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How being female impacts learning and career growth in advertising creative departments

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Abstract

Purpose – In the male-dominant creative industries, do men and women have access to the same resources for career learning and development? The purpose of this paper is to examine women's perspectives of their career trajectories in advertising creative departments.

Design/methodology/approach – Situated learning theory views learning as produced through interaction with and increasing participation in a community of practice. Interviews were conducted with 19 female creatives to examine two research questions: first, how do women develop identities as creative practitioners within the male dominated advertising creative department? and second, how are women's learning trajectories influenced by their gender?

Findings – Gendered expectations affected the type of work women were supposed to produce, their ability to sell work, and the types of assignments they received. Women lacked legitimacy and experienced difficulties developing an identity as a master practitioner. They instead emphasized parts of their identity unrelated to the profession.

Research limitations/implications – Women were unable to develop identities as full members of the community of practice. The identity formed in conjunction with work was that of a person with lesser talents, fewer opportunities, and less valued contributions, causing them to exit the field or seek positive identity from places other than work.

Originality/value – This study was the first study that the authors are aware of to examine empirically the relationship between situated learning theory and gender. It provided evidence from women's perspectives that gender restricted access to material for forming a positive work-identity, which impeded learning as women realized and accepted they were on a different trajectory than similarly-situated males.

Keywords Training, Gender, Career development, Organizational learning, Women, Situated learning theory, Work identity, Employee participation, Advertising agency, Creative industries

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In the creative industries, women traditionally have been underrepresented. This is true in many applied creative fields, such as architecture (24.8 percent women, US Department of Labor, 2008), web design (16.2 percent women, A List Apart, 2008), and advertising creative departments (30 percent women, Endicott, 2002). In male-dominant fields, which creative industries tend to be, women may experience difficulties such as lack of access to social networks, a shortage of mentors, and difficulty navigating organizational politics (de Vries *et al.*, 2006). In gendered organizations (Acker, 1990), work practices seen as normal tend to favor characteristics associated with men and devalue those associated with women (Kolb *et al.*, 1998). The inequities experienced by



women in male-dominant fields can have a real impact. Women in male-dominant organizations report less job satisfaction (McKeen and Burke, 1994) and higher intention to quit (Burke and McKeen, 1996). They experience increased anxiety (Evans and Steptoe, 2002) and stress (Yoder, 2002). Even their creative abilities can suffer (Windels, 2011).

In the USA, creative industries share some basic commonalities: uncertainty over consumer demand for the product, creative workers who care about the originality and technical prowess of the output, and a demand for teamwork among diverse and specialized skilled workers (Caves, 2000). Building from Caves' (2000) research, a study of the UK's creative media industries found production in the creative industries is a high-risk proposition dependent upon consumers' volatile demands and subjective tastes and trends (Eikhof and Warhurst, 2013). To minimize losses, the creative industries have organized around project-based production, in which networks of people or organizations with different skills come together to complete the project. The project-based model of production in the creative industries has features that contribute to a preponderance of educated, white affluent men within the industries (Eikhof and Warhurst, 2013). The high insecurity of employment and large number of low-pay entry-level jobs in the creative industries make it a greater investment of personal resources, which is easier when one has financial support from affluent parents (Eikhof and Warhurst, 2013). The reliance on informal networks to get a job means individuals with access to industry networks are more likely to have opportunities to work, which again favors the affluent and connected (Eikhof and Warhurst, 2013; Gill, 2002). Further, because the informal networks are rather homogenous and closed, access is hindered for ethnic minorities and women (Eikhof and Warhurst, 2013; Gill, 2002). Finally, the long hours and demand for presenteeism required to work in the creative industries adds further constraints for those with childcare responsibilities, which are more likely to be women (Eikhof and Warhurst, 2013; Mallia, 2009).

The research on the influence of the project-based model of production suggests that the environment or organizational context can have an impact on workers, and that it can differentially impact men and women in male dominant, creative media industries. Through qualitative interviews, this study examined the perspectives of female creatives – the colloquial term used for art directors, copywriters, and creative directors responsible for developing ideas and executing advertisements – in US advertising agencies. It examined how the workplace-learning environment impacted the women.

There has been increasing interest in the literature in examining the workplace as learning-oriented (e.g. Billett, 2004; Coetzer, 2006; Huzzard, 2004; Sense, 2004) and a “growing awareness of the need to encourage learning at and through work” (Coetzer, 2006, p. 311). Despite growing consensus of the importance of organizational learning, there is little consensus about its definition, perspective and conceptualization (Sense, 2004). Sense (2004) outlined three dominant perspectives in the literature. The cognitive perspective is an information processing view of organizational learning, while the behavioral perspective has an outcome focus, examining how actions change as a result of learning. Finally, the sociological perspective views learning as a result of collective social actions in a community of practice (Sense, 2004). This paper will focus on situated learning theory, a theory within the sociological perspective. “The clearest attempts in research to date to reconcile learning and power have been work associated with situated learning theory” (Huzzard, 2004, p. 351).

Research has suggested that female underrepresentation in the creative director position, which is a leadership position in the creative department, is due to women

exiting advertising mid-career, rather than disproportionate entry-level hiring (Mallia, 2009). Why are these creative women leaving their chosen field of work? Previous feminist and masculinities literature has examined the issue of the dearth of women in advertising creative departments (e.g. Gregory, 2009; Nixon, 2003) as has some advertising scholarship (e.g. Grow *et al.*, 2012; Mallia, 2008, 2009). Despite earlier research, the issue of gender inequality among creatives still exists unabated. To examine this phenomenon, this study focussed not on the person alone, but instead on the person acting in the world. In this circumstance, one in which women self-select into a field and later abandon it, context was vital to understanding. This paper drew upon situated learning theory (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) to examine the reasons for female scarcity within advertising creative departments. It explored the concept of learning trajectories to examine whether female creatives' experiences in the department put them on a trajectory toward full membership in this community.

Literature review

Women in the advertising creative department

In Western countries, women have made great strides in the advertising industry as a whole. Women make up 49 percent of the workforce in the UK (Klein, 2000). In the USA (EEOC, 2009) and in Spain (Pueyo Ayhan, 2010), women represent 56 percent of advertising employees. The creative department is one area where women have not gained ground. Data from 1999 showed women represented just 17 percent of copywriters and 14 percent of art directors in the UK, and those numbers were slightly down from the averages from 1986-1991 (Klein, 2000). In the US, 30 percent of creatives are women (Endicott, 2002). Women are also under represented in creative departments in France (35 percent), Spain (24 percent) and Sweden (30 percent) (Klein, 2000). One analysis suggested that 20.3 percent of advertising creative professionals worldwide are women (Grow and Deng, 2014).

Among the creative elite, women are scarcer. The worldwide percentage of female creative directors, the managerial position for creatives, is 8 percent (Klein, 2000). Women win fewer awards in award shows and annuals such as the One Show (Weisberg and Robbs, 1997), *Communication Arts* (Windels *et al.*, 2010) and Adweek's Best Spots (Mallia, 2008). A review of the top advertisements featured in *Communication Arts* in 1984, 1994 and 2004 showed that the percentage of women award winners did not increase over the three decades (Windels *et al.*, 2010).

We cannot blame "the pipeline" of college graduates for this. In 1981, women became 50 percent of overall college graduates in the USA, giving them more than 30 years to advance (Sandberg, 2011). Women represent a majority in advertising's academic programs as well, where 61.6 percent of students enrolled in mass communication Bachelor's programs and 65.7 percent of those in Master's programs are women (Becker *et al.*, 2012). Further, women constitute about half of individuals in specialized advertising portfolio training programs (Mallia, 2008).

It is typically harder for women to break into and succeed in creative advertising (e.g. Gregory, 2009; Mallia, 2009; Nixon, 2003), since the culture of the creative department has been developed and maintained based on male norms and ways of working. Creative departments have been described as "laddish," fraternity houses, locker rooms and a boys' club culture with a "subculture of sexism" (Alvesson, 1998; Gregory, 2009; Mallia, 2009). The boys' club culture has been reported in the US (Mallia, 2009; Windels and Lee, 2012), the UK (Gregory, 2009), Spain (Grow *et al.*, 2012), and

Sweden (Alvesson 1998). The boys club, locker room culture serves to maintain the status quo of masculine norms within the department.

The masculine norms carry over to the work as well, where men's brands and a male sense of humor are "privileged values of creativity" (Windels and Lee, 2012, p. 515). According to the systems perspective of creativity, creativity is the product of interactions between three elements, a culture that provides rules, a person who creates, and a field who critiques and validates the contribution (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988, 1999; Vanden Bergh and Stuhlfaut, 2006). Research found that because women lacked power and status in a creative department that privileged masculine values, they were less able to persuade the field of the values of their efforts, even when targeting women (Windels and Lee, 2012).

Some research has tried to determine potential reasons for female underrepresentation in advertising creative departments. Social network research found the ease of socialization between and among men gave them an advantage in advertising. Men were more likely to build relationships with other men that span friendship, social and business ties, and in doing so reaped greater rewards than women from those ties (Ibarra, 1992). This also affected women freelancers. Because freelance contracts were typically awarded informally through personal contacts, women were at a relative disadvantage if they were unable to build strong social ties with the mostly male employee base (Gill, 2002). Women saw this as a continuance of an old boys' network (Gill, 2002).

Success in the creative department was defined and driven by a male career model, one that lionizes masculine characteristics (Mallia, 2009). Personality factors such as perseverance, toughness, competitiveness, and a thick skin were seen as important factors for success (Grow and Broyles, 2011). Long hours and inflexible work arrangements were found to be hallmarks in the department (Mallia, 2009; Mallia and Windels, 2011). Women have expressed frustration with the way time is used and valued (Grow *et al.*, 2012), especially as they decided to take on the dual role of creative and mother (Mallia, 2009).

Situated learning theory

Situated learning theory is a theory of social practice, which "emphasizes the inherently socially negotiated character of meaning" (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 50). In contrast to more conventional, cognitive learning theories that focus on the individual's thoughts, situated learning theory instead emphasizes "learning as increasing participation in communities of practice" (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 49). Learning and meaning are produced as individuals interact and engage with communities of practice. A key outcome of successful situated learning is becoming able to "read" the situation and act in ways that are valued by other members of the community (Contu and Willmott, 2003). Members must learn how to talk and act in the manner of full participants (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

Newcomers within a community are granted legitimate peripheral participation, or access to the periphery of the community, which allows them to observe the community of practice. To learn, newcomers must be granted access to all that community membership entails, including "who is involved; what they do; what everyday life is like; how masters talk, walk, work, and generally conduct their lives; how people who are not part of the community of practice interact with it; what other learners are doing and what learners need to learn to become full practitioners" (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 95).

This access provides newcomers with an understanding of how people interact within the department and what they like, dislike, respect and admire.

Through participation, learning trajectories are developed. Through time and participation, newcomers move toward full participation in a community, but trajectories can differ based upon participation and experiences. Perhaps most significantly, full participation involves “an increasing sense of identity as a master practitioner” (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 111).

Situated learning theory has been used successfully in the past to examine advertising creative departments. In a study using situated learning theory to examine the career trajectories of creatives in the UK, junior creatives on the periphery of the community developed competencies through smaller assignments and assignments on which no one else wanted to work (McLeod *et al.*, 2011). “Over time, novices learned to judge their own work by developing an understanding of what the community would consider ‘good’ or ‘bad’” (McLeod *et al.*, 2011, p. 121). As skills developed, creatives gained increased membership in the community. Keys to newcomers’ success included access to challenging projects and guidance of senior peers.

Identity formation in a community of practice

Individuals form an identity through participation in the community. Identity is a negotiated experience between the individual and the community, built through participation, experiences, interaction, relationships, and sense-making based on feedback from the community (Wenger, 1998). Situated learning theory identifies five key elements of identity, identity as: negotiated experience, community membership, learning trajectory, nexus of membership and relation between global and local. The first four elements were used in analysis to detail the participants’ formation of identity within the community of practice.

With regard to negotiated experience, identities are defined through participation and reification (defined as making real or concrete), as community members ask themselves whether their contributions have been noticed and well-regarded. We “define who we are by the ways we experience ourselves through practice as well as by the ways we and others reify ourselves” (Wenger, 1998, p. 149).

For the element of community membership, we “define who we are by the familiar and the unfamiliar” (Wenger, 1998, p. 149). In a community, “we are recognized as competent. We know how to engage with others” (Wenger, 1998, p. 152). This can be experienced through three dimensions of community:

- (1) mutuality of engagement, which is developing expectations on how to act and how one will be treated;
- (2) accountability to an enterprise, which occurs as the participant starts to understand the conditions, interpretations, and choices likely to be made by the community; and
- (3) negotiability of a repertoire, which occurs as the participant recognizes and develops a set of personal references, stories, events, and memories to draw upon.

With regard to identity as learning trajectory, identity is “where we have been and where we are going” (Wenger, 1998, p. 149). Identity is constantly renegotiated and reconfigured based on experiences and events, and it changes in forms of participation over time (Paechter, 2003). In negotiating our present identity, our past and future

identities are incorporated. Further, the community provides a set of people and stories that are models or possibilities for negotiating one's own trajectory.

Finally, identity can be shaped by nexus of membership, or the "ways we reconcile our various forms of membership into one identity" (Wenger, 1998, p. 149). Each person belongs to several different communities (present and past). Importantly, a participant must reconcile different forms of membership. This means being able to construct an identity that can include different meanings and forms of participation.

Gender in situated learning

Because situated learning theory takes a critical stance of learning within communities of practice, emphasizing the importance of power relations for understanding learning, it is an ideal theory through which to examine the impact of gender on learning and community membership (Salminen-Karlsson, 2006). "When workplaces, or communities of practice, have implicit expectations as to how femininity and masculinity should be 'done,' these expectations join other messages as part of the material for constructing the individual's work identity" (Salminen-Karlsson, 2006, pp. 34-35). In a community with masculine values, women must learn to behave and think in ways more commonly associated with men. They may have difficulties forming an identity.

The gendered expectations of the workplace can start with the power and legitimacy granted to men and women. Power relations, including class and gender, can enable or constrain access throughout careers. Women on the periphery can find it more difficult than similarly situated males to find power to use (Salminen-Karlsson, 2006). This may result in lack of access to information, resources, and opportunities for participation to be able to craft an image of what it means to be a full member of the community (Salminen-Karlsson, 2006). When power relations hinder access to resources, information, and participation, it is hard to learn a practice (Contu and Willmott, 2003).

The gendered nature of learning in a community means different realities for men and women. Identities associated with masculinity could be seen as unattainable for women (Salminen-Karlsson, 2006). As learning occurs in a community, women survey the potential of attaining full membership. If a central position seems attainable and personally satisfying, learning is promoted. When the attainment of a central position seems less likely or demands too much sacrifice in terms of identity issues or social relations, learning is not promoted. Instead it results in contentment with a peripheral position in the community and learning is impeded (Salminen-Karlsson, 2006).

Research questions. There has been a call for research that examines identity formation within communities of practice that takes into account gender and power relations (Salminen-Karlsson, 2006). This call further emphasized the need to examine how the identities available to community members are affected by the power embedded in the community. At this writing, no research has examined the intersection of gender and situated learning. Through qualitative interviews with 19 female creatives conducted from 2007 to 2013 by two researchers, this study examined how women develop identities within the male-dominated creative department of the advertising industry. Thus, the following research questions were examined:

RQ1. How do women develop identities as creative practitioners within the male dominated advertising creative department?

RQ2. How are women's learning trajectories influenced by their gender?

Method

Qualitative research is appropriate when the goal is to examine the perceptions and beliefs of individuals as they interact with the world (Merriam, 2002). In seeking out individuals most intimately involved with the issue of female underrepresentation, in-depth interviews were conducted with 19 female creatives. The goal of the interviews was to understand how female creatives experience and perceive their identity in the agency.

Initial informants were recruited via e-mail based upon the industry contacts of the researchers and expanded via snowball sampling. Efforts were made to recruit women with diverse backgrounds, including variety of experience, credentials and demographics along with women from agencies of different sizes and markets. Interviews were conducted by phone. All interviews were semi-structured, with broad and open-ended questions, to allow for a more complete understanding of the perceptions of informants. The interviews started by asking informants to talk about their experiences in school and on interviews, and it then moved into their experiences in the creative department. This allowed for a sense of informants' career history, gaining a sense of trajectory throughout their careers. Later in the interview, the creative women were also asked, "In your opinion, why are there so few female creatives?" to get a better understanding of why they feel this phenomenon occurs. They were also asked why a woman would leave the department. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed for analysis.

Informants were 19 female advertising professionals with positions in agency creative departments in the USA. Table I provides information on the informants and their agencies. The interviews lasted an average of about 50 minutes, ranging from 35 to 90 minutes. Women from all levels of experience and credentials were represented in the sample. Confidentiality was provided for all informants and their agencies so they could speak openly about their experiences (Drumwright and Murphy, 2004).

Data analysis

First, transcripts were reviewed by the researchers to gain an in-depth understanding of the data and the experiences of informants. The data were then broken into parts and compared for similarities and differences. Concepts were labeled and categories began to emerge. Analysis of the data was conducted with a social constructionist interpretation to discourse, where meaning is examined within the context of social interaction (Lock and Strong, 2010). In this framework, environments are constructed and maintained by individuals interacting based on their interpretations of reality. Meaning is not a private cognition, but rather a construction based upon a culturally and socially embedded history of interactions (Hackley, 1998). This method of analysis allows for an understanding of how women are affected by the patterns of behaviors and interactions within the department.

This study explored the learning trajectories and identity formation of female creatives as they worked from the periphery to the center of the advertising creative department. Throughout the analysis, an attempt was made to recognize the "socially negotiated character of meaning" (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 50) inherent to situated learning theory. Thus, emphasis was placed on the ways in which informants learned and developed their identities through their participation in the community and through the responses, feedback or reification received from their participation.

Throughout the analysis, four key elements of identity – negotiated experience, community membership, learning trajectory, and nexus of membership – were compared to the data to more fully understand female creatives' identity development.

	Number of employees	
<i>Position</i>		
Junior AD/CW	1	
AD/CW	8	
Associate creative director	4	
Creative director	3	
CEO/partner	3	
<i>Age</i>		
20-30	8	
30-40	5	
40+	6	
<i>Ethnicity</i>		
Caucasian	17	
Hispanic	1	
Indian American	1	
<i>Kids</i>		
Has kids	5	
No kids	14	
<i>Region</i>		
Southwest	9	
West	3	
Midwest	2	
Northeast	5	
<i>Agency size</i>		
500+	9	
101-500	4	
25-100	2	
< 25	2	
Freelance	2	

129**Table I.**
Demographics of
informants and
agencies

Findings

Because situated learning theory examines learning and membership through increasing participation in a community of practice, the findings are organized based on a timeline of experience (McLeod *et al.*, 2011).

Pre-peripheral experience

The person who aspires to be a creative – such as a student in a university, specialized advertising portfolio training school, or other fine arts program – is approaching the periphery of the community of practice or creative department (McLeod *et al.*, 2011). Members of the pre-periphery have not yet been granted legitimate peripheral access to the community, thus it is likely that they have not yet experienced the community in a traditional sense. The work in portfolio programs serves to prepare students for the heavy workload and teamwork involved in the industry (McLeod *et al.*, 2011). However, university classrooms, which tend to be less biased and more feminized than creative departments, may not prepare students for the gendered environment of the department (Windels *et al.*, 2010).

Informants were positive about their pre-peripheral experiences in school. A typical response came from a junior copywriter who noted that her training program “was a 50/50 split” and “certainly didn’t feel like a boys’ club.” Informants began to identify as community members (Wenger, 1998). Portfolio schools and university training

programs provided an opportunity for aspiring creatives to sample or try on an identity as an advertising creative, especially with regard to skills such as ideating and developing ads.

The job interview experience was different for each informant. One art director said, "It didn't feel strange to be a woman." The act of getting interviews based on their portfolio of work reified them as participants and made them feel as though they were successfully negotiating their *experience*. For some, interviews were more about personality. A junior copywriter said, "They want to make sure that you will work with everyone else personality wise. There's a lot of bull shitting and joking and chit chatting. Making sure you're not psycho." Another copywriter encountered an agency that said, "We want to hire someone we can be friends with." For female job applicants, it is their first instance of negotiated experience with the industry itself. It is the first opportunity to interact with the community and to be reified as a participant, and many felt their talents and personalities were recognized.

The desire to define ability, and an identity, based on work was prevalent in many informants' experiences on the pre-periphery. An associate creative director noted, "You have this vigor. You think, 'I am going to take over the ad world, and I know what creative advertising is.'" A creative reflected that she wanted to "kick butt and show everyone how great [she was]," while a copywriter had "lofty dreams" to one day be a great creative director. "I had this drive and this willingness to do it all," she continued. Thus, on the pre-periphery, women felt good about their learning trajectory. They were able to develop an identity as a person who would one day make great creative work. Based on their experiences in school, they could envision a path or trajectory that would lead to full participation in the community.

On the periphery

Upon getting their first job as a junior art director or copywriter, creatives are granted "legitimate peripheral access" to the agency creative department. This access provides them with an opportunity to participate in the community of practice as a newcomer. More importantly, legitimate peripheral access lets creatives observe and learn about the community, including the activities, language, ways of acting, resources, and information required to become full members of the community (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Knowledge of shared norms and relationships serves to educate newcomers and sustain the community. At this stage, creatives start to negotiate their own identities as community members in the creative department and start on the inbound journey toward full member (McLeod *et al.*, 2011).

According to the "doing gender" perspective (West and Zimmerman, 1987), individuals "become" men and women in the eyes of others "by behaving or not behaving in gender appropriate ways, and on a basis of this identity as women or men they choose certain interaction patterns rather than others" (Salminen-Karlsson, 2006, p. 32). Thus, gender shapes expectations and interpretations of actions. Legitimacy, or acceptance into the community, is crucial to the inward trajectory, as it allows for newcomers to learn through participation and grants them the freedom to make mistakes. If junior female creatives lack legitimacy, which could occur based upon not being the right kind of person or having the right qualities at birth (Wenger, 1998), she may be denied access to the very aspects of the community that provide her with learning experiences and help her develop an identity (Contu and Willmott, 2003; Salminen-Karlsson, 2006).

With regard to negotiated experience, or the community reifying female creatives as participants in the community, female junior creatives sometimes felt they were treated

differently than their male counterparts. “I think in life there is always that overhanging thing that [women] are less superior,” said a junior copywriter. Sexualized comments served to highlight the differences (Alvesson, 1998; Gregory, 2009). A team of creative women noted that the male team in their group had a different and friendlier relationship with their male creative directors. “They can joke around with our bosses and be like, ‘Oh, look at that lady’s cans.’ And I think we feel a little left out.” Being left out of participation and reification in this part of the community affected identity development.

Upon access to the periphery of the department, informants were aware that they were “not instantly part of the inner sanctum,” said one copywriter. While research by McLeod *et al.*, (2011) had a similar finding for male creatives, an art director perceived that “it was easier for [men] to get in” or that men had an “automatic pass” unavailable to women. Because of gender, many informants did not feel they were recognized as competent members of the community. “Professionally, I feel like they are looking at me differently,” said an art director. To compensate, a junior copywriter tried to “come up with more guyish work.” She felt she had to “be able to prove [herself]” to write like a man. Another copywriter felt her work lacked legitimacy. “The work that we present is so much a part of us. [...] When you are telling someone what’s coming out of your brain, you can’t ask someone to let go of their stereotypes. It’s just impossible. [...] When I am selling a commercial to someone, they see a young white girl.”

In the boys’ club culture of the creative department, gender clearly became an organizing factor in communication and participation, affecting the learning trajectory for female creatives. Especially in their first jobs, some women experienced paternalism from their creative directors. One creative felt overprotected by her executive creative directors, the senior-most executives of her creative department. “They see you as girls.” She continued, “That’s always going to be hard, because people are always going to see that before they see how much you want things.” A team of junior creatives was called “the girls.” This paternalism and differential status led to the creatives questioning their own abilities and to others in the agency questioning their abilities.

Newcomers on the periphery of a community only feel empowered if they can see a path to becoming a valued member of the community (Salminen-Karlsson, 2006). It was clear that even junior creative women had difficulties visualizing that path. Women felt they were on a different trajectory than men, which caused some to begin to separate their work from their identities. An art director noted, “I think in a lot of ways we do seek out more balance in our lives and we do have more outside interests [...] Because we know it’s just a job. It’s just work. [...] Men have the desire to one day be this great, wealthy creative director.” The implication here is that the difference in experience leads to differences in expectations for a future as a creative director in the center of the community. If a person stops working with a community to understand and develop collective meaning, he or she is likely to move on an outbound trajectory (Paechter, 2003). The different experiences and trajectory were already altering expectations for junior-level women.

Progressing from the periphery: mid-level creatives

In terms of situated learning theory, informants in mid-level positions have progressed from the periphery of the organization on a path toward the center. Identity is negotiated on an ongoing basis for advertising creatives (Hackley and Kover, 2007). As they progress, creatives have to learn many new skills. Each agency has its own

creative code, or informal and implicit rules shared by members of the creative department for what represents excellent creative work (Stuhlfaut, 2011). Creatives must monitor agency and industry standards for excellence. "Creatives need to remain up to date with what peers consider 'good' work, checking the output of others, as well as the career progression of peers and superiors" (McLeod *et al.*, 2011, p. 124). Mid-level creatives must learn the importance of networking, word of mouth, and peer regard as keys to mobility within the industry (McLeod *et al.*, 2011).

Mid-level informants continued to feel marginalized in terms of negotiated experience. They felt as though the tendency for creative directors to be men was detrimental to their ability to be recognized and mutually engaged in terms of their work. This occurred partially as a result of informal socialization outside of work. An art director noted that while junior and mid-level men could socialize with male superiors, it could be seen as inappropriate for women. She continued, "I think a lot of men at the top are becoming very wary of befriending women who are subordinates. That's kind of a problem, too, because we want to joke around with the guys too, and hang out at the meetings, but I think it kind of makes them feel uncomfortable." Gregory (2009) termed this informal socializing "the locker room," representing a safe space for men to discuss their (sometimes sexist) values, motivations and desires. To allow for freedom to engage in these behaviors, men resisted women's presence in these spaces unless the women were willing to participate on the men's terms (Gregory, 2009). The informal socializing between junior- and senior-level men led to friendships, and also it sometimes led to better access to good projects "coming down the pipeline," said an art director. Access to good projects meant a greater chance to succeed within the industry. Gregory (2009) similarly noted that because of their lack of access to the locker room, women were "less likely to gain access to prestigious clients, projects and promotions" (p. 326).

The lack of natural shared interest between men and women compounded the issue of community membership. "[My creative director] would always get together with my partner and talk about the basketball game and the baseball game. And I would have to find another way to connect with him. I didn't have that instant male rapport," said an associate creative director. The difference between the tastes and preferences of men and women also impacted the work that was approved within the agency. Gregory (2009) found a locker room sense of humor in UK advertising agencies, not only with regard to informal banter, but also in reference to the "implied maleness" seen in so many advertisements (p. 339). Similarly, even when targeting women, informants in this study felt the male point of view in creative work was preferred. A female team of associate creative directors said they were asked to work on an account that targeted women. To their male CD team, they presented work they felt was funny and appropriate for women, but the work was rejected. The team felt it was rejected "because the people directly above us were male and had that sensibility of, 'I know what's funny, and this isn't funny.' So it didn't really go anywhere." Humor, like gender, is socially constructed (Gregory, 2009).

Women progressing in their careers were also cognizant of the stereotypes associated with having a female partner on a creative team. This relates to the mutual engagement component of community membership, in which individuals develop expectations of how to act and how they will be treated within the community. It was clear that there were different expectations about the performance and commitment of men and women. One associate creative director said, "But it's this preconceived notion, 'Oh, if I have a female partner, she is going to be emotional, she is not going to be like my

guy partner, she won't be tough, she's going to have to run home to her kids every night, she's not going to focus on work." These stereotypes served to marginalize women.

Mid-level women continued to perceive a different learning trajectory for themselves than for men. It was expected that men would continue to develop advertising that was funny, while women would develop a style that was more "touchy feely or lofty," according to an associate creative director. This influenced the types of assignments creatives were placed on. She continued, "If they are looking for something really funny, with guy humor, [...] they are going to think 'my funny guy team, they are going to nail it.'" While women were associated with emotional work, men's work was associated with humor and wit. A team of female associate creative directors talked about the first big assignment they were asked to lead. "I really got the feeling that it was because no one else wanted to deal with it. And they knew it was this dorky women's initiative that nobody liked, that was really uncool. And because it was feminine and dorky, they were like [the female team] will just take this away from us." Another team of female creatives became known as "the women team." When their agency had client brands that targeted women – including baby products, shampoos, and razors – this team was called in. A female who worked over 20 years in a very macho agency also recognized a distinct disparity in the distribution of plum assignments, "We'll let women go do the women thing and, meanwhile, us boys, we'll take care of the car accounts and the beer accounts and that sort of thing." But those car and beer campaigns were more likely to win awards. A former agency CEO said women "aren't getting the opportunities and showcase campaigns and great briefs," which makes it seem the pool of outstanding female talent is even smaller.

Another clear sign that the learning trajectory was different for men than women came in an interview with a team of female associate creative directors. "I think sometimes when guys talk to each other, there is more of a power play there. There is a guy we work for, you have that relationship with him that is probably like their one he is used to having with his wife or with other females in his life. He just listens to what you have to say and there is no pretense of, 'I don't want her jockeying for my job.'" It's clear here that there was a greater assumption that other men would challenge creative directors for their jobs, while women posed no such threat, signifying a different trajectory.

When asked to explain why some mid-level women exit the industry rather than continuing toward the center, a creative director informant said, "They're like, 'Why am I here? I am not advancing. I am busting my ass and not getting recognized. I am going to go open a boutique or go raise a family or go do something more rewarding.'" A CEO suggested many women think, "I've paid my dues, why haven't I been promoted?" In terms of negotiated experience, this suggests informants did not feel reified as participants by the community. They felt as though their membership continued to be marginalized as they traveled on a different trajectory than similarly-situated men.

Reaching the center: creative directors

Creative directors have the opportunity to define an agency's creative culture (McLeod *et al.*, 2011). Creative directors spend less time producing creative work, as they are typically more involved in management issues such as building client relationships and attracting new business. It involves a period of "dis-identification and identity reconstruction" to accommodate new roles such as "quality controller, critic, motivator and mentor" (McLeod *et al.*, 2011, p. 127).

Learning in a community of practice entails building a repertoire of competencies, but learning itself can be gendered. "In tasks that are themselves gendered (i.e. perceived as men's or women's work), this may entail considerable effort for community members who normally 'do' the opposite gender" (Salminen-Karlsson, 2006, p. 42). It may be difficult for women to perform appropriately when the job or workplace itself is associated with masculinity, as has been shown in advertising creative departments (Gregory, 2009; Nixon, 2003).

As women progressed up the ladder toward creative director, there were fewer female role models and models for ways of working, increasing the difficulty associated with negotiating the role and developing an identity as a master. One ACD with 15 years of experience said, "I am banging my head against the wall to be a creative director." A creative director said "The guys are competitive. I don't know that women are as competitive, they are more inclusive. There's a lot of one-upmanship. At meetings, guys are always putting each other down, whereas women are trying to get everyone on the same page." One creative director said the women who succeeded were strong, had a sense of humor, were able to talk to guys on their level, and were willing to make sacrifices to prove dedication to the agency.

Even in the center of the community as creative directors, women felt they had spent their careers on a different learning trajectory. One female creative director described it as a situation in which there was an A team and a B team. "If you don't somehow prove yourself with a big project with amazing creative [work] right off the bat and get put on the A team, you're on the B team. Once you're categorized on the B team, it's really hard to get into play. [...] I think it starts off as an uneven playing field to begin with. You are usually put in the B category, because you are a woman, to begin with." Even as creative directors, or leaders in the field, informants still felt they were on the B team.

While managers or creative directors are typically thought to enjoy a certain power based on working in an industry that formed according to their needs (Salminen-Karlsson, 2006, p. 37), the women in this study did not experience such power. As they reached the center of the community and became creative directors, there was still a sense by informants that they were seen differently than male creative directors. After years in the industry, informants felt both men and women were "disillusioned." However, there was a difference between how men and women reacted to disillusionment. An associate creative director said, "It's more likely to be the women that move on. Because they have the option of doing something else because their spouse has a job. Or they are more willing to be like, 'You know, I don't have to make six figures, I will just go work in a flower shop.' Whereas most guys, it's more engrained in them from society that, 'I've got to earn the big paycheck and just be tough.'" Since women's identity as creatives had not been recognized and reified throughout their prior experiences, their identity and self-worth were not derived solely from their jobs.

Creatives often work hectic and unstructured schedules, and long days. They work until 2:00 a.m. on busy nights, they work weekends, and they often go on photo shoots for weeks at a time. These factors result partially from the pressing demands of clients in this service industry (Mallia, 2009) and partially due to hyper-competitive masculine career codes. One respondent said, "My life was just so screwed up in NY because I worked until 10 o'clock every night. Not every single night, but I pulled all-nighters and there was never a question. You have to make these crazy sacrifices to be in the creative department because it is such a competitive business. If you are willing to live your life in your office, you're going to do better in the business." Due to the difficulty of coping with the dual role of creative and mother, many women waited

until their career was established to have children (Mallia, 2009). Even those women who succeeded often had an at-home spouse or nanny due to the demands of the industry (Mallia, 2009).

At this stage more than any other, informants saw issues with the nexus of membership, meaning they had problems constructing an identity that included both the job and other identity memberships. An associate creative director said, "Whichever way you view it, spending all of your time at work, society lets men get away with that, not so much women. But society lets women get away with not spending all of their time at work. It's just these roles that we have." An art director said, "You can't have outside hobbies and interests and your work becomes this definition of who you are, and I don't think women are able to do that." Another art director echoed the sentiment, "I think that women naturally want more balance in their lives. [...] What it takes to become a creative director requires so much of your time, and it requires you to give up things like spending time with your kids. I think that women aren't willing to give that up, they just have different values." The women said they had started to "work smarter" after they had kids, by working through lunch and managing time more effectively. However, a creative director felt the men did not recognize those efforts:

I just remember, when I first became a mom, and I was leaving the office at like 5:30 to go get my daughter from daycare. And I remember running into a creative person, right around the same level, getting on the elevator and he just looked at his watch, you know. He didn't know that I had gotten there at 8:00 in the morning, about two hours before him, or that I had worked through lunch while he was off having a two-hour lunch. But he was judging me by the fact that I was leaving at 5:30. Because it is very much a perception, face-time thing.

It seemed there was a lack of harmony between society's role for women and the culture of the creative department, which was built to more closely mirror society's role for men. In considering each of the factors associated with female underrepresentation, the women found it was hard to get their voices heard in a system based on the norms of a male-dominant culture. One creative director noted that because the department was "dominated by men, there's less willingness or encouragement to change the system." She continued, "It's hard to be the lone voice, the minority in this majority."

Discussion

Throughout this study, the identity formation of female creatives was examined as they moved from the periphery to the center of the advertising creative department. Identities are "living relations between persons and their place and participation in communities of practice" (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 53) that are constantly developed and redeveloped based upon experiences within the community (Paechter, 2003). The women in this study experienced obstacles as they tried to move toward the center of the community and develop an identity as a master of the practice. These obstacles presented themselves in many ways, but one constant was the gendered construction of the department.

In terms of identity as negotiated experience, in which identities are formed through participation and reification, the sexualized banter prevalent in creative departments (Gregory, 2009) served to identify woman as "other," which affected how junior women related to their creative directors. Junior and mid-level creatives felt unable to socialize with their male creative directors for fear that others might feel the relationship was inappropriate. This meant women newcomers had a very different mentor relationship than did men newcomers, who developed friendships with mentors in

social situations that carried over to the workplace. As women continuously bumped against the boundaries of the practice rather than moving toward the center, they did not feel reified as members of the community. They felt as though their membership was marginalized.

In terms of identity as community membership, where identities are formed through experiencing competence and seeing the community as familiar, gender was an issue as well. While junior and mid-level male creatives could talk sports with male creative directors, creative women had to find other ways to connect. Some women compensated by acting like one of the guys (Windels and Lee, 2012) and participating in discussions of sports and sex on men's terms (Gregory, 2009; Klein, 2000; Nixon, 2003). Status differences between men and women left women feeling less competent and capable about the work they produced, causing some to try to create work that was more guyish (e.g. masculine humor or hyper-sexual) to conform to the norms of the environment (Gregory, 2009). Women lacked power and legitimacy, which was a problem as they tried to sell work to their creative directors (Windels and Lee, 2012). Overall, women did not strongly experience competence and community membership.

With regard to identity as learning trajectory, where identity is formed based on where we have been and where we are going, expectations of the work that men and women would produce affected the participants' trajectories. Men were expected to be funny, thus they were assigned to work where humor was desired. Women were expected to develop a style that was more emotional or lofty. This served to demarcate assignments in a way that affected future job prospects, because the types of assignments seen as appropriate for men were also those most likely to win creative awards and accolades. Women were also on a different trajectory with regard to their prospects of being a creative director, since award-winning creative work and a masculine style were components of the creative director job.

Finally, in terms of identity as nexus of membership, or reconciling various forms of membership into one identity, junior women experienced paternalism from some of their creative directors, which they felt led them and others to question their competence and ability. Already at this stage, women were starting to minimize the importance of their work identities to their overall identity. This dis-identification or minimization of the work identity was likely a tactic to minimize the negative effect of their work identity on their overall self-confidence. By the time women progressed toward the center of the community, many obstacles had prevented them from developing an identity as a full member of the community. They were unwilling to incorporate the industry's view of their abilities into their own representation of their identity, causing them to seek identity elsewhere. This represented a form of resistance by the women against the industry's perceptions of them.

The identity formed in conjunction with work was predominately a negative identity. It was an identity as a person with lesser talents and abilities, with fewer opportunities, with less value, making work with less value. So women were left with the choice of placing greater importance on their outside identities or on adopting a negative self-image. "When individuals accept and integrate the meaning of the practice they belong to, their identity changes" (Salminen-Karlsson, 2006, p. 34). Creative women are by self-selection intrinsically motivated, high-achieving, type-A perfectionists. To maintain their identity, they are better served by dis-identifying with the creative department and instead focussing on those parts of their identity that contribute to a positive self-image.

Conclusion and implications

This research examined the relationship between gender and situated learning theory. It found evidence that the existing power structures in the male-dominant field of the advertising creative department affected the learning trajectory and identity formation of female employees. This study examined the creative function of advertising, an exemplar of the male-dominated applied creative industries. The study offers evidence that women's lack of access to social networks, shortage of mentors, and problems navigating organizational politics found in previous research (de Vries *et al.*, 2006) can hinder their learning. Existing power structures can serve to deny access to becoming a full member or master of the community of practice. Power relations did indeed constrain access for women in the study, both on the periphery and at the center of the community (Salminen-Karlsson, 2006). This was true even for female creative directors, those who had most successfully navigated the system. The study provided evidence that gendered expectations about the type of work a person will produce, the value of that contribution, the fit of the person to the dominant culture, and the level of comfort associated with socializing with that person were all expectations that constituted material for constructing a work identity (Salminen-Karlsson, 2006). The identity of master or full member was not seen as attainable for women in the field. The result was that women in the field accepted their role on the periphery of the community and turned to outside identities, such as friend, artist or mother, in an effort to maintain a positive self-concept.

As with any qualitative research, the observations are based on the subjective experiences of the 19 female creatives interviewed, but the diversity encountered with regard to age, position, and geographic region was far greater than the diversity of voice with regard to the problems faced by women in the industry. This study was not intended to estimate the proportions of women who experience discrimination within the field. Instead, it was intended to serve as a tool to better understand female underrepresentation within the department. This research, as well as past research in the area (e.g. Grow and Broyles, 2011; Mallia, 2009), suggests this is a problem that exists across agencies, thus it merits future attention from academia and industry alike.

Future research should examine whether this phenomenon from advertising extends to other male-dominated applied creative industries, such as architecture and graphic design. When "normal" work practices favor the characteristics of men while devaluing those associated with women (Acker, 1990, Kolb *et al.*, 1998), women may lose out on valuable opportunities to learn and develop an identity as a community member. In a world in which women represent 50 percent of the population and a substantial portion of consumers and clients, it matters whether the work is gendered.

Men need to know that embracing women (and life) benefits them. They need to know that research demonstrates that diversity in creative is good for people, the end product – and the bottom line. And that diversity includes gender, race, shape, age and skill set. Managers need to recognize that having a diametric opposition in gender balance between your creatives and your customers is neither good for people, nor business.

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Further reading

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