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‘Creativity is a skill that everyone has’:

Analysing creative workers’ self-presentations

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Abstract

This paper discusses the research use of creative workers’ publicly available self-presentations such as documentaries or social media posts. In so doing it contributes to our understanding of how creative workers might fruitfully be researched. The paper, firstly, argues that self-presentations can provide valuable and rich insights into creative workers’ self-understanding, and thus can be of interest to creative industries researchers. Secondly, using the example of a film produced by Austrian product designers, the paper then demonstrates why researchers need to consider the processes through and contexts in which self-presentations are generated. The paper explains why self-presentations may not be treated in the same way as the first person accounts traditionally generated for social science research, and presents recommendations for how self-presentations might form parts of rigorous research designs.

Keywords: creative workers, creative work, creative industries, product design, self-presentation

‘Creativity is a skill that everyone has’:

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Introduction

This paper discusses why and how creative industries researchers might want to analyse creative workers’ self-presentations. Since the late 1990s, governments around the world have identified those industries that ‘have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent’ (DCMS, 2001, p. 5) as catalysts of socio-economic regeneration because of their alleged capacity to facilitate economic growth and urban regeneration (e.g. Comunian et al., 2009; Miles & Paddison, 2005; Pratt, 2009). As part of this shift, a new image of creative workers has gained traction – that of creative workers as agents of urban regeneration and of the creative class as high earning/high spending urbanistas who are educated, diverse and tolerant and who actively contribute to vibrant and inclusive communities (most influentially Florida, 2004). The ‘creative industries turn’ in cultural, regional and economic policy (for an overview see Banks & O’Connor, 2017) has changed and challenged, and continues to do so, the conditions creative workers find and present themselves in. ‘The old tent poles of [creative and artistic] identity are strained’, write Lingo and Tepper (2013, p. 352), ‘by structural changes in not only the art world and the economy, but also by new artistic practices and contexts that challenge traditional notions of who an artist is and what an artist does.’

Consequently, researchers have called for new studies into creative workers’ self-understanding and self-presentation (e.g. Lingo & Tepper, 2013; Loacker, 2013; Elsbach & Caldwell-Wenman, 2015). We strongly support this call. However, we would like to highlight that such new research needs to be aware not only of the

opportunities but also the challenges related to a second recent development: the increase of creative worker's public self-presentation activities and their potential use as research data.

Empirical research into creative workers self-understanding and self-presentation has so far largely focused on first person accounts, i.e. creative workers' narratives of their work, motivations, ambitions etc., generated through research interviews or ethnographies (Eikhof & York, 2016; Mishler, 1992; Umney & Kretsos, 2015). But over the past decade a new data source has increased in availability: creative workers' self-presentations, i.e. portraits of themselves and their work, that are published in a range of formats such as blogs, short films, tweets, Instagram and Facebook posts. In media studies social media data is increasingly utilized to discuss self-branding activities (e.g. Duffy, & Hund, 2015; Scolere & Humphreys, 2016). Reflections on their professional activities have, of course, always been part of creative workers' output, for instance as writers' memoirs or autobiographies (famously, for instance, Doris Lessing's *Under My Skin* or Ernest Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast*), theatre plays (e.g. Rene Pollesch's *worldwidewebshums*) or in documentaries (e.g. Andreas Veiel's documentary of drama school education, *Die Spielwütigen*). However, new and easy to access digital fora for marketing one's 'creative persona' (Bain, 2005), such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook or LinkedIn, have much increased creative workers' self-presentation activities (Millar, 2016). Their public availability, often in 'ready to use' digital formats, makes it tempting to use self-presentations as research data.

Which, we argue, can indeed make ample sense: self-presentations can constitute a useful source of information on how individuals or groups want to be perceived by others. And there is emerging research on self-presentations, generally on

the online branding of the self (e.g. Hearn, 2008) and the use of social media sites such as Twitter (e.g. Murthy, 2012), and, though much more limited, specifically on creative workers (e.g. Duffy & Hund, 2015; Scolere & Humphreys, 2016). This research establishes the production of self-presentation as linked to workers' identity in cultural industries and as part of individuals labour, as producing 'inventories of branded selves' (Hearn, 2008: p. 211; see also Scolere & Humphreys, 2016). But what is missing is a discussion of how the intentions and processes with which self-presentations are generated might affect our analysis and interpretation of this data.

Our paper seeks to instigate such a discussion of the use of creative workers' self-presentations as research data. Self-presentations, we argue, need to be approached with consideration for the processes with and context in which they were generated. To illustrate and discuss this point, this paper revisits work we undertook in the early years of creative industries policy on a collective self-presentation published by a group of product designers. In so doing our paper contributes to the vital conversation of how research into 'notions of who an artist is and what an artist does' (Lingo & Tepper, 2013, p. 352) might be fruitfully and rigorously undertaken.

Creative workers' self-presentations as research data

Why, then, might it be important to research creative workers' self-representations? Creative workers' self-presentations are closely linked to these workers' self-understanding and identity. Both of these have been comprehensively established as essential to creative production, its vitality and sustainability. Firstly, self-understanding is the source of creative workers' ambitions and aspirations, i.e. it is the driver behind the creative work they undertake. Understanding themselves as driven by cultural

values, as making a creative contribution through their work or as flexibly living and working Bohemians is constitutional to creative workers daily practice and motivation (e.g. Banks, 2014; Becker, 2001; Røyseng, Mangset, & Borgen, 2007). Secondly, this self-understanding also legitimises acceptance of precarious employment conditions such as income insecurities, long and asocial working hours, geographical flexibility or absence of sick or maternity pay, and thereby shores up the employment systems underlying contemporary creative industries (Eikhof, 2013; Ellmeier, 2003). Thirdly, creative workers' self-understanding forms the basis of the creative persona as which they market themselves on the labour market. Creative workers have to present an authentic 'distinctive and marketable individuality' (Bain, 2005: 29; Daniel, 2016) in order to find employment and sustain their career. Their self-understanding is closely entwined with that 'marketable individuality' (also Duffy & Hund, 2015; Peterson, 2005; Scolere & Humphreys, 2016; Svejenova, 2005). A clear sense of who they are as creative professionals is therefore not only the driver of their work but also a *sine qua non* for their ability to earn an income from their creative endeavours. For these reasons analysing creative workers' self-understanding is important for better understanding creative production. Creative workers' self-presentations can be viewed as expressions of such self-understandings, as providing insights into how these workers see themselves and want to be seen by others. Against this backdrop, we would argue, research has good reason to analyse a wide range of data on creative workers' self-presentations.

In 2008, trying to explore changes to creative workers' self-understanding and positioning, we attempted such an analysis of creative workers' self-representations. Roughly ten years after the creative industries idea first emerged in cultural and economic policy, we analysed a film made by a group of product designers. They had

produced the film to inform about product design as a profession and to provide a ‘contemporary history documentary of working in design and of a young Austrian creative scene’ (*Career Ladder* booklet, authors’ translation). The film was produced in 2007 and featured interviews with design school graduates ten years after their graduation from the University for the Applied Arts in Vienna. When producing the film the product designers deliberately engaged with the Floridean creative class idea and the recasting of product design as a creative industry, which made it particularly interesting research data for us. In the film’s accompanying booklet producers Thomas Geisler and Ingrid Mückstein recounted how Richard Florida’s creative class concept had sparked the idea to explore creative workers’ own understanding of their work. The film, they wrote in the booklet, presented ‘a design-specific account of the world of work’ based on ‘how creative workers perceive themselves and are perceived by others.’ It ‘recounts individual positions and personal strategies in the professional everyday life of creative workers.’ This positioning statement, we argue, justified interpreting the film as a collective self-presentation that could be analysed in an attempt to explore the self-understanding of contemporary creative workers.

The film featured 14 product designers who were interviewed by fellow design graduates Geisler and Mückstein. Geisler und Mückstein edited the interviews into 12 chapters, each starting with a frame that introduced the chapter’s topic (e.g. *Work Processes, Creativity* or *Networks*). The resulting film was entitled ‘*Career Ladder – A/No Manual for Working in Product Design*’ (*Karriereleiter – (K)eine Anleitung zur Designarbeit*) and distributed on DVD via a dedicated webpage (<http://www.karriereleiter.co.at/>) and at project events. A verbatim transcript of the film was subjected to qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2008) supported by QSR NVivo software, and analysed following the inductive process recommended for qualitative

data analysis (Bryman, 2004; Flick, 2004). The transcripts were coded with respect to content and indicative phrasings, resulting in 452 codes across 74 categories, which were then analysed for key themes and patterns in the self-presentation of product design as a profession and of product designers as professional workers.

Images of creative workers

In defining their self-understanding, individuals actively relate to images of creative workers held in permeate society more broadly (e.g. Becker, 2001). What images of creative workers, then, might we expect to feature in creative workers' self-presentations? During the Renaissance, the idea of art as the reproduction of God's creation was replaced by that of art as an expression of individual inspiration and genius. The individual artist became the focus and fetish of cultural production. In the 19th century, this image of artists developed to encompass a lifestyle that Henri Murger's 'Scènes de la vie de Bohème' (1988; first published in Paris, France, 1847–1849 as a magazine series) described as centred on self-expression in artistic work, spontaneity, sporadic employment, a sense of belonging to an artistic-bohemian milieu, and an explicit and public opposition to bourgeois norms and values (see also Kreuzer 1968; Stein 1981). The 19th century notion of the artist-bohemien has been updated and adapted, for instance in the image of the bourgeois bohémien (Brooks, 2000) or digital bohème (Friebe & Lobo, 2006). However, the image of the artist as a 'bohemian rebel, outsider and social critic who sacrifice[s] status, money and material comfort for the supposed freedom this afford[s] the imaginative spirit to pursue individual creative expression' (Bain, 2005, p. 29) remains important. Røyseng and colleagues (2007), for instance, demonstrate that this image of the artist-bohemien continues to be a central anchor for creative workers' self-understanding, and Becker (2001) found that aspirant

creative workers acquire stereotypical artist-bohemien personality traits and lifestyle practices to underline their artistic credibility. Other studies found creative workers to be driven by the desire for ‘individual creative expression’ (Bain, 2005, p. 29), motivated to produce ‘art for art’s sake’ (Author 1 and Co-Author A; Kavanagh, O’Brien, & Linnane, 2005) and oriented towards cultural rather than economic values (Banks, 2014).

From the beginning of the 21st century, the image of creative workers as members of a so-called creative class and as agents of socio-economic development has gained hold in policy and academic debate (Banks & O’Connor, 2017). According to this discourse, creative workers value diversity, inclusiveness and tolerance, and aspire to ‘live in communities that reflect [those] values and priorities’ (Florida 2004: 10). Location is also important for creative workers as a source of inspiration and for access to peers and markets (Markusen, 2013). Because of their alleged values and engagement with location, and because they are part of economic production that purportedly offers above-average growth rates and high skill, high wage employment, creative workers are regarded as agents of a desirable of socio-economic development and urban regeneration. Whether creative workers can, and indeed should, fulfil that role has long been fiercely contested (e.g. Comunian, 2009; Pratt, 2008; Rainnie, 2005). Nevertheless, the image of creative workers as agents of socio-economic development has proved attractive to policy-makers and has strongly influenced current economic policy world-wide (e.g. Banks & O’Connor, 2017).

Aware of both images of creative workers we conducted an initially inductive content analysis of the *Career Ladder* film. Given the above outlined research and the film producers’ intention to offer insights into ‘how creative workers perceive themselves and are perceived by others’ in the context of creative industries policy, we

expected that the product designers' collective self-presentation would comprise strong elements of the artist-bohemien image and some evidence of an emerging second image of creative workers as part of the creative industries, or a creative class in the Floridean sense.

***Career Ladder* – a/no manual for working in product design**

The product designers' film was divided into 12 chapters of roughly equal length.ⁱ The first chapter, *Product Design as a Profession* showcased a diverse and often vague notion of product design along with the view that it was 'important to keep open' (Martino) any notions of what product design might mean. Three statements in this chapter touched upon the relationship between design and the Austrian economy and expressed the hope that design be taken more seriously, 'also in economic terms'.

In the following chapters *Work Processes*, *Skills* and *Creativity* the interviewees described product design work as 'highly structured' (Thomas G.), with ideas, concepts and processes organised in, for example, a 'system of files and folders' (Christian R.) or guided by 'a manifesto [set out] for myself, it's like, I'm very interested *places* [...], *spaces* [...], *people* [...] and [...] *behaviour*'ⁱⁱ (Mario). Presentations of design work as 'confused, like, like foggy' and shaped by 'uncertainty and, well, chaos' (Walter) were the exception; accounts of systematic approaches to researching topics and ideas dominated. Befittingly, descriptions of the skills important for design work focused on 'precision, discipline' (Maria), 'work[ing] in a structured manner, plan[ing] well, coordinat[ing] people' (Christiane) or being 'quick, precise and reliable' (Michele). Attention to clients and marketing skills ('You've got to bring quite a lot of marketing talent to the job', Christian H.) were also mentioned. With respect to personal attributes,

designers were portrayed as having to be ‘spontaneous and flexible’ (Sylvia) and possess ‘stamina’ (Nada), ‘curiosity’ (Martino), an ‘ability to take risks’ (Sylvia) and ‘a passion for what you do’ (Christian R.). Creativity was presented as non-exclusive, as ‘a skill that everyone has, to a certain extent’ (Karl), ‘parts of [which] can certainly be learned’ (Christiane) and that ‘we need [...] for all tasks in our lives’ (Thomas G.). Rather than relating to art or artistic talent, statements in these sections predominantly linked creativity to open mindedness and problem-solving. Creativity was discussed in rather broad terms, for example as an ‘ability to find new solutions’ and to ‘think and approach things differently’ (Michele). Creativity as the key ‘driver’ of one’s work and an ‘elixir of life’ (Thomas H.) featured in only one statement as opposed to six statements that presented creativity as ubiquitous, such as ‘don’t tell me an engineer is not creative, or a cultural journalist’ (Andreas).

In the *Creative Industries* chapter interviewees reflected on the idea of product design as a creative industry, a term that was used in the English original. The designers were portrayed as sceptical of the term (‘that’s just a media thing [...] I personally can’t relate to’, Thomas H.) and as keeping their distance from creative industries as ‘a term from a particular political direction’ (Christian R.) that had been ‘imposed’ (Walter). Concerns about the relationship between ‘the contractors who’ve got the money and [...] the creative talent’ (Sylvia) and the fate of ‘those creatives who aren’t an industry [...] who work in employment relationships that are, like, really precarious’ (Ingrid) also featured. While this chapter contained comparatively passionate statements about the term ‘creative industries’, the following chapter *Location* comprised markedly dispassionate attitudes towards the location of product design work. Whether location mattered or not, especially in relation to networking and contacts, appeared to be down to personal preference. Some statements presented location as a potential source of

inspiration, ‘input’ (Maria) and ‘new perspectives’ (Thomas G.) but not as a vital ingredient of producing design. Similarly, a location’s potential as a market for design and ‘a place where you can survive economically’ (Christian H.) was mentioned, but not elaborated upon or emphasised.

The eighth chapter, *Networking*, emphasised the importance of personal contacts: ‘a large part of jobs comes from networks’ (Thomas H.) and ‘personal contacts are often important’ (Sylvia). However, the designers were also presented as having reservations about that dependence and the term networks as such (‘[the term network] always sounds so, so... pretentious’, Maria). Several interviewees also emphasised networks as a source of ideas exchange and communication rather than a source of business. Overall there was notably defensive tone to the *Networking* chapter, as if interviewees felt the need to justify the existence and use of networks against unspoken accusations of nepotism.

Reflections in the *Careers* and *Career Ladders* chapters centred on an understanding of career as an ‘upward movement’ (Christiane) in the sense of ‘new tasks that challenge me somehow’ (Thomas G.), ‘more responsibility, [...] bigger projects’ (Christiane) or ‘freedom and more flexibility’ (Sylvia). However, the interviewees also emphasised scepticism about the degree to which notions of linear progression were applicable to design as a profession. There was also outright rejection of career as ‘a very business-y term’ (Ingrid) that ‘deep inside I rebel against’ (Thomas G.) and that ‘disgusted’ (Christian H.) some of the designers. *Success* in product design was primarily equated to satisfaction and happiness, both generally (‘simply to be satisfied’, Michele; to be ‘happy’, Christian R.) and specific to work (‘satisfied with your work, quite simply’, Andreas). Two other prominent proxies of career success were financial security (‘that you can make a living from [your work]’, Silvia; ‘not

having to accept every job', Martino) and recognition from clients (e.g. 'companies we work for', Maria; 'the client', Sylvia).

The concluding chapter *Looking Ahead* presented a collection of heterogeneous and vague statements about the designers' intent to continue their careers in product design. The only recurring themes here were addressing ecological challenges and a reluctance to imagine the future ten years ahead in too much detail.

Analysing *Career Ladder* as a collective self-presentation

So how did the product designers' self-presentation in the *Career Ladder* film compare to the images of creative workers we expected to see? Relating the findings from our inductive content analysis to the literature on creative workers, three points stood out. Firstly, the designers' self-presentation contained only traces of the image of intrinsically motivated creative talent squarely focused on their exciting work and collaborators and earning a living in precarious employment. While motivation featured prominently in *Career Ladder*, there was no mention of any sources of intrinsic motivation or goals towards which motivation might be geared. The product designers presented themselves as striving for satisfaction in a very general sense and, though less prominently, for a certain level of financial independence. Creative ambitions, let alone a 'bigger mission' such as art for art's sake, were not mentioned. Equally, there was no discussion of individual genius or of designers as possessing creative talents in the sense of an exceptional gift. The focus was on social skills (e.g. active listening, empathy, attentiveness), technical knowledge and general professional skills (e.g. discipline, organisation, meticulousness and tenacity). Design work itself was described as structured and methodical rather than ruled by creative chaos, serendipity or divine

inspiration. There were no descriptions of the actual content of creative processes; there were no illustrative stories of specific project or products or of influential collaborations. There was also notably little information about employment or typical career paths. Also absent were notions of artistic success, reputation or professional recognition.

Secondly, *Career Ladder* showed only faint traces of the image of creative workers as bohemian rebels or social critics who oppose economic and bourgeois values and live transient and flexible lives. There was some mentioning of an appetite for disruption, for example:

‘there is a generic mindset [...] that also has to do with freedom, with claiming the freedom to think differently [...] the task is not only to hold a mirror to people’s faces, that is not enough, but to disrupt rigid mindsets, mechanisms, reduce prejudice and ... to simply to give people the feeling of risking something, taking chances, looking ahead and questioning established answers.’(Christian R.)

But statements such as this one were rare and remained at a notably general level; they made no reference to particular structures or mind sets (e.g. the *capitalist* system, *bourgeois* prejudices) that were to be disrupted. In some instances the designers portrayed themselves as sensitive to economic or entrepreneurial language but *Career Ladder* did not present design work as an explicitly bohemian, anti-economic or anti-bourgeois undertaking. The business side of design work was largely presented as innate and while the designers alluded to art and business as distinctly different, they did not present these as antagonistic or problematic. Notions of transiency and flexibility in lifestyle or career paths were completely absent.

Thirdly, *Career Ladder* showed almost no overlap with the Floridean idea of creative workers as a creative class involved with the local community and desiring to live in diverse, inclusive and hip urban neighbourhoods. These codes yielded very little material. The film contained vague notions of location as a source of inspiration and economic survival but no evidence of strong preferences for particular features of a city or neighbourhood. While the designers' self-presentation mentioned a role for designers in society (breaking up structures, thinking differently), they did not portray themselves as particularly concerned with their immediate geo-material environment or communities. Equally there was no mentioning of values such as diversity or inclusivity.

Interpreting the *Career Ladder* findings

According to producers Geisler and Mückstein, the *Career Ladder* film offered a 'design-specific perception and account of worlds of work.' And yet, the collective self-presentation *Career Ladder* did not show much overlap with the general images of the artist and bohemian rebel that are allegedly central to creative workers' self-understanding (Røyseng, Mangset, & Borgen, 2007; Becker, 2001). Neither did the self-presentations in *Career Ladder* correspond much with the findings on creative workers in academic research. Indeed, *Career Ladder* did not feature understandings of or attitudes towards work that could not have been expressed by other professionals who mildly cared about their labour (e.g. Hallier & Forbes, 2005; Warhurst, Hurrell, Gilbert, Nickson, Commander, & Calder, 2009). So what might have caused this marked gap between the product designers' self-presentation in *Career Ladder* and the images of creative workers as artists, bohemian rebels and members of the creative class?

One possible interpretation might of course be that previous research got the characteristics of creative work and workers wrong. In other words, we could interpret the analysis of *Career Ladder* as challenging the reliability of the image of creative workers recent research paints and ask whether creative workers are really as special, idiosyncratic and different as the literature makes out. But while we would argue that research, especially where it exists in close proximity to policy-driven creative economy publications and pop management literature, needs to stay well clear of unduly idealising and romanticising creative workers, we see at least two more likely explanations for the discrepancy between the designers collective self-presentation in *Career Ladder* and the images of cultural work we expected to find.

Firstly, the specific process of producing *Career Ladder* is likely to have had significant impact. Both film producers and interviewees were design school graduates which meant the film was conceived by designers, the interview schedules were written by designers, the interviews consisted of designers interviewing designers who they had also studied and been friends with, and the interview data was then edited by designers. The film was thus produced in an insider setting which may not have been conducive for eliciting the idiosyncrasies or peculiarities of design work. In the interviews, for example, the designers may simply have felt no need to explain design work processes to fellow designers, or the daily practice of working collaboratively. Interview answers may also have been influenced by self-marketing and impression management, which are integral to creative work (e.g. Bain, 2005; Eikhof, 2013), as well as other, more general scripts and conventions inherent to the field (Alvesson, 2003, p. 21). Self-marketing or impression management practices might have led to, for example, interviewees downplaying the precariousness of their employment situation or the importance of economic success. Additionally, because many creative workers mainly

interact with other creative workers and use those colleagues as reference points, their perception of what is specific to design work and thus worth mentioning may deviate from outsiders (Author 1 and Co-Author A). The designers may, for instance, not have asked or talked about project-based careers or creative motivation because they perceived these as normal and not specific to design work. Importantly, *Career Ladder* was also edited by insiders, the two film producers, Geisler and Mückstein. It is likely that Geisler and Mückstein will have reviewed and edited the interview material based on their own immersion in product design and that the insider influences described above for the data generation were then repeated or amplified in the data editing. Overall, as a collective self-presentation *Career Ladder* may thus reflect the social setting of its production, including the intended audience for the film, more than the product designers' experience of creative work (Chudzikowski & Mayrhofer, 2011).

Secondly, although the creative industries share a range of characteristics that make it worthwhile analysing them collectively (Hesmondhalgh, 2007), there is some evidence that the creative industries also differ within themselves (e.g. Comunian, 2009), including with regard to work motivation, values and lifestyles. While painters and actors, for instance, strongly self-identify as bohemian artist (e.g. Bain 2005), creative workers in film or TV seem to be motivated more by passion for the actual product itself (e.g. Svejenova, 2005). Similarly, the industry culture in special effects production (VFX) is more “laddish” [...] centering on coolness, excitement, and entertainment’ (Haunschild, 2011, p. 369) than bohemian, pro-art, anti-bourgeoisie or anti-economy. Bourdieu (1983) points out that the paradigm of art for art’s sake is the more pronounced the higher a specific artistic field’s independence from the field of business. Product design is comparatively applied creative work with close links to business and industry (Georgieff, Müller, Kimpeler, & Rammer, 2008). Ideals such as

art for art's sake or the image of the creative workers as a bohemian artist may well be less prominent or influential in product design, and therefore less central to product designers' self-understanding and self-presentation. The creative industries paradigm, on the other hand, may not be perceived as so alien and objectionable in the applied context of product design. The latter might explain why *Career Ladder* contained expressions of mild discomfort with, rather than outright rejections of, the creative industries paradigm. A second explanation for at least some of the differences between the product designers' collective self-portrait and the image of the artist bohémien is thus likely to be found in the specific characteristics of product design as a creative industry.

Learnings and implications from the *Career Ladder* analysis

Our discussion of the potential reasons for the gap between the designers' collective self-presentation and the more common images of creative workers comes with an important caveat: the *Career Ladder* film and the accompanying booklet only allow for a limited interpretation, not only of the data but also of the influences that may have shaped the data generation and findings. However, as outlined in the introduction, the increased prominence and public availability of creative workers' self-presentation especially on social media prompted us to reflect on the use of such data for research purposes and to revisit our *Career Ladder* analysis. What, then, are the learnings and implications our *Career Ladder* case can offer for the use of self-presentations in research on creative work and production?

Generally, first person accounts have the potential to generate in-depth insights into perceptions and experiences of work (e.g. Bourdieu, 1983; 1999; Taylor, Warhurst,

Thompson, & Scholarios, 2009). Especially when, as in the case of self-presentations, these accounts are generated without interference by a researcher, they can offer valuable ‘unfiltered’ data. In the case of the creative industries, data generated without researcher intervention has the advantage of not being influenced by a researcher’s preconceptions of creative work or the related practitioner or policy context. As long as their interpretation is not unduly overlaid with the researcher’s positionality vis-à-vis creative work (Herbert, 2014), self-presentations can therefore be a source of particularly authentic and rich insights into the perceptions, experiences and motivations of the creative workers who publicise them (e.g. Scolere & Humphreys, 2016; Duffy & Hunt, 2015).

However, researchers have to interpret self-representations as embedded in a specific context of production. As the example of *Career Ladder* shows, analysts of self-presentations need to be aware of where, when, how and by whom these accounts were generated, and for what purpose, and how these circumstances may have impacted data content, focus and presentation. Based on extensive empirical research Bourdieu (1999) pointed out that data generated by individuals themselves is valuable for understanding individual actor’s subjective perceptions and experiences but needs to be objectivised by the researcher, i.e. related to the social context in which it was produced. Foregoing this objectivisation risks an unreflected taking of self-presentations at face value, as a true account of the social reality in question. In the case of the product designers, our analysis showed that the process of producing the film means their collective self-representation in *Career Ladder* needs to be understood as only one possible articulation of working in design, even if the film booklet advertises the film somewhat authoritatively as a ‘contemporary history documentary of working in design.’ We would argue that any research working with creative workers’ self-

presentations needs to contain at least a thorough reflection on the context in which the data was generated, similar to the discussion we have provided in the previous section. Such reflections are underdeveloped in the emerging research on self-presentations.

Depending on the scope of the research questions at hand, working with self-presentations might require a more elaborate triangulation of methods and data sources (Bryman, 2004; Flick, 2004), neither of which is widely utilised in creative industries research generally (Graham, 2016). Triangulation of data could, for instance, compare self-representations from different sources (creative workers, field experts, union leaders, educators) or combine the analysis of self-presentations with other methods such as interviews or participative methods (observation, action research). In the case of the designers, for example, *Career Ladder* as a collective self-presentation could have been triangulated with interviews with the film producers regarding their editing decisions or with the designers themselves, asking them to describe their working lives not in relation to the Floridian account of the creative class, but explaining their day-to-day practices. Triangulating helps to gain a deeper understanding of the issues under investigation as it allows deeper insights into field-specific perceptions and interpretations (Flick, von Kardoff, & Steinke, 2004), and reduces the risk of drawing rash conclusions about what does or does not constitute the idiosyncrasies of creative work(ers).

One specific issue that has emerged from our *Career Ladder* analysis as particularly important when working with creative workers' self-presentations is that of representativeness. Self-presentations might focus on concerns that are topical rather than typical, or that are even completely specific to an individual's situation. This warning is particularly salient, we would argue, for creative workers who often not only engage in creative work but also seek to shape public debates about that work. Where

researchers instigate the first person accounts, for instance through interviews, such biases can be addressed through questions and prompts and probing for what is typical as well as topical. When working with self-presentations researchers need to decide whether representativeness is desired and if so, they might need to contextualise data resulting from self-representations with other data, for instance a creative workers' blog on precarious employment conditions might be contextualised with employment and earning statistics.

Conclusion

Changes to the cultural and creative industries, especially the creative industries turn in public policy, have led to renewed calls for research into creative workers' self-understanding (Lingo & Tepper, 2013; Loacker, 2013; Elsbach & Caldwell-Wenman, 2015). Such research is important, as creative workers' self-understanding constitutes the central resource for the cultural industries: it fuels their work ambitions and motivations, it underpins their acceptance of the creative industries' production and employment system and it constitutes the core of the creative persona, i.e. creative workers' labour market offering. Creative workers' self-presentations, for instance on social media, can offer valuable insight into their self-understanding. Over the last decade, the public availability of such self-presentations has considerably increased. Easy access and the often digital format of self-presentations make them attractive as potential research data.

But while creative workers' self-presentations can indeed enable valuable, in-depth insights into creative workers' self-understanding and their work more broadly, researchers need to be conscious of a number of caveats when working with this specific type of data. In this paper we have revisited an analysis of creative workers'

self-presentation undertaken at the beginning of the creative industries turn in public policy to illustrate the potential challenges of using publicly available self-presentations as research data. In our example, *Career Ladder*, a film produced by a group of product designers to inform about working in product design, presented creative workers and work in ways that deviated considerably from what creative industries research would have led us to expect. Discussing the potential reasons for these deviations we have shown that the use of self-presentations as data requires reflection on the process and context of data generation. Finally, by outlining how self-presentations might be embedded in triangulated research designs and by pointing towards the issue of representativeness we have suggested how future research might robustly incorporate self-presentations as a valuable data source for better understanding creative workers. In so doing we make a contribution to the debate not just of which research on creative work needs to be undertaken in the future, but also how this research might be undertaken. These methodological considerations, we would argue, are particularly important as they facilitate academic research outputs that are positively distinguished from the growing number of industry and policy reports and journalistic publications on creative workers and creative industries.

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Footnotes

- ⁱ Below we use indicative verbatim quotes to illustrate how designer present collective self-portraits. All quotes are taken from the verbatim transcript of the film and were translated from German into English by the authors.
- ⁱⁱ Although all other quotes were originally in Austrian, this interviewee spoke the italicised words in English, mirroring the Floridian use of language.