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Crafters, explorers, innovators, and co-creators – Narratives in designers' identity work

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Abstract

The role of designers is changing in many organizations, yet we know little of how designers themselves construct their professional identities. Based on 38 interviews of designers working in a design agency, we use Bakhtinian literary genres and chronotopes as a lens to identify four embedded narrative types. These highlight different aspects of designers' work, including different constructions of design – ranging from craftmanship and exploration to innovations and co-creation. Novelty, learning and community emerged as fundamental constructs within designer identity. Furthermore, identity work in each narrative was connected to different types of triggering situations and contextual promoters. The analysis illuminates the multifaceted and situated nature of professional identity work, emphasizing the need to examine design embedded in its context.

Keywords: design expertise; design practice; psychology of design; creativity; professional identity

Highlights:

- Designers construct themselves as crafters, explorers, innovators, and co-creators
- Designers' identity work is highly contextual and thus dependent on time and space
- Different narratives in identity work were connected to different types of trigger events
- Novelty, learning and community were fundamental for identity in the studied agency
- Novelty in content was balanced by desired preservation in the organizational context

During the past decade, the role of designers in organizations has been shifting. Design approaches and design management have captured practitioner and academic attention alike (Gruber et al., 2015). Service design has attempted to shift design "upstream" to a more strategic level (Fayard et al., 2017), design thinking has become a trend in organizations (Brown, 2008; Martin, 2009), and design-driven companies have been lauded (Rae, 2016; Micheli et al., 2018). Amidst the shifting power relationships of design in organizations, the scope and legitimacy of what is considered the realm of designers is under negotiation (Mutanen, 2008; Rauth et al., 2014, Micheli et al., 2018). The role of design is often constructed in relation to other stakeholders in the organizational ecosystem (Fayard et al., 2017) and, as such, designers' professional context is central in identity creation. While recent research has highlighted the socially and organizationally situated nature of design work (Ball and Christensen, 2018; Lloyd and Oak, 2018), we know very little of how design professionals negotiate themselves in and around organizations. Many studies have been conducted out of context with design students and narrowed-down design tasks (Cross, 2004; Defazio, 2008; Björklund, 2013), and the voice of designers

themselves has been largely absent in design research unfortunately (Adams et al., 2011; Liu and Hinds, 2012).

The concept of identity focuses on people's reflections on who they are and what they do (Alvesson et al., 2008; Alvesson, 2010). Identity is also a future-oriented construct; our behavior is affected not only by who we are, but also by who we want to become (Watson, 2013) and what we want to create. As such, designer identity offers an intriguing lens for understanding the changing role of designers in organizations, grounded in the experiences, perceptions, aspirations, and actions of the designers themselves. Instead of understanding designer identity as the sum of different characteristics seen as facets or aspects of self, identity is seen here as emergent and continuously negotiated in the context of interaction (Angouri, 2016). In a turbulent world, the discursive construction and reconstruction of identity emerge as a continuous process (Ybema et al., 2009; Svenningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Beech, 2008). How designers operate depends on the context, including multiple elements such as the extent to which designer identities are reinforced or threatened by others (Liu and Hinds, 2012).

Past research on designer identity highlights its dynamic and multifaceted nature. Professional practice is an important part of designers' identity work, along with the environment in which it takes place; how designers work, and how they understand their professional competence and roles are key issues to keep in mind when researching identity (Goodman et al., 2011). Activities, experiences and contexts of practice are they key areas of designers' lives that lend themselves to useful assessments of professional identity (Green 2009). Notably, identity construction is in a sense co-created by both the designer and their environment linked to a variety of factors including knowledge, complexity of the role, organizational culture and competence perceptions (Gray 2014; Gray, Toombs & Gross, 2015). Designer identity tends to be highly dynamic and evolving in the professional setting, involving aspects of collaborative exploration, development of personal understanding, and cross-disciplinary translation of information within organizations; these types of experiences allow for the formation of designer identity (Daly et al., 2012; Gray & Fernandez, 2018).

Identity can change with experience in a context; for example Liu and Hinds (2012) found that designers decrease references to art meaning systems while increasing references to engineering and business after the first six months on the job in a telecommunications company, while Tracey and Hutchinson (2016) found design students to adopt a more positive orientation towards uncertainty across a semester of studies. Indeed, organizational culture may have a strong effect on designer engagement with their professional identity and affecting how it is perceived in both positive and negative ways regarding self-assessment and adaptation to the environment and expectations therein (Gray 2014). Research on the professional roles of designers also highlights the variety of facets designers draw from in their identity construction. For example, the fifteen visual communications

designers studied by Paton and Dorst (2011) described adopting technician, facilitator, expert, artist or collaborator roles in the briefing process. Neither do designers represent a uniform experience in their professional experiences: Adams and colleagues (2011) mapped four social aspects of collaborating and designing with others in engineering contexts, while Daly and colleagues (2012) found six distinct ways of experiencing design across multiple disciplines - highlighting either evidence-based decision-making, transitions, personal synthesis, progression, creative exploration or freedom. In order to understand how designers navigate in an unpredictable environment, more research on how designers develop and maintain their professional identities is warranted (Tracey and Hutchinson, 2016).

Despite the the analytic frameworks developed through past research on designers, a different kind is needed, namely one focused more on the process of design that leverages designer perspectives themselves (Rogers 2004). The practical concerns and activities of designers must be kept in mind in assessing designer identity; designers apply principles, choose models, and adapt theories, in addition to other simultaneous processes throughout professional daily life (Boling et al., 2017; Gray et al., 2015). A deeper understanding of designers may be unattanable where design work is treated as a set of concrete and ohjective problems instead of as a complex understanding of designers' experiences within a particular design context (Stolterman 2008). As such, the eye of the designer is a crucial source of insight that emerges from design related activities, through reflection, decision making and experience based judgements (Goodman et al., 2011). This article aims to provide such an account through assessing designer identity and identity work through the lens of how designers negotiate, enact, and perform aspects of self in relation to their organizational environment and how they position themselves and others in their narratives (Angouri, 2016). Designers' perceptions linked to the experienced complexity of their professional setting and the work therein are vital in this approach. With a comparatively diverse sample of 38 design consultants of different specializations, cultural backgrounds and geographical locations, within a shared organization, we shed light on how designers use narratives to construct their professional identities in different moments of their career stories.

1. Identity and identity work as a basis for design work

Outside of the field of design, the concept of identity has been studied from several perspectives. As Brown (2015) argues, "identities, people's subjectively constructed understandings of who they were, are and desire to become, are implicated in, and thus key to understanding and explaining, almost everything that happens in and around organizations". This study takes a social psychological approach to identity (Caza et al., 2018), comprising its two main streams of research on identity. The social identity theory has its roots in psychology and focuses on social identity, including social attributes, categories, and relationships (Tajfel and Turner, 1979; Tajfel, 1982). The identity theory, on the other hand, has its roots in sociology and focuses on role identity and expected role performance (Stryker,

1980; Burke and Stets, 1999; Stryker and Burke, 2000). We join a growing number of scholars in brinding these two points for a holistic approach (Angouri, 2016; Stets and Burke, 2000; Fauchart and Gruber, 2011). Professional identities are linked to individuals, but constructed, re-constructed, and de-constructed in dialogue with others. Social relations with different stakeholders impact how the professional role is enacted and perceived. Building on Giddens' (1991) perspective of identity as a process of becoming, where narratives of the self are negotiated and recreated over time, and Weick's (1995, 461) definition of identity as a "person's sense of who he or she is in a setting", we define designer identity as a *discursively constructed understanding of oneself as a designer* (see Author, 2018). This definition allows for both social and role-based identities (see Ashforth, 2000; Fauchart and Gruber, 2011; Powell and Baker, 2014) and emphasizes the constitutive role of language (see Vaara et al., 2016). Having a designer identity means that a person perceives themselves as a designer, and that this is evident in their speech and behavior (see Down and Reveley, 2004).

Even though identity has become a popular topic in organization studies, our understanding is still underdeveloped when it comes to *identity work*, emphasizing the dynamic aspects and on-going struggles around creating a sense of self (e.g. Svenningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Down and Warren, 2008; Watson, 2009). We adopt Svenningsson and Alvesson's (2003, 1165) definition of identity work as the person's *engagement in forming, maintaining, strengthening, and revising the constructions that inform a sense of coherence and distinctiveness*. When doing identity work, people articulate and give meanings to themselves and their actions (Hytti, 2005), aiming for a positive identity (Dutton et al., 2010). Although everybody engages in identity work (Down and Warren, 2008; Lounsbury and Glynn, 2001; Downing, 2005; Down, 2006), there can be specific situations in which the need for active identity work becomes more apparent (Watson, 2009). This includes changes in the scope of roles, as can be argued to be underway in the field of design at large.

Design work complexity is experiential in that it cannot be attributed simply to function, namely a defined design problem or some task performance; context and the activities taking place through designer action must be considered (Goodman et al., 2011). As such, identity work for designers is heavily influenced by embeddedness, or the aspect of being part of a surrounding context (Granovetter, 1985; Dacin, Beal, & Ventresca 1999). One's organization can be a key source of information, resources or legitimacy that inform the a professional identity. Here, the relationiship between the designer and designer identity is continuous and approachable through discourse based on perceptions. This focus on experience is enriched when keeping in mind emotional, intellectual and sensual aspects of interaction with contexts or phenomena; here, theorizing about one's relation to something else is generative, or in other words, a continual interaction rather than definition making in a wholly disconnected state (Wright and McCarthy, 2008).

The concept of identity work can help us to better understand how designers negotiate their professional identities in the face of social demands and role expectations (see Kreiner et al., 2006). As such, this study aims to add to our understanding of socially situated identity work in design by leveraging tools not yet used in designer identity research, namely Bakhtinian literary genres and chronotopes (Bakhtin 1981; 2002), as a lens through which we examine how designers construct their professional identities in a design agency.

2. Methods

This study takes a qualitative approach and uses narrative analysis for investigating designers' identity construction (see e.g. Vaara et al., 2016; Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010) and the role of context (Caza et al., 2018; Brown, 2015). Narratives can be defined as temporal, discursive constructions that provide a means for individual, social, and organizational sensemaking and sensegiving (Vaara et al., 2016). Narratives are natural for human beings; we organize our experiences in narratives, telling each other stories and interpreting the stories we hear (Polkinghorne, 1988). They provide individuals with essential tools to craft their identities (e.g. Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010; McAdams, 1996; Czarniawska-Joerges, 2004; Johansson, 2004; Beech et al., 2012; Hytti and Heinonen, 2013) and to gain legitimacy (e.g. Lounsbury and Glynn, 2001). In general, linguistic processes are not only relevant to our communications with others, but also to how we think and how we persuade ourselves rather than others to follow certain arguments about what we should do (Watson, 1995). Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we define our everyday realities (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). Narrative analysis is thus particularly well suited for examining the situated nature of designer identity.

2.1 A Bakhtinian lens to designers' identity narratives

In the design context, Bakhtin's work has previously been leveraged in the context of user experiences, with McCarthy and Wright's (2007) seminal work using Bakhtin's experiential approach and literary chronotopes (1981) to develop a generative theory of user experience related to technology as experience that could potentially be translatable to design practice (Goodman et al., 2011). In their work, McCarthy and Wright (2007) re-theorize experience to include aspects of interactions with technology, arguing that technology is integrated into daily life and not just used as a tool. This generative theory leveraging Bakhtin's approach could be leveraged for design research (Goodman et al., 2011) infosar as design can be considered a part of contextual daily professional life in addition to being a tool.

In our study, the Bakhtinian lens can be used to add a valuable dimension to understanding designer identity by considering it as experientially embedded in the daily life of designers within particular contexts rather than as a distinct role based function. Although we acknowledge that there are diverse chronotopic approaches and categorizations (Bemong and Borghart, 2010), we build on past work on experiential perspectives that can lend themselves to research on designers (Goodman et al, 2011). We consider the Bakhtinian perspective of chronotopes as valuable and novel in its application to designer identity and identity work through an assessment of experience based designer narratives. Here, the interplay between multiple chronotopes is a critical determinant of how encounters and conflicts unfold (Lawson, 2011). Adopting the Bakhtinian approach, we aim to pay attention to different transition processes, during which designers must explain both their background and future goals (see Ibarra, 2003; Bakhtin, 1993). Furthermore, the Bakhtinian approach is particularly well suited for a pairing with the social psychological social identity theory approach (Tajfel and Turner, 1979), and sociological identity frame (Stryker, 1980) taken here – Bakhtin puts forth that one makes sense of self only in terms of how one relates to others and one's history of self, and thus the social comparison component is central. Here, context, interaction and comparison are all valuable aspects of assessing experience and future aims. As such, given the value of the Bakhtinian lens in foundational past work focused on experiential research (McCarthy and Wright 2007), the call to apply it to designer research (Goodman et al., 2011) and its complementary pairing with identity and social identity theory linked to identity based on social comparison (Tajfel and Turner, 1979; Stryker, 1980), we consider it a valuable asset worthy of application to the current study.

Bakhtin (1981; 2002) introduces the concept of chronotopes. The chronotope encompasses the interconnectedness of time and space in written text, expressed by experiencing individuals, as well as the way in which specific time or context related patterns characterize certain generic types (Collington, 2001). Here, Bakhtin's basic assumption is that narratives are not only composed of a sequence of events and speech acts, but also – and perhaps even primarily – of the construction of a particular story or chronotope (Bemong and Borghart, 2010, 4). As such, he sees language as a world view, which 'represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present' (Bakhtin, 1981: p. 291). In other words, narrative expression by the subject in question about certain aspects of life and shown to be embedded in experience that have functional, ethical and aesthetic aspects to them that inform everyday meaning creation (McCarthy and Wright 2007).

Furthermore, according to Bakhtin (1981), bringing out the developed meaning based on experience is reliant on language and therefore has an inescapable social dimension. Genres that one realizes or develops are seen as diagnostic tools which help to bring about deeper understanding once they are expressed externally and therefore are related to a comparison with other people and past self; here,

understanding is created in the tension between self and others (see Thomson, 1984; McCarthy and Wright, 2007; Bakhtin, 1986). In the present study, we use these genres and chronotopes as units of analysis for studying identity construction within its context by way of experience-based narratives and the characteristics of the temporal and spatial categories represented in the language therein (see Morson and Emerson, 1990).

2.2 Data collection

The data for this study has been collected in five sites in North America and Europe. All interviewees worked for the same design agency, but in different locations, on different levels of the organization, and for partly different clients. Invitations to take part in the study were sent to all designers at the five sites by organizational representatives, and 38 designers volunteered for the study. This included 25 men and 13 women, 26 out of which were working in North American sites and 12 for European sites. All of the interviewees had at least a few years of professional experience in design, and many had more than a decade. Their specialties ranged from visual design to strategic design, and hierarchical position from a trainee to the CEO of the design agency.

Three researchers conducted the semi-structured interviews, which were built around the central themes of professional history, current roles, positive and negative experiences in the organization, and hopes and expectations for the future. Direct questions of identity were not asked (e.g. the term identity was not used by interviewers), rather these wider professional reflections on roles and experiences in the field prompted identity constructions within the interviews. For example, the designers were asked how they had ended up in their current position and to describe examples of the projects they had been involved with, The interviews typically lasted 30-60 minutes, and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. All of the interviews were conducted either in the native language or primary working language of the interviewees. Analysis was conducted in the original languages of the interviews, and some quotes have been translated for the presentation of the results.

To better understand the context of the interviews, the researchers visited four sites in person (interviews in the fifth site were carried out through videoconferencing), typically spending a few days at the offices interviewing and engaging with the staff informally. Two of the authors also attended a number of open events organized by the company and followed the public communications materials produced by the agency. While none of the authors are practicing designers, all have been part of an extended research project on design in organizations, and two have been educating and/or participating in design communities for years in different locations.

2.3 Data analysis

Our abductive and iterative analysis included several rounds (see Table 1). We began with a focus on designers' professional identity, coding expressions of designer identity and the context of identity work – what situations were connected to the identity expressions and how others were described. The first round of coding was done by one of the authors, after which the material was discussed together. There are always many possible interpretations, and systematic coding helped us to discuss our choices and the reasoning behind them (see Mantere and Ketokivi, 2013).

The coded identity expressions served as raw material for the second layer of analysis, namely identifying Bakhtinian literary genres and chronotopes represented within these expressions, paying particular attention to time and space.

Finally, we identified four narrative types (a single quote could contain more than one narrative, being coded into several categories), paying particular attention to representations of creation and design portrayed within these narratives, as well as re-visiting the identity expressions identified in the first stage of the analysis to assess the types of situations and contexts connected to each narrative.

Table 1. Rounds of data analysis in the study

Phases of analysis	1: Identifying expressions of designer identity and identity work	2: Identifying Bakhtinian literary genres and chronotopes	3: Defining narrative types
Analysis work	Coding expressions related to designer identity creation - "who am I?" or "who are we?" – and the situations and contexts into which these are embedded	Coding different Bakhtinian literary genres and chronotopes from the data relying on Bakhtin's work	Defining four different narrative types relying on specific literary genres and chronotopes: "Loving your work", "Learning every day", "Building something unheard of", and "Succeeding together"
Examples of coding	Designer identity: *"I love working on some of the conceptual work that we're doing. Moonshots. I love doing workshops. We'll do like a kindergartner workshop where we solve real-world problems with Play-dough."* Organizational embeddedness: *"We all work hard and we get our work done, but we take time to enjoy things like that and kind of foster that creativity and just kind of that open environment. You know, it's not "so sit at your desk, don't talk to anybody, and get all your work done, and work extreme numbers of hours, as well". There's also kind of a really good work-life balance, and everybody kind of checks in with parts of the team: "How are you feeling about this?", "Can I help?" Things like that. So, I think it's really nice and collaborative that way, too."*	A chronotope of threshold*: "And it was just so, so complicated, like, making a software that basically combined five different programs and covered a subject matter that I knew nothing about. So, having to go through the whole research phase. And I worked with a really great interaction designer who was freelancing for us. But really getting to be there from the beginning, through the full scope. And by the end, it was like, "Oh, I want to be done with this project so badly," because I'm not really designing anything super-cool. It was... I had presented like buttons and knobs. But I had a really good time learning about it and just getting to learn a new language of how to converse with the client on that end. That was really fun, and it felt really good to complete it, because in the beginning, we didn't think it would be possible."*	The "Learning every day" narrative type and the "Loving your work" narrative type: *"I think having a challenge makes it exciting. Some of the maybe more simple projects aren't quite as exciting, where it's just "Reskin this website," or, "Do this basic logo redesign." It's fine, but I'm not always quite challenged in that. And then, so we just got done working on this one project, where we got really lucky to have a great client who saw a few different visual designs and just kind of said, "Go for it." Like, I got total freedom to just go wild with the design in a way that I don't always get to do. So, that made it pretty exciting. And just learning about some new technologies along the way. So, yeah, learning and creative freedom I think make things exciting to work on."*

3. Findings

Four different narrative types were identified from the 38 designer interviews. Below, we discuss each narrative type in terms of their literary genre, chronotopes (temporal and spatial dimensions), representations of creation and design, triggers and organizational embeddedness.

3.1 "Loving your work" narrative type

The narrative type of "Loving your work" (summarized in Table 2) constructed designers' career idyllic and their organization as a family, reflective of the Bakhtinian literary genre "idyllic novel" and chronotope "the family idyll". The idyll is often defined by the unity of space, which brings together contrasting parties, or, in this case, typically different colleagues. Idyllic life is inseparable from places

and often focuses on the past (Vaara and Pedersen, 2013) – it is not something that is available in general, but rather in this specific time, space or organization and is thus context specific. Personal preferences and motivations were emphasized here, linking to identity work in terms of personal needs, desires and future hopes. On the other hand, idyll type of stories often legitimize the status-quo in organizations (Vaara and Pedersen, 2013). In our case, preservation of the good organizational culture was constructed as crucial, which may be linked to the value of reinforcing the social environment within which positive aspects of designer identity and thus professional sense of self are reinforced.

In the "Loving your work" narratives, designers constructed their work as almost perfect, and associated elements such as *"autonomy", "craftsmanship", "exploring",* and *"learning"* with it. At the same time, the designers constructed their professional identity. Many designers expressed in one way or another that design is not only work for them, but rather a way of living and thus it can be seen as important on a deeper level, such as in terms of *"core values".* One designer described his project and the experience he considered priceless: *"That's the kind of experience that you can't pay for it, even, so getting to do that as part of my job is really exciting."* In these narratives, one's profession and work was connected to personal happiness, which reflects the notion that personal fulfillment is embedded in professional life to a significant degree (Granovetter, 1985; Dacin, Beal, & Ventresca 1999). Interestingly, none of the interviewed 38 designers narrated having considered any other career paths, although some of them were considering other employers within design. Many designers narrated design projects and their content as an important element in their idyll. Some constructed ideal projects in terms of ethical aspects or a strong mission: *"doing good in the world"* or *"social good".* For others, it was more about *"exploring the frontiers", "exciting"* projects or doing something that *"nobody has ever done before"* (such as utilizing new technologies). One designer explained: *"I think that I've been [as] an employee really lucky to have an opportunity to work with probably the biggest projects here and the most exciting ones."*

The designers' idyll was typically constructed in relation to either a physical, social or psychological space, revealing how organizational embeddedness affects wellbeing here. A *"family"* metaphor was often used when referring to one's own organization. Many designers constructed their employer positively: *"unique","ambitious", "super-design-focused",* and *"high-quality"* were used, while at the same time a *"relaxed"* and *"laid-back"* atmosphere appeared to be important. Many interviewees emphasized the importance of the physical place, expressing their preference for small offices and a strong sense of community, while cubicles and large open office areas were heavily criticized. On the other hand, organizational culture clearly also included intangible elements: "*And that's why I came here, that's why I stayed with here, that's why I'm still here, is because of that energy."* One designer constructed his idyll: *"definitely a sense of community and smallness, like close-knit."* Another even

used the expression *"perfect world"* when referring to his experience: *"In [this] perfect world, the disappointments can be related to not being able to spend more time with the wonderful colleagues."*

Table 2. "Loving your work" narrative type

Construction in the narrative	Core content	Example quotes
Literary genre	"Idyllic Novel": Happiness, inspiration, motivation	*"I think what makes me happy is that I'm doing what I like. Sometimes for me, it's not work just the extra hours or just do something extra or give even more to them. I think that I really like what I do. Design is my thing. When you have that and you're in a good space that you can do that and you have amazing people that help you to do that and you have friends and your personal life is good and you don't have problems. It's not only part of the job. They're these things that combine and create your happiness level."*
Chronotope	"The Family Idyll": Focus on past times Safe, familiar, and intimate space	*"It's just, you know, it feels very open, and I know they call it "the family," and I like that, I think that's really nice. And I also like the philosophy of keeping the offices fairly small… And I think that's really an important thing to think about, you know, kind of you keep people closer when you have that smaller kind of team aspect and people know each other personally, in addition to professionally."*
Creation and design	Autonomy, being oneself Craftmanship, exploring, learning	*"Because I have the opportunity to put the real thinking on that, be creative. No one actually was checking with me. You have the freedom to do that."*
Designer identity	Expressions of personal motivations: autonomy, creativity, willingness to experiment and learn Identity and anti-identity	*"I want to do consumer-facing social. So, if it's consumer…I know there's a lot out there and there's a lot of philosophy around why people interact with technology in a social context, and it's really intriguing to me where the trends go and why they go there. And looking at young users and just analyzing that, nobody's got it figured out. It's super-unpredictable but it's really intriguing to me. I would love to…like a nightlife, social, mobile, that's ideal for me, my favorite, hands-down."*
Triggers for identity work with this narrative	Changes from the past Worries about the future Disappointments, bad experiences, conflicting goals	*"And that's when I realised that you just, as much as there is so much love, at the end of the day, it's a business, what matters."* *"I mean, preserving the culture, in the fact that, you know, that we have a high respect for design thinking and design-led projects, those kind of things, even though…well, actually, acting out in a project maybe those don't… don't get, you know, are reality. But I think I don't want that to change. Always keeping Zen at the forefront, not becoming design monkeys."*
Organizational embeddedness	Expectations: openness, supportiveness, small-firm feel, family-feel, creativity, innovativeness, lack of hierarchy and micro-management Legitimizing the status quo Anti-idylls	*"I like that it doesn't have this hierarchy of feed-down. I like that I can…I feel respected when I speak with our C-level people, and they listen, and that feels really…. I think that's really unique, I really do. And there's a lot of energy there and there's a lot of vision there. That's unique. That's why I'm hesitant or scared to ever try to go somewhere else, because I don't know if I could find that. And I've connected I think on a core value level with the leadership team. Like I said, core values are important to me, and they're about doing good, they're about love and trying to radically express themselves in ways like that, and about curiosity and creativity. And those are all things I think I resonate with."*

Triggers for this narrative in identity work came from changes. Some interviewees experienced cracks in their perfect world and constructed violations of work-identity integrity (see Pratt et al., 2006), bringing up conflict, *"boring"* projects, and *"difficult"* or *"disrespectful"* clients. In addition to these

bad experiences, many designers presented a dilemma: the organization's ideals were not always realized in practice. In particular, there was a clear tension between creative, inspiring work and profitability. Many interviewees were somewhat worried that company growth – which was otherwise seen as positive – could lead to entering a different time and space and thus changes in the organizational culture, in turn causing a conflict of interest with the earlier state of the organization in which designers had become embedded. The importance of recruitment was also often highlighted: *"All it takes is one bad egg to spoil it for the rest of us."* Contrasting anti-identities of lacking ambition or creativity, and anti-idylls of boring projects, lacking freedom, micro-management and large, impersonal office spaces were used actively to strengthen the identity constructions with this narrative type.

3.2 "Learning every day" narrative type

The narrative type of "Learning every day" (summarized in Table 3) constructs a pathway of personal development and organizational learning, reflecting the Bakhtinian adventure of everyday life and the chronotope of the road (Bakhtin, 1981). For Bakhtin, the chronotope of the road is a meeting place (Bakhtin, 1979). In the same way, on the career path, learning and identity creation takes place in dialogue with others. When choosing the road, one chooses a certain direction. There is typically a beginning and an end for a certain road, just as there is a beginning and an end for a professional career. However, the roads may be long and the narratives allow us to implement exploring, trying, succeeding, and failing when traveling them. The events upon the road are infused with a lasting significance for the agent (Dentith, 1995). In particular, they allow us to follow designers' learning and professional development, but also related organizational development and growth. The chronotope of the road shows how identity is continuously constructed in present everyday life through embedded experience in a particular context.

In the designers' narratives, the recruitment process was often constructed as the time and place where a certain path begins. Collective learning was often highlighted and, in line with Pratt et al. (2006), role models appeared to be important. Some designers had clear plans for their careers, but many wanted to see and explore what was behind the next corner. Most interviewees wanted to focus on design rather than pursue leadership positions: *"I don't really wanna manage people, so I don't really like have necessarily goals to go beyond being senior [designer] level."*

Table 3. "Learning every day" narrative type

Construction in the narrative	Core content	Example quotes
Literary genre	"Adventure of everyday life": Learning from everyday experiences	*"And then like I said earlier, the culture of growth and sharing skills is really big here. I was just talking to some friends of mine who are also designers at different companies about how we, even if we share a case study here, you say, like, oh, here's the project, this is what we did, it went really well, and that's five minutes of the presentation and then for 25 minutes I might talk about what we could have done better and what I wanna do on the next project, I really like that."*
Chronotope	"The Road": Career path Present time Everyday events in everyday spaces	*"And these are all life-time skills. I think they are not really going to die. Whatever design is like in the future, my ability is gonna be important, my ability to have detail-oriented designs is important, my ability to understand what's visually appealing is gonna be important."*
Creation and design	Continuous ideation, exploring Testing, failing fast, learning from others	*"You're looking for mentors and heroes, people that would help elevate you as a designer. You wanna surround yourself by people who are equally talented but usually you look for someone that's gonna challenge you a little bit."* *"I think there's definitely a push to really do that research and really get to know: Well, the client may say they want X, but let's talk to users and talk to them about it. And maybe we don't land on X, we land on Y."*
Designer identity	Personal learning experiences and ambitions (hard work, explorer mindset, learning by doing, moving forward) Professional growth and career development	*"I don't really plan my life in terms of oh, what would be three years from now. I wanna be better than who I am right now, I wanna be inspiring as a leader of my teams, I wanna be, essentially grow and if I want to change the fields in my life and I don't think twice about changing and if I see an opportunity that's interesting. So I hope I continue to be as free-flowing as I always have been."*
Triggers for identity work with this narrative	Small successes and small failures in the everyday context Getting forward and being stuck in one's career	*"I would like to be able to have more of that kickoff phase where we can do that deep dive. This last project that I was on, we had to go on a research cruise, and it was three days in right after the project kicked off, and I was - I have to interview all these people, I don't even know what this project is about, and so we were able to make it happen, but we just had to very, very broad questions just to figure out what direction we wanted to go in. But I felt like we could've gotten data, better data points, if we were more prepared for that."*
Organizational embeddedness	Supportive company culture Gradual organizational development (skills, knowhow, collective learning) and growth (financial, geographical, number of employees)	*"I don't know that I've ever worked on a project that was like another project, which is great. And I think even the developers that I work with, everyone's gotten to learn quite a bit. And I think that is also reflected in the culture, because everybody kind of gets excited about new problems and challenges that they haven't faced and tends to… everyone tends to hit them fearlessly. So, I see a lot of that."*

Continuous learning was constructed as crucial in the ever-changing operating environment, whether it was expressed as *"staying on top of current trends", "willingness to learn", "willingness to change"* or *"adaptability."* One designer described continuous learning as a starting point: *"I would just say it's*

definitely that need to sort of stay on top, stay current, because I mean, it's...it's...to me, it feels like the first step in creating a good product." Hard work and persistence was often emphasized when narrating one's learning. Many designers described learning the hard way, but these learning experiences were often presented in a positive rather than negative light: *"And just that eye-opening and having to learn as I went, and getting tossed into the deep end with big clients... very difficult, but it was also the most growth."* The interviewees also described different steps in the design projects and how for example user research, stakeholder interviews, and validation testing played a crucial role in the designers' work and could provide important new learning opportunities. The importance of *"continuous dialogue"* between designers, developers, and clients was considered a key for learning. How much you can learn on your professional path was often constructed as dependent on the organization you work for. Learning and becoming better throughout was constructed as a collective experience. Organizational culture played an important role in learning, and sometimes this narrative type overlapped with the "Loving your work" narrative type, emphasizing a supportive culture: *"Our people have to have the right to explore new things and to fail. That's the way to find new things, and otherwise we have no business."*

In addition to frequent triggers of continuous learning from experience, this narrative was also evoked in identity work for progressing careers and threats to learning. The designers sometimes described their *"learning curve"* and expressed insecurity or lack of confidence felt especially in the beginning of their journeys: *"I think it was ´oh sh*t, oh sh*t, I don't know what to do, people are looking at me from above, guys, do something'."* Designers also brought up a continuous need to challenge not only others but also themselves and their best practices: *" I think it's easy to get in the habit of, well, this is what software looks like and these are the best practices, and we don't often question, ´well, sure they are, but is it the best practice for this particular project?´"* One of the worst experiences appeared to be not getting anywhere, namely not having a project to work on. One designer explained how *"being on the bench"* is part of the job in agencies every now and then, but annoying nevertheless: *"It's just a thing that happens. It's more of a complaint of, like, my career and working in, like in agencies, versus in-house."* Learning was also threatened by insufficient resources, with for example one designer stating: *"You need resources and time to experiment with things like that, and it's hard to do when there's the danger of a deadline."*

3.3 "Building something unheard of" narrative type

The narrative type of "Building something unheard of" (summarized in Table 4) focuses on turning points, opportunities and challenges on the path to breakthroughs and innovations in the literary genre of carnivalistic novels (Vaara & Pedersen, 2013). The narrative includes the Bakhtinian chronotope of a threshold, which can be described in terms of emotional intensity. This chronotope is often related to

some kind of turning point, major change, or even a crisis in one's career or life (Bakhtin, 1979). On an organizational level, we can see the threshold chronotope in e.g. major organizational changes or new innovations and disruptions. There is time before and after passing a threshold line. The threshold itself can be real, symbolic or metaphorical, allowing us to follow the plot as the designer constructs sudden changes in oneself, in one's project or organization, or in the surrounding society.

Table 4. "Building something unheard of" narrative type

Construction in the narrative	Core content	Example quotes
Literary genre	Carnevalistic novel Sudden change	*"I was involved also in the very, very beginning of the conversation with the client, and it was just a couple of meetings, and we did them all in style, not with the Head of Studio or anything, but just the project manager and me talking to this client. Then it panned out, and it turned into a project that was not huge, but it was a moment where we didn't have a lot of work, and - yeah, I don't know, I like winning, winning clients with our projects."*
Chronotope	"The threshold": Future possibilities, new time and space Plays and dramas in important turning points	*"I think maybe when I first got to this company, and I got thrown out in the middle of the water and had to swim for my life, I'd like some more of those opportunities, actually. "Maybe he might," excuse my language, "f*ck this up or something, but let's throw him in there and let him swim." Because that's how I learn. So, I like taking more risks and more responsibility, because, otherwise, I won't be learning. Yeah."*
Creation and design	New innovations Daring, risk taking Unique, game-changing decisions or solutions	*"And then they came to me and said, hey, so we may we need this animation done for this project. And I've never done animation, at least not to that extent, I was interested but I've never done it. So I said sure, let's do it. In my mind of course some panicking but I ended up being a lot better than I was expecting, so that was a, I guess that was a good start of hello, my name is –kinda thing."*
Designer identity	Personal challenges and risks taken Significant decisions or events, career choices, getting hired, closing big deals, specific projects, innovations	*"And I was like, this is stupid, there has to be a better way of doing this. So, I did a bunch of research into color science and developed a very robust and replicable way for them to select colors that would work within their accessibility requirements. And I put all the research into a deck, and I shared it, and I just blew them [clients] away because it was such a thoroughly researched idea. And that was really great, because to me it felt like I like designing things when there's both some level of creativity, where I was selecting the colors for particular purposes, the hue, but then it's backed by scientific research, so that it is actually…it's very rational, as well. And so, that was a great moment."*
Triggers for identity work with this narrative	Opportunities and risks Career, project and company turning points	*"Understanding that hey this was so unknown and now we created this fascinating [solution], at least to our eyes. [laughs] [...] because you spend a lot of time in, developers like to call it war rooms, and ideation sessions and on the whiteboard. And you don't know things, you get to argue with your colleague, 'no, this is not right, this is right' and he or she goes like 'no', and then at the end, comes the solution that you like. And those are really good, satisfying moments, I think."*
Organizational embeddedness	Innovations and risk-taking on organizational or project level Significant changes or new structures in organization, acquisitions, winning/ losing clients, internationalization	*"I think the company is driven. I think they're very much about innovation, exploring spaces that kind of maybe haven't been completely explored, or looking at different ways to kind of take on things that maybe have been done, to really kind of put a spin on it, to make it unique."* *"We lost, we had three big retainers here, and we lost all of them, and then we lost our Head of Studio, so it's a really shitty moment."*

A common turning point in the designers' narratives was getting their first or current job. Interestingly, many designers narrated themselves as young and inexperienced fools who got an important opportunity as they were hired and then passed their first qualification test (see Greimas, 1983; 1990). Based on the data, we can see the essence of design work as passing through the doorsteps of one project after another: *"I can do something unique, something unheard-of, something nobody has done before."*

Another typical turning point in the narrative was a specific design project, in which the designer took a chance and stepped into a new world. For example, one designer described rising up to a new challenge when being thrown into the deep end of a challenging project:
"It's the projects where 99% of all energy and resources are consumed. It's some of those projects that really allow you to change. It's like [this project], it was a magnum apus for me, I was thrown to the other side of the world to see if I can handle it."
Another designer pointed out a specific hackathon, while third described a meeting with a lasting impact: *"they had me sitting on a short meeting with their advisory board and that meeting went so well that I'm now in communication with her on a daily basis and we're working together on driving the product forward."* Closing a deal was also a typical turning point as it allowed the designer to step into client's world and build a basis for future collaboration. On the other hand, losing clients happened, too, and sometimes these turning points led to an individual or organizational crisis. Yet one designer remembers a specific project that gave him new type of professional confidence for the future, although they lost the client: *"It was a very meaningful moment for me personally, we got such a huge, and in my opinion such a great job, done during that week."* Sometimes a turning point was finding a new way to do things, which led to recognition from others. These aha-moments were narrated using strong expressions such as *"mind-blowing",* which allowed us to interpret them as chronotopes of threshold. Also resolving a conflict could be seen as the chronotope of threshold, opening up new opportunities: *"A really bad project, just a lot of politics and nonsense from the client side, but thankfully that's getting resolved now."*

These narratives were constructed in relation to both opportunities and risks, ranging from client relations to project outcomes and from personal reputation to company growth. Sometimes a doorstep was seen, but not quite reached. There were expectations, assumptions, and dreams that were not realized. One designer constructed an organizational status-quo as a risk: *"We've had so many times where it's like, now we're gonna move forward and grow and it doesn't happen, so there's a little bit of that worry, like is this really gonna happen."* At an organizational level, being acquired by a larger company was often seen as an opportunity in terms of growth, but as a threat in terms of culture: *"And the possibility of a larger company coming and dictating what projects we should be working on is not something that will appeal to most designers."* Some designers constructed also new colleagues as a

growth-related risk: *"new designers that maybe are like totally different, expecting a different kind of culture, wanna create a different kind of culture."*

3.4 "Succeeding together" narrative type

The final narrative type of "Succeeding together" (summarized in Table 5) focuses on in-groups, out-groups, and group perceptions, portraying design work as a team effort. An understanding of a networked organization was constructed, positioning the design agency in the middle of multiple clients and stakeholders. This narrative type presents the Bakhtinian biography genre, which unfolds in a real life chronotope of 'the public square', focusing on how people understand themselves and others by combining the past, present and the future (Vaara and Pedersen, 2013). In the public square, individuals self-categorize themselves and construct their identities in relation to others. The storyteller faces different actants, some of which can be helpers, and others opponents (see Greimas, 1983; 1990).

In the interviews, the designers often constructed themselves as part of a larger group of designers. In addition, collaboration with internal and external stakeholders played an important role in the narratives. *"Everything is interconnected",* as one designer said referring to co-operation with others. *"Dialogue", "interaction",* and *"continuous communication"* was often constructed as a key element in the work and it appeared to form an important source of creativity: *"So it's just a constant sharing of different projects and getting to see what other people are doing and getting inspired by that."* It was evident that interaction takes many forms, and in many narratives, unofficial interaction was constructed as especially important. Many interviewees told stories about repeating rituals that made the organization and its atmosphere special or unique. Often meetings and events provide a time and space for people to interact as a larger group or with a wide range of colleagues: *"I think, you know, I really enjoy the studio meetings, I think the openness of the kind of atmosphere and culture of the team."* Many designers brought up company trips as important highlights that allow less formal interaction in a new space. On the other hand, stakeholder events and in particular opening the organization's own office space for others was also constructed as an arena for networking.

Space and time suitable for creative work was typically constructed as very different from traditional office settings: *"designers don't like to work in certain, they are picky about the conditions that they work in, more so than other field people."* Optimal office premises were constructed as *"artistic", "creative",* and *"small",* allowing a specific type of atmosphere. In addition, the importance of digital spaces, such as Slack, was often highlighted. They allowed formal and informal interaction across time zones, countries, and continents, *"being able to collaborate remotely".* On the other hand, the international nature of the business provided opportunities to visit different countries, experience different spaces, and collaborate with different people: *"I spent 14 months in Europe, getting to travel,*

Table 5. "Succeeding together" narrative type

Construction in the narrative	Core content	Example quotes
Literary genre	"Biography": Interactions with others	*"I also enjoyed the designer meetings that we have. We have a couple. One is more kind of a product update that we have monthly. And then, we have a weekly meeting that's kind of optional, but basically we all come together and share things that inspire us, and I think that's really cool, to kind of get to know people more than just kind of working with them on a project, to know their interests. But then, also, kind of expanding your own horizons about learning about something new or seeing some kind of new artist or something like that, because it's not always completely designing related, it's more in just kind of the creative space."*
Chronotope	"The public square": The real time Past, present, and future Public space, e.g. office	*"We have events here sometimes that are open to, they're open to the public but they're mostly catered for C-levels that wanna come and kind of, it's a little bit like a, what's it called, it's not the right word but like a symposium where we'll have a speaker so it will be about a certain topic, people will talk about that topic, we have a VR system here so we had that set up in one of the rooms for the event, it was super fun seeing everybody, different guests come in and try it out [...] and I think everyone was so genuinely excited about where the company could go that and being such a small team, you feel like you're gonna have a lot of ownership and impact and all that."*
Creation and design	Co-creation and collaboration	*"I love picking up on [the participants'] energies and doing sketching exercises with them, or just - or even with adults, getting them to revert back to a childlike state when we're doing these workshops, it's just really rewarding. And yeah, it just - with sketching or something, just seeing someone be – 'oh, I can't draw', and then demonstrating, doing a few exercises, breaking down those barriers, and seeing someone realise – oh, no, everyone's drawings can be good if you just keep it simple, [...] you're almost creating a space where creativity or ideas can come forward, and there's something really nice about that, and giving that to a group of adults who normally feel judged or they don't want their ideas to be heard, or they think that they can't say this because this person's here, or whatever it is, there's something nice about creating a space where ideas can just happen."*
Designer identity	Self-categorization Oneself in relation to leaders, colleagues, clients etc. In-groups and out-groups	*"I feel trusted upon, and that's good, right. I've always noticed that when you're in an environment - and not just for me, but for everybody, when you're in an environment of trust and you feel that everybody in the room trusts you, then you do better. And right now I feel really good in that respect."* *"But it was great to see everyone's talents come out, everyone's very supportive of one another, I think we have healthy boundaries but also being friendly each other. That feels very healthy, I think it's one of the healthiest group dynamics I've ever experienced. So yeah, we would just joke a lot in those down times, yeah. Send memes to each other, everything."*
Triggers for identity work with this narrative	Helpers and opponents Balancing individual and collective, private and public	*"What is most unpleasant and I'm very, very strong about it, is when I work with organisations and as a pattern, I find that they are larger ones, where I'm treated with disrespect as a designer, where I'm treated like a contractor instead of a design partner, where I take design decisions and hand over to somebody and the product owner just makes the changes without connecting with me and impacting the product negatively. [...]And it's not even that any of us are diva designers and developers, we are asking for very, very bottom line level of respect and this is actually a huge element of dissent in the entire company, it is not having the power in larger companies and being treated like design monkeys, PowerPoint monkeys, where somebody just comes and says, this is my agenda, this is a story I wanna tell, you make the pick. And that's, for that, that's not really using our minds."*
Organizational embeddedness	Social categorization Business partnerships Forms of interaction and structure of collaboration	*"It was just kind of infuriating, how much time was spent on this project and how much more work there was needed to be done that could have been answered by involving the right people earlier."* *"We have a sweet spot for companies that are old or really big and not doing really well, but they want us to show them cool stuff or a way forward… definitely enterprise - big retainer contract."*

work on different projects." While some designers were eager to explore new spaces, others were happy with their current space and interaction: *"I just have enough history and good feelings about the leadership and the company here that I don't wanna go anywhere [chuckles]."*

This type of narrative was often evoked in connection to helpers that supported them in their (identity) work, such as colleagues, mentors, or a great culture. For example, one designer described how colleagues helped in a challenging situation: *"I felt a lot of love and support"*, and another highlighted the general willingness to help others in the organization:
"I can go to someone in a different discipline and ask, 'How are you developing this', and, more often than not, they'll take the time and sit with me and walk me through it. And that only helps me do my next project better."

On the other hand, negative triggers included to challenging interactions, typically including the use of power and threat towards one's professional identity. Presented in terms of, for example, unfair *"negative feedback", "micromanagement", "disrespect",* or *"lack of trust",* these narratives were particularly common when designers worked in client's premises, on somebody else's ground. There were clearly preferred and less preferred projects and partners: *"I would really like to see more of these smarter or thoughtful projects that we've had and keep those, and less of the bread and butter staff augmentation contract".* Sometimes the main challenge within design projects was interacting with the wrong group of people. For example, in some narratives, key professionals were not present at the right time and space and their skills could not be used, while in other narratives the design team lacked power to make decisions when needed.

The narratives were often complex, and were sometimes evoked in connection balancing act to different modes. For example, there was tension between public space and one's personal space, with some designers were seeking a balance between interaction with customers and partners and more private spaces: *"I think just interacting with people in general is taxing if you're talking for eight hours a day. That's just gonna be exhausting, no matter who you are. The rewarding aspect is that you're passing on knowledge, I guess, or seeing someone else have an a-ha moment."* This tension between individual and collective could also be seen within the agency: *"And then the other thing was we had so much autonomy, but we also had a lot of expectations to live with."*

The findings of the analysis on the four narrative types are summarized in Table 6, below.

Table 6. Summary of the four narrative types, their triggers and organizational embeddedness

Narrative type	Bakhtinian literary genre	Bakhtinian chronotope	Representation of creation and design	Designer identity	Triggers for identity work narratives	Organizational embeddedness
Loving your work	Idyllic novel	The family idyll	Craftmanship and creativity in different forms	Constructions of a dream career Enthusiastic artist identity	Changes, conflicts, concerns for future	Constructions of ideal organization An idyllic organization with a family culture
Learning every day	Adventure of everyday life	The road	Continuous exploring	From novice to a seasoned professional Explorer identity	Small successes and small failures, progressing careers	Constructions of competitiveness and ways of working Learning organization
Building something unheard of	Carnevalistic novel	The threshold	New innovations	Constructions of personal challenges and risks taken Innovator identity	Opportunities and risks, turning points	Constructions of innovations and risk-taking on an organizational and project level Innovative organization
Succeeding together	Biography	The real time	Co-creation and collaboration	Self-categorization in relation to others Group Dynamics	Helpers and opponents, balancing individual and collective	Social categorization Networked organization

4. Discussion

The current study set out to investigate how designers use narratives to construct their professional identities, paying particular attention to the situated nature of identity work. Previous research on design work has focused mainly on design process, practices and their outcomes, with some key work on designer identity and links to organizational context and designer experience (e.g. Gray 2014; Gray, Toombs and Gross, 2015; Goodman et al., 2011; Daly et al., 2012; Gray & Fernandez, 2018). This past research highlights the need for further research on designer identity creation as an embedded part of experience borne out of professional life where social comparison, environmental factors and designer

needs all play a role in one's professional sense of self. Furthermore, the current study makes significant efforts to contribute to the gap in research in terms of designer identity work by identifying key triggers through designer narratives, namely specific professional actions or events prompting the need to construct different types of identity narratives. Indeed, our data supports the notion that there are multiple professional and career identities at play rather than a uniform one (Shepherd and Haynie, 2009), and that these are often overlapping, complementary or contradictory (Liu and Hinds, 2012). Here, the novel application of Bakhtin's (1981) theoretical lens provided a useful framework for examining multiple, situated narratives in identity creation (Vaara et al., 2016; Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010), identifying the co-existence of different narrative types (Bakhtin, 1981) and to bear in mind alternative interpretations (Bakhtin, 1993) in terms of how designers navigate a variety of formal and informal spaces and places when constructing their designer identities through identity work.

As a result, in this study we extend past research through assessing designers working in a design agency serving multiple clients in five different locations on two continents. Based on a detailed analysis of 38 designer interviews, we came to identify four narrative types: Loving your work, Learning every day, Building something unheard of, and Succeeding together. Each of these had different triggers, temporal emphases, constructions of creation and design, and connections to the surrounding context. While these narratives were identified in data collected in a single organization, they cannot be generalized to designers in general. However, a shared context was helpful to capture the nuanced experience based identity work of participants by simplifying the diversity of possible organizational effects linked to embeddedness, particularly given the high diversity of the designers themselves interviewed (representing several specialisations, geographical locations, and positions). As such, the results offer two key contributions to understanding identity work in design.

First, we shed light on the content of the designers' identity narratives. In contrast to some recent findings on identity construction in knowledge work (Costas and Kärreman, 2016; Alvesson and Robertson, 2016), designers appear to create and maintain a strong professional identity with a high level of fulfillment and personal and professional satisfaction. Alternative, negative constructions were rather scarce and typically related to specific projects or clients rather than the work, profession or organization in general. While different narratives were constructed in relation to different triggers and organizational contexts, novelty – in the form of both personal learning and creating innovations – was highlighted across all of these. Continuous learning was narrated as an essential element in designers' work, reflecting a constant need to re-construct one's professional identity based on new experiences. Our findings suggest that uncertainty is taken for granted by designers and considered as something to be expected in current fast-changing operating environments. Trials, successes, and failures often formed important turning points in the narratives. In addition to novelty, the role of community was also emphasized in the designers' narratives. Although designers constructed themselves as fearless

innovators and explorers, feeling respected (see also Rogers and Ashforth, 2017) was important for positive identity reinforcement. Identity is continuously negotiated in dialogue with others (Angouri, 2016) and design work can be seen as particularly interactive, as design projects are typically carried out in collaboration between different parties (e.g. Brown, 2008). This study allows us to better understand designers' identity in the context of multiple actants, such as colleagues and clients, who can, depending on the situation, either support or hinder designers' efforts in finding their professional sense of self within the organizational context. As such, there is a social aspect through professional networks that enhance designers' ability to succees in their work, which can bolster identity work.

Second, this study adds to our understanding on identity work and how it is embedded with the organizational context. This was done by identifying key "triggers" of identity work that were extracted from designers' narratives and connecting the different narratives to how the organizational context was constructed. While novelty was fundamental in the narratives of the designers from a learning and creative output perspective, at the organizational level, these identity work narratives were embedded in a desire for stability and preservation, especially in terms of organizational culture, familiar space, and like-minded colleagues. As such, the identity narratives do not exist in isolation, but are depended on the contextual affordances perceived by the designers. This strong emphasis on a contextual effect highlights the relevance of embeddedness (Granovetter, 1985; Dacin, Beal, & Ventresca 1999) in approaching designers' identity work within organizations. Here, the context, or organization, can be a key source of information, resources or legitimacy for designers insofar as the designer is situated within a context that enables or constrains valued activities or strategies. Indeed, a stable organizational "family" seemed to provide a psychologically safe foundation for engaging in novel design work pushing the boundaries outside of the home base. Organizations' members shape and are shaped by the organizational context (see e.g. Alvesson et al., 2008; Albert and Whetten, 1985; Hatch and Schultz, 2002), similar to the co-evolvement of problem and solution spaces in design (Dorst and Cross, 2001). These findings reflect a continuing dialectic of agency and structure (Brown, 2015) in that designers navigate complex interconnections between autonomy linked to designer identity and organizational systems or expectations.

4.2 Implications for future research

Overall, our findings support the idea that the creation of professional identity is not only about the relationship between self and occupation, but also between the self and a specific work group or organization (see Vough, 2012; Ashcraft, 2013; Alvesson and Empson, 2008). Based on our findings, we argue that designers' strong need for autonomy and freedom in identity work and associated performance coexists with a strong need for peer support, learning from others, and working in a safe, but inspiring, psychological, social, and physical space. As such, identity work is heavily embedded

within its context while also being highly designer driven. How designers become embedded in processes and organizational settings and how various factors within those contexts such as norms, expectations, requirements affect designer identity over time are central issues and links to additional identity work triggers for future research of designers. As this study was conducted in a single organization, more research is needed to broaden the empirical base to further organizations of different shapes, sizes and domains. In addition, the growing group of independent designers constructing their identities also offers an intriguing arena for further research, as the concept of work and traditional career paths are evolving (see Barley et al., 2017).

Furthermore, the results open up new venues for examining the role of design in organizational change. A reliance on contextual factors within the organization showed how embeddedness affects designer action; there was a tension between organizational business goals and the desire to leverage personal competence through the beneficial social network within that context. Where the quality of design work and collaboration were seen at odds with profit maximization, designers were negatively affected. On the other hand, designer actions affect the organizational context as well, and investments in design can be made specifically with the goal of changing organizational culture to encourage creativity, flexible experimentation and collaboration (Elsbach and Stigliani 2018; Björklund et al, in press; Gruber et al., 2015). This balancing between conformity and provocation by designers within the organizational setting that can result in both positive and negative disruptions and is a key area for further research, one that the triggers and dynamics of identity narratives presented here can help to guide.

4.2 Implications for practice

The results offer practical implications for organnizations attempting to attract and retain design talent. Based on recent merger and aquisition activities (Maeda et al., 2017) and academic studies (e.g. Micheli et al., 2018; 2019), there is increasing interest in design and designers across industries. Many organizations are hiring designers, but often design as a field is not very established yet in these organizations. Even in more design mature organizations, understanding different type of designer identities and designers' identity work can be valuable when aiming to attract talent. The current study suggest that novelty and communality are highly valued by the designers themselves, with learning from exposure to novel situations and the support (or lackthereof) of colleagues, management and clients featuring prominently as triggers for different narratives in identity work.

Given the degree of creativity and collaboration associated with design work, it seems prudent for organizations to maintain a sense of flexible expectations when considering deign work and designers. Most designers interviewed for this study were very attached to their employer, but not in a traditional sense. Organizational control (see e.g. Alvesson, 2001) was presented in a very negative light by

designers, which can conflict with more hierarchical organizational styles where individual flexibility is not prioritized. Instead, designers constructed themselves in terms of freedom and creativity, but narrating individual performance as inspired and enabled by peer support, learning from others, fruitful collaboration, and creative space. Here, key cooperative relationships within organizations motivated a high degree of loyalty to the organization, yet organizational methods less in line with designers' values lead to negative sentiments. However, even difficult experiences were constructed as positive ones if they allowed for personal growth (see also Vough and Caza, 2017), which highlights how important it is for organisations to bolster pathways for designers' professional development. As such, it seems that creating a favorable organizational context for designers requires a combination of personal flexibility in terms of professional output, a strong collaborative network and a cooperative culture.

Finally, the results of the study shed light on the value of connecting designer identities with organizational context, which may allow recruiters and leaders to evaluate different designer identities from a cultural perspective. While design professionals often emphasize diversity and different backgrounds, a certain type of cultural fit is often needed for employee engagement. It is equally important to understand different contextual triggers as they can play an important role in motivating, developing and retaining talent. Furthermore, a better understanding of designer identities and identity work can be useful for designers themselves as they reflect their professional choices and plan their future career paths.

5. Conclusions

In order to understand design work and its results, we need to examine not only the design processes and cognitons of design professionals, but their identities and how they are created through identity work, as these guide perceptions and actions in a dynamic environment. This requires an in-depth approach that takes into consideration the voice of designers and the context in which their experiences are embedded in. Adopting a narrative approach to designers' identity work, this study examined designers' identity constructions based on the interviews of 38 designers working at a design agency operating at multiple locations. While designers used different narrative types of crafters, explorers, innovators and collaborators in their identity construction, these were not between-subject differences as in previous work comparing different design disciplines (e.g. Daly et al., 2012), but rather the same designers constructing complementary or even conflicting identity narratives connected to different trigger experiences and organizational contexts. This study adds to our understanding of the complex and multifaceted phenomenon of designers' identity work, emphasizing its nature of being embedded in a contextual setting in complex and intercorrenced ways. Taken together, the findings suggest that designers' identities are constructed flexibly and purposefully depending on the context, goals, and

tasks at hand. Novelty, learning and collaboration were emphasized in the different constructions of design itself, but with different foci reflected in different portraits of organizational embeddedness – from stable families and gradual refinements to pioneering leaps and interdependent networks. However, further research is needed to explore designer identities and identity work in different types of organizations, moving beyond the single organization of the current study. Understanding how different contexts prompt or inhibit identity work can help us to illuminate how designers interact with other stakeholders in their professional practice while also growing in their professional capacity and self-awareness.

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