction record. (D.2)

No matter how strategic an artist is though, there is no straightforward trajectory to follow:

But yeah, it doesn't feel very planned, you know you couldn't make it up, it's not like the typical, you would say, there's a kind of vision of the typical kind of art career which is that you go from school to foundation course to degree to MA, to being represented by a gallery, have a solo show, international art fairs, museum shows, you've made it. And yeah, it doesn't feel like that, it feels much more haphazard than that. (C.5)

In fact, for the vast majority of artists there are years at a time where the trajectory does not go anywhere, mainly because it takes time to build the consensus and the social capital in order for people to start noticing you and start giving you critical attention.

It was only really after going on my MA that I thought [being an artist] could actually be something that I could make a living out of, I guess. And only really through what feels like a series of accidents (...) and I've heard that figure banded around quite a bit, like 5 years, it takes 5 years to kind of establish yourself as something, as someone who can kind of do stuff (C.5)

It normally takes a couple of years from something for someone to kind of, almost come back to you and say 'would you be interested in doing this thing?' I think also people are quite, quite weary of trusting their own taste in a way because that's what a lot of this is, it's sort of putting your neck on the line and saying I believe in this artist and they're sort of, a lot of people kind of think that other people have more, that it's got to be approved by lots of other people before, I mean that's what the art world is in a way, it's like building a pyramid of approval isn't it. (C.6)

That means that for long periods of time artists have to just stick it out with only their own confidence in themselves to keep going. Moreover, the trajectory is not a simple straight line once they are 'discovered,' things tend to happen simultaneously and in a haphazard order:

Everything just fell into place in about two years. (...) So roughly, 11 years of uttermost darkness and then, but you see, this is always very misleading because I had made many, if you like, like-thinking if you like, comrades, brothers, connections, fate. (F.1)

Again, we see how making these connections over time, not just with curators and other professionals but as significantly with peers is incredibly important, although these connections may not pay-off straight away they may be useful at some point down the line. However, as quickly as things may happen to advance your career as an artist, things can fall apart just as quickly and with as little notice, the same artist goes on to say:

So I'd say the mid-90s were a bad time with the downturn. And I mean, the other thing to be said is that, I think most people have this notion when things start to go well that the trajectory, is just upance, you know they think 'ah I'm making it' as it were, it's not true, it's just not true, the chances are there'll be a down, it's not one way. (F.2)

This is why having alternate definitions of success to the traditional 'money and fame' definition is important:

I think my definition of success is to kind of reach, you know a wide audience, as wide an audience globally as possible, while improving the work all the time, you know, constantly, achieving, creating greater work. And kind of, exciting myself, staying as excited myself by the work, you know, that's the most important thing, you kind of make it, it's exciting for you and then you hope it's exciting for others. So that would be, but obviously economically there have to be factors that can enable this kind of scale of work, I'd love to really move up in scale. (B.2)

Although, as we can see, making money is one part of the equation, as importantly or even more importantly is the need to fulfill some kind of internal objectives or development. The need to 'excite yourself' or 'push yourself' came up again and again as a criteria for success. The art itself is often something the artist feels a need to do, it isn't just a way of making a living, it is a part of their identity. In many cases the practice merges with personal life:

It's really hard to gage [how much time I spend on my practice] because I kind of do both at the same time, and I film a lot on holiday and I film a lot when I'm with my daughters so they kind of come into my work sometimes (...) Yeah it really is hard to differentiate. (...) It's tricky because you're always kind of running between one, you're kind of so it's hard, you don't really clock in or out as such. And they both feed into each other so much that it's hard to separate them, because the more I've been working, the more the work and my life kind of becomes kind of meshed into one. (B.2)

This is why the link between the artist and the product they create and their career is so interesting. What one of the artists interviewed said about selling his first piece: "you know I was thinking it was kind of like selling my soul," clearly demonstrates what is so particular about the art market and this study seeks to investigate how branding and identity formation can be used to navigate the rather uncertain terrain of the artworld.

Conclusion

By analysing artists' career trajectories from a marketing angle, this study hopes to shed light on the link between an artist's career and the product he/she creates by focusing on issues of branding and identity formation. This will also contribute to a better understanding of how value is attached to work in the visual arts market and how career-management skills and clear identity and branding lead to success in the market, which may in turn lead to wider conclusions which will be applicable to all boundaryless careerists.

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