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The Psychological Impacts of Engaging in Creative Work

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THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACTS OF
ENGAGING IN CREATIVE WORK

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An Abstract of the Thesis by
Jeanine Jo Kunshek

Although the literature investigating creativity is extensive, this research is designed to address deficits in knowledge regarding the first-hand accounts of individuals who engage in creative work and the motivations and gratifications they draw from those experiences. This study employs the use of *in vivo* analysis to articulate and explore the benefits and disadvantages of individuals who pursue careers in five creative industries identified by Taylor and Littleton (2012). Based on qualitative data gathered from focus groups and interviews, most frequent benefits include social connections, cognitive challenges, boosted esteem, communication, and personal and professional development. Disadvantages include time demands, lack of compensation, physical demands, and lack of appreciation.

Keywords: *creativity; creative work; motivation; gratification;* in vivo *analysis;*

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

The creativeness of the self-actualized man seems rather to be kin to the naïve and universal creativeness of unspoiled children. It seems to be a more fundamental characteristic of common human nature – a potentiality given to all human beings at birth.

- Abraham Maslow (1954, p. 122)

In her TED Talk debut, author Elizabeth Gilbert (2009) mused about the models humans have used across time to describe the phenomenon of creative individuals. Ancient Greeks and Romans believed that "creativity was [a] divine attendant spirit that came to human beings from some distant and unknown source, for distant and unknown reasons" (Gilbert 2009). Known to Greeks as "daemons," Romans referred to this creative quintessence as a genius. These geniuses, which Gilbert comically characterizes to the likeness of Dobby the house elf, would emerge from the walls and would aid and shape an artist's work.

Contemporary psychology picked up its examination of creativity much later. In 1954, psychologist Abraham Maslow wrote,

In [contemporary psychology's] preoccupation with practical results, with technology and its means, it has notoriously little to say, for example, about beauty, art, fun, play, wonder, awe, joy, love, happiness, and other "useless reactions." It is therefore of little or no service to the artist, the musician, the poet, the novelist, the humanist… or other end- or enjoyment-oriented individuals (p. 179).

Today we think about creativity very differently. Oftentimes, measurement of creativity is used to evaluate contributions of employees in their workplaces, especially in terms of how to increase productivity (Baer & Oldham, 2006). Additional studies have shown the increasing potential economic value of creative industries to revitalize depressed local economies (Taylor and Littleton, 2012). While research has identified creativity as a facilitator in enhancing problem solving, adaptability, self-expression, and health (Runco, 2004), literature investigating creativity lacks the ability to describe personal motivations of individuals through their own words. This study aims to fill that gap in knowledge and thus examines the benefits that individuals identify as they engage in creative work:

RQ1: What are the gratifications of engaging in creative work?

To better understand the creative individual holistically, this study also explores the drawbacks individuals identify in their creative professions.

RQ2: What are the disadvantages to engaging in creative work?

CHAPTER II

Review of the Literature

Historical model of creative identity

Throughout history there was an important shift in perception about the traditional artist as a "supreme being" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996) to a modern idea of today's creative individual, and it is important to distinguish which kind of creative being this study investigates. Vlad-Petre Glăveanu (2010) describes the traditional, historical vision of creative individuals exclusively as gifted artists and solitary geniuses. He writes,

> … [They are] extremely rare and their existence and activity resembles nothing less than a miracle; their capabilities cannot be explained by our common knowledge… and they are conceived as a symbol of divine inspiration or hereditary traits that allow them to revolutionize art, philosophy, and science (p. 149).

Psychologists exemplify this superhuman individual as the "He-paradigm," an example of the unachievable human made legendary through time (e.g., Leonardo da Vinci).

Recently this fundamental image of an ultimate creative individual has been shifted to the talents of ordinary persons of creative potential, the "I-paradigm," which can be developed and shaped through experience. However, Glăveanu argues that the individual's potential is an incomplete image that only represents half the picture.

Instead, a more comprehensive look at creativity is seen through the "We-paradigm" where creative inclinations are best understood in the context of interacting and exchanging ideas with others, such as in a community (Glăveanu, 2010).

The Creative Identity in Communities

Glăveanu founded a branch of psychology called "cultural psychology of creativity." Based on the argument that creativity cannot be complete unless it is culture-inclusive, this theoretical framework considers first and foremost the everyday creative individual as they interact with their community and society in a variety of creative contexts and capacities (i.e., science and art). He writes, "… Culture is conceived as not being 'outside' but '*inside*' each creative act, as a constitutive part…" (Glăveanu, 2010, p. 152). According to Csikszentmihalyi (1996), creative work is an important component of culture because it enriches our shared communities, thereby indirectly improving everyone's quality of life. Indeed, the presence of creativity as a prized skill can be observed in almost all known cultures throughout human history (p. 150-151).

The results of Glăveanu's efforts to study creativity through the lens of cultural psychology resulted in a five-part model influenced by theoretical and empirical research. First, cultural psychology seeks *a contextual understanding of creativity* which questions how new artifacts are considered novel and compared to what. It also asks how it is useful and for whom. Second, *a generative understanding of creativity* looks at how creative individuals manipulate existing concepts in new ways. Third, *a meaning-oriented understanding of creativity* investigates "how individuals relate to their creations and in how they make sense of their own creativity" (Glăveanu, 2010, p. 153). This principle also establishes that the value of an artifact shouldn't solely be determined by

expert groups but also by our communities. *A genetic understanding of creativity* addresses the emergence and development of creativity in individuals and in our shared cultural experience. Last, the principle *ecological creativity research* contends that quantitative research is an inappropriate way to examine creativity based on the argument that artificial tasks, confounding variables, standardized testing, etc. cannot accurately or adequately capture the essence of genuine, real-time creativity.

The Flow of Creative Work

Arguably the most well-known publication investigating creative work is Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) influential book, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience.* Csikszentmihalyi's core concept explores a phenomenon called optimal experience, or Flow, a state in which individuals achieve effortless control over their conscious actions as they reach the peak of their abilities. Flow occurs when individuals are completely absorbed in an activity, especially activities involving creative abilities, and are able to forget themselves (e.g., an athlete honing in his attention pre-game to "get in the zone"). As a result of one's attention being completely embedded in an activity (e.g., fishing, playing the piano, yoga), individuals experience genuine satisfaction. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) explains that when our attention is absorbed, there's "no excess psychic energy left over to process any information but what the specific activity offers… [people] stop being aware of themselves as separate from the actions they are performing" (p. 53).

Two principle themes of Flow are time and personal growth. Csikszentmihalyi explains that many individuals who experience Flow encounter a peculiar unawareness of time. He writes,

One of the most common descriptions of optimal experience is that time no longer seems to pass the way it ordinarily does… freedom from the tyranny of time does add to the exhilaration we feel during a state of complete involvement (p. 74). Csikszentmihalyi also explains that challenging activities which require significant skill result in personal growth and provide "a sense of discovery, a creative feeling of transporting the person into a new reality" (p. 74). However, Csikszentmihalyi concluded, "One cannot enjoy doing the same thing at the same level for long. We either grow bored or frustrated; and then the desire to enjoy ourselves again pushes us to stretch our skills, or to discover new opportunities for using them" (p. 75). Csikszentmihalyi's prominent work on Flow revolutionized the way creativity is presently investigated, and much of his work supports Glăveanu's arguments that creativity as an academic pursuit should shift from an investigation of the revered, solitary genius to an ordinary person of creative potential.

In a later publication examining creativity as a process that unfolds over time, Csikszentmihalyi (1996) claimed, "When we are involved with [creativity], we feel we are living more fully than during the rest of life" (p. 2). Do individuals actually feel that they live more fully while participating in creative activities? According to contemporary psychology, motivation is embedded in our decisions and actions. Maslow (1954) wrote, "Usually when a conscious desire is analyzed we find that we can go behind it, so to speak, to other more fundamental aims of the individuals" (p. 66). To understand the motives of individuals who engage in creative activities, this investigation examines both the incentives as well as the drawbacks identified by professionals in their creative careers.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

Participants

Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling methods under the condition that they were currently pursuing a career in one of the following creative industries: film/video (7), creative writing (6), theatre (6), visual arts (5), and music (4). These industries were five of 13 creative industries identified by Taylor and Littleton (2012). Due to time constraints and a narrowed vision for this study, these five areas were intentionally and specifically selected for this academic investigation. Of 28 participants, 15 were male, 12 female, and one participant preferred not to answer. The mean age was 34.7 (range of 20-65), one participant preferred not to answer. Twenty-two participants disclosed their race/ethnicity as Caucasian, three as African American, one as Hispanic, one as both Caucasian and Hispanic, and one participant preferred not to answer.

Data Collection Procedures

This investigation employed a combination of focus groups and interviews to collect data and employed *in vivo* coding to analyze participants' responses. According to Tracy (2013), "Focus groups are appropriate for your research project if your topic could

benefit from the group effect" (p. 169). "Group effect" can be observed when focus group conversations take on a cascading, tumbling effect wherein participants' conversational contributions are sparked by the comments and expressions of others. Tracy (2013) writes, "Focus groups can be transformative – raising participants' consciousness about certain issues, or helping them to learn new ways of seeing or talking about a situation. Participants' experiences are validated, extended, and supported by similar others" (p. 168). Similar to the power of therapy groups, Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik, and Alberts (2006) identified a specific synergy occurring during focus groups "when participants hear others' verbalized experiences that, in turn, stimulate memories, ideas, and experiences in themselves" (p. 155). Another key benefit of focus groups is an organic development of a common language between individuals who share significant similar experiences (Tracy, 2013). For this investigation, the shared similarity between participants is their involvement in one of the five creative industries mentioned previously.

Focus groups were conducted by the principal investigator and were audio recorded for later reference. Refreshments were provided. Focus groups lasted on average 1.2 hours (65 to 80 minutes) and together equaled 4.6 hours. Research questions served as an interview guide to structure the focus groups, including: "Why do you engage in creative work?" "What are the benefits of engaging in creative work?" and "What are the disadvantages of engaging in creative work?" Interview questions were not always asked in an identical order and might not have included this exact wording.

In addition to focus groups, three interviews involving four participants were conducted due to participant availability constraints. One interview included two participants and the subsequent two interviews were conducted with one participant each.

Each interview lasted on average 25.3 minutes (18 to 38 minutes) and together equaled 1.3 hours. Research questions again served as an interview guide to structure the focus groups, and included questions such as, "Why do you engage in creative work?" "What are the benefits of engaging in creative work?" and "What are the disadvantages of engaging in creative work?" Again, interview questions were not always asked in an identical order and might not have included this exact wording.

In Vivo Coding Thematic Analysis

Coding is a commonly employed method in qualitative analysis in which the researcher separates and organizes data into categories for the purpose of exposing "underlying messages portrayed by the data" (Theron, 2015, p. 4). "A *code* is a descriptive construct designed by the researcher to capture the primary content or essence of the data," explains Theron (2015, p. 4). Through the coding process, the researcher looks for emerging patterns and similarities in order to link data to ideas and phenomena (Theron, 2015). Because focus groups organically develop a common vernacular (Tracy, 2013), this study employs *in vivo coding* – a thematic analysis that uses the wording and terminology expressed by the participants themselves (Tracy, 2015) in order to stay true to the ideas expressed by participants. Participant responses were tallied and categorized into the most common and significant themes.

CHAPTER IV

Findings

The Advantages of Engaging in Creative Work

Some participants, when asked why they engage in creative work, were flabbergasted. Michael, a theatre director, said, "I have trouble wrapping my head around the question because it's kind of like asking, 'Why do you breathe?'" Paul, a poet and university professor said simply, "Writing is like an appetite, you get hungry and you want to eat." James, a band manager and musician, explained,

> As hard as I work and as much as I love my career – this music stuff is almost more important than my job. When I die and someone writes my obituary, it's going to be just as important to me that it says, "He was a musician" as it is to say that he had a doctorate degree and was the Director of Parks and Recreation. It's up there – it's a really important part of my life.

Out of fifty-one identified benefits, five categories were most frequently discussed during participants' discourse, answering research question one: social connection, cognitive challenge, communicating a message, esteem fulfillment, and personal and professional growth.

RQ1: What are the gratifications of engaging in creative work?

Establishing Social Connections. Considering the extensive research examining creativity as an "engine" of cultural evolution (Runco, 2004), it is unsurprising that the most frequently cited gratification of engaging in creative work identified in this study was Social Connections. Social Connections are circumstances in which participants form an established relationship, temporary or permanent, with others in the following capacities: Communities, Audiences, and Collaborations. The most frequently identified Social Connection sub-category was Community. Community encompasses the idea of a fellowship with others through a shared interest in a creative industry or through a similar identity. Mia, a lead singer and guitarist in a local rock band observed,

> The community comes because of the music. Music is a main interest I always want to think and talk about, so when I come across people who are interested in music in the same way as me, it's a huge starting point to a new friendship. Like, "Oh, this person seems cool."

Charlotte, a poet and university professor responded, "There's a community that comes out of [creative work]. We have a big community of writers here [in Pittsburg, KS]." Jacob, a documentary filmmaker, responded that his contribution to the culture in his community is a benefit, a reflection of Glăveanu's investigation of the everyday creative interacting with their culture and society. He explains, "Being a part of the documentary culture is a benefit – making, creating, and contributing to our culture, it just makes you a better person. You put good in, you get good out."

From the potter's wheel to a performance stage, participants cited the excitement of sharing a product with Audiences as the second-most cited benefit under Social Connections. Audiences referenced by participants across the creative industries were

similar in that they consisted of other people or groups of people who enjoyed products produced by participants. James, a band manager and musician explained, "There's a high you get from being in front of an audience, and it's such a joy to make people happy from what you do." Other participants enjoyed the idea of providing meaning to audiences. Emily, a broadcasting alumna, shared,

> I was working at FOX-14 when the Joplin tornado hit. One day I was talking to my coworker Jane about it, and she said something I'll never forget. She said, "We're a small community. We do a lot of field trips and auction sales, stuff on the news that seems unimportant. However, then when a crisis like [the Joplin, MO tornado] happens, we're the first people to turn to." That is where we find some meaning. I'm in your home every night telling you the news and what's going on – and you know that when something happens, you can turn to me. That, to me, is very powerful.

Emily's contribution touches on a cornerstone of Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) concept of Flow. He wrote, "When not preoccupied with ourselves, we actually have a chance to expand the concept of who we are" (p. 64).

Last, participants cited collaboration with others as a social benefit. Several participants described the feeling of unison within an ensemble to be significant. Alice, a student director, described a memorable experience:

> It all comes back to connection. Whether it's a connection between me and my actors or the connection we're making with the script. There was this moment last night [at rehearsal] when everyone was on the same page. I went to say something

and someone else finished my sentence. It was like, yes - *this* is what it's about.

It's like making discoveries.

James describes a similar experience with his band members. "There's a musical kinship and brotherhood that you have with the people you're playing with," he describes. "You develop this chemistry with the people you're with onstage – you know what they're going to do next onstage, and they know what you're going to do. It just flows and it just happens." Jacob, a documentary filmmaker described his experiences of working with others as often superior to working alone on projects. He explains, "I've filmed projects by myself and have made decent stuff by myself, but somehow the final product seems so much better when you're collaborating with someone else. There's something about bouncing ideas off someone else."

Cognitive Challenge. In 1996, Csikszentmihalyi wrote, "The best moments usually occur when a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile" (p. 3). Twenty years later, participants described this cognitive challenge as the second-most frequent benefit of engaging in creativity. The cognitive challenges identified by participants were frequently described as "mental workouts" and opportunities to "problem-solve" or "learn new things." Additionally, finding or creating meaning through creative endeavors was a frequently cited benefit. Participants who enjoyed the challenge of creative work likened this benefit to the challenge of solving riddles or puzzles. Poet and high school English teacher Amelia related it to playing Tetris, saying, "I look for the right word to just *come out*." Paul, a university professor and poet describes poem-building process, "Sometimes in the

middle stage of a poem it feels like a jigsaw puzzle. Then there's a moment when you think, 'Oh, this *is* going to work,' and it all starts to fit and come together."

Participants also found the learning component of creative work as a benefit and described it as a tool for acquiring knowledge and new skills. "There's no stopping point in music, there's always more to learn," Mia said. Participants cited the benefit of learning novel ways to approach various situations as a tool for understanding the world around them. For example, Frank, a filmmaker, explained,

> You learn every time you shoot something – either something worked, or something didn't work – and then you try something else. It's constant experimentation. Also, everything changes – every year you get new cameras, new computer systems, new Kodiaks, or new hard drives. It's always about experimentation – learning and trying, solving problems and coming up with new solutions.

Several participants mentioned that the opportunity to learn about people and the world around them is a benefit. Creative writer and novelist Susan said,

> There's a process of discovery and understanding that happens, too. When you're writing, you're thinking, "How *would* it feel to be like this person?" and you step into that person's shoes, or "How *does* that bark on that tree feel?" or "What *do* bacon and eggs smell like?" It's that process of discovery and embracing the world and understanding the world and other human beings that's an element of it.

Michael, a theatre director, added, "[Theatre] really allows you to explore emotions, places, and ideas you'd otherwise never have the opportunity to explore or comprehend."

Last, participants cited the search for and discovery of meaning as a benefit of engaging in creative work. Frequently, meaning was found through the expression of ideas. Ava, an art teacher and freelance painter, said, "I feel like without art, life would be meaningless. To be able to create and express ideas is the benefit for me."

Communicating a Message. The third benefit identified most frequently throughout participant discussion was an opportunity to have authentic conversations or to communicate a specific message. Sixty years ago, Abraham Maslow suggested, "[Creative] people seem to see the true and the real more easily" (1954, p. 224). Participants described the act of engaging in creative work as an outlet to have conversations that can't be done through everyday activities. As Ava explained,

> For me, it's a vehicle for communication. I feel like I can communicate whatever I want. If I were to stand on the rooftop and shout it, I would get fired. But through art, I can say whatever I want.

Theatre director Michael professed, "I am just oriented so that I have to make a production out of everything in order to really have conversations I want to have."

For others, the message itself was most important. Some participants described the act of expressing themselves as one message identified as a reason to engage in creative work. Overall, self-expression was seen as a way to display participants' authentic voices and through which participants could "be who they want and say what they really want" under the guise of an artist or performer. "I was a very shy kid and I didn't really know how to express myself," answered Alice. "So when I was given an outlet [through theatre] that I could do that under, I was like, 'Okay, this is how I'm going to express myself.' Ever since then, I have used that." Susan explained, "At a

certain point writing is pleasurable for me because I'm expressing [myself], but also something deeper in me that I didn't even know was there. It gives voice to something deep inside myself that otherwise is not expressed."

Often, participants identified messages with the potential to influence, impact, inspire, or educate others in order to promote change in society. Theatrical director Harry explained,

> We're not special as artists. We're priests, we're servants to our survival. We put the human condition on stage in a way that allows the audience to learn through what we're doing. We are servants – and what a wonderful servant to be.

In fact, the concept of fulfilling the role of a "public servant" or doing their "civic duty" was a popular message expressed as a benefit of engaging with creative work. James recalled a community service activity he participates in as a benefit of playing in a band,

> There's a group called Musicians for Miracles that I participate in. If someone has cancer or if someone's child was born prematurely, we put together these benefits with different musical groups. Someone arranges a silent auction and three or four different bands play throughout the afternoon trying to raise money for the family – that's been really cool.

For several participants, communicating a more personal message was an important aspect of engaging in creative work. Amelia described an example of how she used a poetry reading to communicate frustration she had bottled up regarding a personal decision that challenges the *status quo*. She disclosed,

> My husband and I don't plan to have children and people think that's really weird. I was trying to figure out how to answer everyone because everyone thinks I'm

crazy and this is all just kind of bothering me with how intrusive they are with their questions. I finally wrote a poem explaining why I didn't want to have children, and I read it recently at a conference's open mic. The next morning at breakfast I had a woman come up to me and she said, "I heard your poem and it made me ask myself why I had children." I felt really understood and that felt awesome. I was understood at least for that moment.

For other participants, the idea of creating or expressing an idea or image in someone's mind was an incentive. Paul described his "love of language" as an explanation of this idea, "Meanings and sounds lead to new poems. Not necessarily a meaning I want to express, but more the sound of words or an image I want to communicate." Susan added, "It's the closest thing to magic that I can think of and do. You think of something, you write it down, and then you create something in another person's mind. It's a bit of magic."

Esteem. The fourth benefit cited most often was Boosted Esteem. Participants described boosts of confidence and self-esteem as positive incentives to engage in creative work. Of the Esteem benefits cited by participants, pride, personal satisfaction, recognition, and appreciation of a job done well were identified as particular advantages. A significant benefit recognized in this study identified that participants feel pride, gratification, and fulfillment when they've accomplished a difficult achievement. Sophie, a ceramic artist, explained, "It is about accomplishment and that moment of pride after you've sat there for eight hours and you're satisfied." Jacob, a documentary filmmaker, voiced a similar experience,

There's something really rewarding about making something. I made a 15-minute documentary a year ago and I had a hard time finding the way it was going to flow. But once I found that flow, it was just so gratifying to see it all come together.

Moreover, participants described recognition and respect for their talents as a benefit. For participants, recognition of talent could take many forms. Charlotte explained, "Sometimes we get prizes. Sometimes we get published. Sometimes we get scholarships and fellowships and jobs, and sometimes we get to hold our book in our hand." For other participants, the recognition and reward is less physical. Michael, a theatre director, described the validation of evoking a response from audience members,

When you find what you did was received or you get appreciation back, that's validating. The worst thing is to have no reaction. I would rather people be really upset or really offended or really jazzed or really enthused than have the reaction, "Okay, so what?"

Last, the compliment of being acknowledged as talented was a common benefit identified by participants. Mia, remarked, "It is super flattering when people like our music and our band. We're doing it because we love it and then if people like it on top of that, that's pretty awesome."

Personal and Professional Growth. The last benefit identified as an advantage was personal and professional growth. Michael described the advantage of personal growth and self-discovery through creative work. He said, "It sort of provides a compass to where I am and what I'm doing. I become so isolated that it doesn't even occur to ask anymore, 'Where am I at?' Theatre forces you to be on the map." Several participants

also cited the discipline that creative works instills in them as a benefit. Maria, also a director, noted, "Theatre makes me so much better at time management because you don't have a choice but to open the show and get your checklist done."

Participants identified professional growth and the improvement of their craft as an important benefit. Jackson, a graphic artist, described the enjoyment of tracking his artistic process as exciting. He explained, "Every time I put up work in my studio it's progress, it's a step. Then I get to create another one that is more advanced. It's like a track record of my artistic ability." At times, the adventure of discovering what they are capable of was most appealing to participants. Charlotte said,

> There's a big overlap in writers who say that they were surprised at what they found in their writing when they were writing a story. There must be something you're satisfied by when you discover something in your own writing. It's like when you're taking a test and you know the answer and you think, "Oh my god, I didn't know I knew that."

Several participants described how the idea of mastering their craft is a main benefit. Jackson observed,

> I like replicating realism. It excites me every time I draw something that's right in front of me. It's like, I took that object right in front of me and put it on a two-dimensional plane, and I like that excitement and that feeling where I can look at a paper and be like, that's the same object.

The Disadvantages of Engaging in Creative Work

RQ2: What are the disadvantages to engaging in creative work?

As a whole, the advantages that participants expressed overwhelmingly outnumbered their complaints. For some participants, the "ego check" of negative feedback was considered a drawback; for others, the negligence of their familial duties trumped all other disadvantages. Overall, nearly every participant consistently cited four stumbling blocks of working in creative industries, answering research question two: lack of appreciation for their craft, time commitments, adequate compensation, and physical demands.

Lack of Appreciation. For most participants, the most common reoccurring disadvantage identified was an under-recognition their crafts. Charlotte contended, "[Poetry] is not always highly valued in our culture as we would like it to be or as it has been at other times." Poet and English teacher Amelia illustrated Charlotte's point, "If you ask someone, 'Who is the most famous living poet?' hardly anyone knows who they are. Maybe Billy Collins? However, nobody would say, 'Who is Stephen King? Who is J.K. Rowling?'" Participants also noted that people undervalue and underestimate the time and mastery that goes into their crafts. Drummer Liam remarked, "People just think, oh someone's really gifted at doing their thing and that's all they have to do. There are a lot of hours of practice behind it that go into it and I think certain people don't understand that." Amelia added, "Lots of people think they can do [poetry]. I studied really hard and went to school to teach and to write poetry, and people are like, 'I popped off this poem, what do you think?' It's frustrating."

Another common drawback expressed by participants concerned other people questioning their career choices. Alice described her experience attempting to justify a career in theatre. She explained, "Catching flack for my career choice is a disadvantage.

Some of my family members, my dad especially, are very logical and sometimes don't understand how I can be passionate about something that doesn't make me very much money." Painter Sophie articulated a more physical reaction she feels when questioned about her choice to pursue art,

> Having to constantly defend yourself to someone [is a drawback]. I hate it, and every time someone asks my major, my palms get sweaty and I feel the need to communicate that it's okay and I do have a plan for my future. It's a disadvantage to always get "that look." Why do they pity me?

Time Commitment. Participants often mentioned time as an obstacle in their pursuit of creative work. For participants, the lack of availability to invest in their craft – to practice, perform, travel, etc. – was the tip of the iceberg. Ava, a conceptual artist, vocalized the struggles she faces as an artist, parent, and full-time employee,

> I work so many hours a day, I am a parent, and I have responsibilities. At best I can put in four or five hours. I feel like I'm always neglecting something – you can't do it all. The progress I'm going to be making is going to be a lot slower than someone who has more time or who has craftsmen working for them. I would like to have more time to really jump into my work and stay there for a long time until I'm satisfied. It's logistically hard.

James added, "I can't play music as much as I would like to play music and still be great at my job and be a great husband and be a great dad." Another side of the Time disadvantage concerned many participants expressing difficulty finding "the right state of mind" with which to work. Sophie, a painter and student, observed, "You can't rush making work. With art you have to be focused and rested. I have to be able to make this

piece, it's going to take time, and I can't wait until the night before." Sarah, the ceramic artist, agreed, "I can't just sit down and make art, I have to be in the right state of mind to make something I'm satisfied with or it won't turn out well. I have to be patient and I can't rush it."

Adequate Compensation. Compensation for work was the third-most frequently addressed negative of engaging with creative work. As videographer Oliver succinctly observed, "Unfortunately money is involved." The disadvantages monetary compensation created fell into two categories: either participants weren't getting paid enough to live on or participants felt as if the rate of pay suggests a lack of respect for their craft. Ben acted in Los Angeles, CA and described how he "ran screaming… because [he] wanted to eat." As a recent university graduate, videographer Emily summarizes the financial conundrum participants face:

> Money is a disadvantage. The problem is if you can't make money starting out then usually you're working some other job to support what you love to do. You get into this attitude of "I have to do this for my real job, and this isn't for my real job" and [time for your craft] just falls away. If the money were more lucrative, then you could spend more of your time investing in it. But a lot of people starting out have to work an extra job starting out with really crappy hours, really crappy wages to make it lucrative for them. That does make it hard because I've seen a lot of people, especially in the news industry, who [are] now insurance salesmen or something. And it's not because they fell out of love with it, but it's just not enough to live on.

Overall, most participants connected with Mia's outlook, "The pay isn't great. If you're trying to do something big with music, you don't do it because of the money."

Some participants believe that a lack of appreciation regarding their craft deters appropriate compensation. Filmmaker Levi examined this issue,

> A disadvantage is the outside opinion when they just don't appreciate the skill and the time it takes. They want to undervalue and undercut you in purchasing your time and your craft. To make a living, people have to understand that this is a skill that takes hours of planning, and a wealth of knowledge and experience to produce something that the client will enjoy. People never want to pay you for what it's worth.

Many participants described the financial contribution they must put in before they can make a profit, if they make one at all. The initial costs varied across creative industries (e.g., art supplies for visual artists, new equipment for music and film/video). Charlotte described a common scenario writers face when setting out to publish their work, "There's no money in writing… There are people who want *me* to pay so that they can look at my work and decide if they want to publish it. That's common." Lastly, participants identified a catch-22 scenario regarding time and compensation. Ben, a director and theatre professor, observed, "For our students, [theatre] becomes a job disadvantage. If they are putting in 10 hours or more, that's 10 hours that they're not earning money, which can be a burden."

Physical Demands. Last, across the creative industries, participants described the physical demands of their crafts as a disadvantage. For example, both musicians as well as film and video participants cited hauling equipment as physically taxing. James

described an average evening performance as loading equipment into the trailer only to unload equipment for the show. Following performances, all equipment must again be loaded into the trailer. He noted, "You go to bed at two or three o'clock in the morning and you're just physically fried the next day." For novelist Betty, she depicted the wear and tear of her craft differently, "Your back goes out and your knees go out because you're at the computer for hours and hours." Ceramic artist Sarah described how sitting at a potter's wheel for several consecutive hours could be painful in the following days. Other participants described the physical deterioration of neglecting to take care of themselves properly. Filmmaker Jacob mentioned how he could often forget to drink water or feed himself throughout a day when he is particularly absorbed in his work. Theatre director Harry described an event where his lack of personal care cost him heavily. He disclosed, "I had stayed up three days in a row when I was 50. And you think, oh I'll just take a few days off. No, it takes months to get over that type of exhaustion."

CHAPTER V

Discussion

This study described the psychological impacts that individuals acquire through engagement with creative work. Through the use of focus groups and interviews and *in vivo* coding analysis, this study found that there are strong thematic ideas identified as benefits or disadvantages by participants across five distinctive creative industries (see Taylor and Littleton, 2012). Five strong gratification themes emerged from focus groups and interviews: social connections, cognitive challenge, an outlet to communicate, boosted self-esteem, and personal and professional growth. Four strong disadvantages themes were also identified, including: lack of appreciation, time constraints, inadequate compensation, and physically demanding work.

Additionally, there are two surprising and significant contributions to academia's knowledge and understanding of creativity. The first interesting take from this research endeavor supports Csikszentmihalyi's (1996) research on creativity as a process that unfolds over time. As Csikszentmihalyi sought to ask how creativity changed over time, this study found that participants also observed an evolution in their motivations to engage with creative work throughout their lives. Theatrical director Michael remarked,

It serves different functions at different points in time. When you start out as a kid, it's about expression and "How do I process emotions?" in that adolescent

sort of way. You can use it to learn how people behave or have behaved. Now that

I'm kind of an adult, it's like any other academic field or discipline. Now it's,

"What do I want to say?" and "How do I think?" and it's beyond an emotional

aspect. It's a larger, more complicated web of information processing.

Poet Amelia voiced, "When I was in my twenties I just wrote constantly. I still write, but

it's part of my job." Conceptual artist Ava added,

I think the reasons I have done art have evolved through the years as I've gotten

older. When I was in high school, I made art because I was good at it and it

impressed other kids. When I got to college it was about expressing ideas. Now,

as an adult and I have a tedious job that pays the bills – I have to have a creative

outlet, I have to have something that gives my life meaning. It's become more of a

necessity as an adult because it's not my livelihood.

Perhaps the largest and most interesting contribution of this study was unexpected

and connects to Abraham Maslow's (1954) Hierarchy of Needs. Maslow's revolutionary

contribution to contemporary psychology describes the ability of humans to self-

actualize, the act of achieving one's personal potential, through an instinctual need to

seek personal growth and fulfillment. According to Maslow, the act of self-actualizing is

not an end-point, but rather an ebb and flow that can be attained over the course of one's

life. "This tendency might be best phrased as the desire to become more and more what

one is, to become everything that one is capable of being," Maslow (1954) wrote (p. 92).

He also noted that self-actualization is *growth*-motivated rather than *deficiency*-

motivated. Meaning, this instinctual human need to achieve fulfillment stems from our

desire to grow, rather than a reaction to any insufficiencies we might perceive.

The fundamental concept of Maslow's model is that humans have higher and lower needs, and he designed a five-layer pyramid to represent the spectrum of these needs. The foundational layer of Maslow's pyramid is "physiological needs." This most basic, instinctual level is where humans must fulfill their basic survival needs; such as: bodily needs (food, drink), shelter, sex, or sleep. Individuals begin here on their journey to self-actualization. Once these foundational needs are achieved, the subsequent fourth layer provides the challenge of achieving "safety needs," such as: security, stability, and protection from the elements.

The parallels between Maslow's hierarchy and the results of this study begin at the third level on Maslow's hierarchy, "esteem needs." Esteem needs include self-respect, self-esteem, and the esteem of others. Examples of how humans achieve their esteem needs are by gaining strength, achievement, adequacy, mastery and competence, confidence, reputation, and prestige. Our participants cited esteem as the fourth highest benefit of engaging in creative work. Maslow's fourth level is "belonging and love needs," where humans look to fulfill needs such as relationships, family, romantic interests, affection, and intimacy. Our participants cited the connection with others as the number one benefit of engaging in creative work.

Finally, at the zenith of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, is the "self-actualization level." Individuals who have acquired the four other levels – to a certain extent and with exceptions – achieve peak experiences, or moments of clarity and elation. However, Maslow continued, "Man is a wanting animal and rarely reaches a state of complete satisfaction except for a short time. As one desire is satisfied, another pops up to take its

place" (p. 69) Thus, humans cannot forever stay in a state of transcendence, but will rather fluctuate between peak experiences throughout his or her lifetime.

While Maslow's historically popular model is five-layered, this later work expanded the model to a seven-layered pyramid. In the third edition of *Motivation and Personality* (1987), Maslow expanded his hierarchy to incorporate cognitive and aesthetic needs (situated between the former fourth and fifth levels, esteem needs and self-actualization). Cognitive needs establish that knowledge, understanding, and curiosity are essential for the evolving human. This level also conveys a need for exploration, meaning, and predictability in our lives. Maslow (1954) wrote, "Even after we know, we are impelled to know more and more minutely and microscopically on the one hand, and on the other, more and more extensively in the direction of a world of philosophy, theology, etc." (p. 96). This study found cognitive challenges to be the second-most frequently reported participant benefit. Aesthetic needs seek beauty, a sense of balance, form, etc. While aesthetic was not cited a significant benefit, it was mentioned a handful of times by participants. However, as artists, it could be assumed that aesthetic needs would play a more prevalent role in the motivation or gratification of pursuing creative careers. Finally, Maslow's updated model incorporated an additional layer on his model above self-actualization needs. On the summit of Maslow's mountain, transcendence needs states that humans seek to help others realize self-actualization.

What is pertinent to the results of this academic endeavor is how Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs makes some striking parallels to the results of this study. Additionally, our participants cited "personal and professional growth" as one of the top benefits for engaging in creative work. Growth, of course, is relevant because Maslow's

entire model is based on the theory that humans instinctively seek growth, and therefore fulfillment. Even some disadvantages vocalized by our participants are remarkably similar to Maslow's work. As with our participants who choose to pursue creative careers despite pay being a frequent complaint, Maslow deduced that people, specifically "creative people," forego basic needs in order to transcend to higher needs. He writes,

> There are other apparently innately creative people in whom the drive to creativeness seems to be more important than any other counter determinant. Their creativeness might appear not as self-actualization released by basic satisfaction, but despite lack of basic satisfaction (p. 98).

Maslow (1954) also wrote, "A greater value is usually placed upon the higher need than upon the lower by those who have been gratified by both" (p. 149). Csikszentmihalyi (1990) mentioned a similar sentiment, "Sleep, rest, food, and sex provide homeostatic experiences that return consciousness to order after the needs of the body intrude… But they do not produce psychological growth" (p. 46). Maslow (1954) continued,

> Such people will sacrifice more for the higher satisfaction, and furthermore will more readily be able to withstand lower deprivation. For example, they will find it easier to live ascetic lives, to withstand danger for the sake of principle, to give up money and prestige for the sake of self-actualization. Those who have known both universally regard self-respect as a higher, more valuable subjective experience than a filled belly (p. 149).

While prestige is a benefit cited by our participants (esteem), it is very much accurate to note that participants will sacrifice basic luxuries in exchange for the ability to pursue a career in any of the creative industries discussed in this study.

Maslow (1987) did specifically investigate creativity. In particular, he sought to answer the paradox of creative endeavors. Contemporary psychology at the time had already divided motivational behavior into two branches: coping and expressive behaviors. Coping strategies were found to be "instrumental" to survival as individuals achieved basic needs, aims, and goal-seeking behaviors (i.e., shopping at the grocery store to eat). Expressive behaviors were more akin to a reaction and were found to be "non-instrumental" (i.e., smiling at a joke, one's handwriting). Maslow investigated the motivation of individuals who engage in creative work. He wrote,

> Art may be relatively motivated (when it seeks to communicate, to arouse emotion, to show, to do something to another person) or it may be relatively unmotivated (when it is expressive rather than communicative, intrapersonal rather than interpersonal) … Very much to the point, however, is the question "*Is* there a *need* for expression?" If there is, then artistic expression, as well as cathartic and release phenomena, are as motivated as food seeking or love seeking (1987, p. 68).

As self-actualization is growth-motivated rather than deficiency-motivated, this study found that creative work not only parallels several needs on Maslow's hierarchy (social connection, love and belonging needs; cognitive challenges, cognitive needs; boosted self-esteem, esteem needs; personal and professional growth, the human instinct to grow), but it supports his conclusion that artistic expression art and artistic expression are as motivated as food or love seeking.

CHAPTER VI

Limitations, Future Directions, and Conclusions

Two limitations restricted this research investigation. First was the inability to gather the music focus group into one setting due to incompatible scheduling, thus interviews were conducted. While interviews provided a unique data set, the interviews did not lend themselves to the tumbling, cascading effect of focus groups and needed more prompting to obtain sufficient data. Another limitation of this study was the principal investigator's limited experience in qualitative research. If this study were to be conducted again, interview questions should be given more thought with regard to every research question.

Given the parallels to Maslow's (1954, 1987) Hierarchy of Needs (social connection and love and belonging needs; cognitive challenges and cognitive needs; boosted self-esteem and esteem needs; personal and professional growth and the human instinct to grow) and this study's support that creativity is a need like food or love seeking, future research would do well to further consider these implications and conduct further analysis on a larger sample. It would also be interesting to investigate and compare a wider breadth of creative areas, such as science, mathematics, and dance.

In conclusion, this study provides an understanding of the gratifications and disadvantages of engaging in creative work. Through the results of this study, it can be

determined that major benefits of creative work include social connections, cognitive challenges, boosted esteem, communication, and personal and professional growth. These particular benefits make striking parallels to the work of psychologist Abraham Maslow (1954, 1987), and provide noticeable support of his argument that creativity is a need as essential to human life as love. This study also determined that common disadvantages of engaging in creative work include lack of appreciation, time commitments, adequate compensation, and physical demands.

CHAPTER VII

Final Thoughts

Philosophers have contemplated the idea of self-actualization for thousands of years. Maslow (1954, 1987) believed that the higher need was a result of evolutionary development. He wrote, "We share the need for food with all living things, the need for love with (perhaps) higher apes, the need for self-actualization (at least through creativeness) with nobody. The higher the need, the more specifically human it is" (1954, p. 147). Csikszentmihalyi (1996) believed that creativity is the single most significant separation between apes and humans. A multitude of research points to the benefits of creativity in our society as propellers and agents of change. As such, creativity should be a cornerstone of our education and political systems as we tackle economic, environmental, and other increasingly significant national and global crises. The benefits of understanding the heights of our evolution will work to our advantage as we move forward in our modern civilizations.

Notes

1. Names used throughout this article are pseudonyms, and several identifying details of participants have been modified.

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APPENDIX

Definitions of themes and categories relevant to this study per Merriam-Webster (2016).
Definitions denoted with an asterisk indicate main themes identified as benefits or
disadvantages of engaging in creative work.

1. **Achievement (Esteem).**

    a. A thing done successfully, typically by skill or effort

2. **Appreciation (Esteem).**

    a. The **recognition** and enjoyment of the good qualities of someone or
    something

1. **Cognitive Challenge.***

    a. The mental action or process of acquiring knowledge and understanding
    through thought, experience, and the senses

2. **Collaboration (Social Connection).**

    a. To work with another person or group in order to achieve something

3. **Communication.***

    a. The imparting or exchanging of information or news

    b. Means of connection between people or places, in particular

4. **Community (Social Connection).**

    a. A feeling of fellowship with others, as a result of sharing common
    attitudes, interests, and goals.

    b. A similarity or identity, such as a group of writers

5. **Social Connection.***

    a. Something that joins or connects two or more people

6. **Discipline (Personal and Professional Growth).**

    a.   Training that corrects, molds, or perfects mental faculties

7. **Esteem.***

    a.   Respect and admiration, typically for a person

8. **Growth.***

    a.   Grow – To become better or improved in some way: to become more developed, mature, etc.

    b.   Personal development - activities that improve awareness and identity, <u>develop talents and potential</u>, build human capital and facilitate employability, enhance quality of life and <u>contribute to the realization of dreams and aspirations.</u>

9. **Fulfillment.**

    a.   Satisfaction or happiness as a result of fully developing one's abilities or character; the achievement of something desired

10. **Mastery (Personal and Professional Growth).**

    a.   Comprehensive skill in a subject or accomplishment

    b.   Proficiency – high degree of competence or skill

    c.   Ability – talent, skill, or proficiency in a particular area

11. **Meaningful (Cognitive Challenge).**

    a.   Having a serious, important, or useful quality or purpose

12. **Networking (Social Connection).**

    a.   Interaction with other people to exchange information and develop contacts, especially to further one's career

13. **Payment for work.***

a. Pay, wages, salary

14. Physical Demands.*

a. Stressors associated with a job's physical setting

15. Pride (Esteem).

a. A feeling or deep pleasure or satisfaction from one's own achievements

16. Rewarding.

a. Giving you a good feeling that you have done something valuable,

important

3. Self Esteem (Esteem).

b. A realistic respect for or favorable impression of oneself

17. Self-Expression (Communication).

a. The expression of one's own personality

b. The expression of one's feelings, thoughts, or ideas, especially in writing,

art, music, or dance

18. Societal Impact (Communication).

a. Influence – the power to change or affect someone or something: the

power to cause changes without directly forcing them to happen

19. Time.*

a. A portion of time allotted or used for a purpose