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City context and subjective career success: How does creative workers' need for recognition filter city identity?

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Abstract

How do creative workers draw on their city context as they interpret their subjective career success over time? This article aims to answer this question with a qualitative study of 140 creative workers in Reggio Emilia, Italy. The results illuminate how subjective career success stems from a need for recognition that draws on a city's identity. Mobilising Lotman's concept of semiosphere, we propose that creative workers use city identity to understand what 'soft' factors they can harness from the city context. They filter city identity based on three recognition-related needs that are contingent on their level of work experience. Our contribution is threefold. First, we provide a nuanced view of the social and symbolic context in which careers are embedded, highlighting its multilayered, multivocal and multimodal nature. Second, we provide a fine-grained understanding of the interplay between an individual's career

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need for recognition and their interpretation of city identity. Third, we shed light on recognition as a facet of subjective career success, which is particularly relevant to creative workers.

Keywords
careers, city identity, creative industries, creative workers, qualitative study, sensemaking

Introduction

Recognition by peers, critics, and consumers is a key aspect of creative workers' career success (Jones, 2010; Lang and Lang, 1988). Previous literature investigates creative workers' strategies for achieving recognition (Alvarez et al., 2005; Montanari et al., 2016), and also studies how macro-contexts influence that recognition (Sgourev, 2013; Wijnberg and Gemser, 2000). Cities represent one such macro-context: they provide creative workers with structural, economic, social and symbolic resources for finding job opportunities, carrying out their work and sustaining their careers (Faggian et al., 2013; Storper and Scott, 2009). Although large cities are often seen as particularly attractive, smaller cities can also offer cultural, symbolic and social resources for developing professional recognition as a creative (e.g. Drake, 2003; Lingo and Tepper, 2013; Scott, 2000).

Despite prior literature's valuable contributions, we know relatively little about the ways by which creative workers draw on their city context in their career-related sensemaking. Making sense of the ways by which a city influences the development of one's recognition is important for creatives who act on such interpretations when navigating their career. Thus, this article examines the following question: *How do creative workers interpret their city context as enabling (or inhibiting) their recognition?* We do so by drawing on the concept of city identity as a specific form of 'collective identity based on perceived uniqueness and meanings of place' (Jones and Svejenova, 2017: 203). We argue that city identity is implicated in people's interpretation of the city context as enabling (or inhibiting) their recognition as a creative worker. We use the concept of filters (Lotman, 2005) to develop a finer-grained understanding of the ways by which individuals use city identity to make sense of the unique resources, which they can harness from the city context for their professional recognition.

Our study makes several contributions. First, we provide a nuanced view of the social and symbolic context in which careers are embedded. In particular, Lotman's model of the semiosphere as a communications space contributes to extant literature with a nuanced account of the multilayered, multivocal and multimodal nature of the social context of careers. Second, we provide a fine-grained understanding of the interplay between an individual's career need for recognition and their interpretation and filtering of city identity. Third, our focus on recognition extends the conventional operationalisation of subjective career success (i.e. career satisfaction) with an aspect that is particularly relevant to creative careers (Shockley et al., 2016). Recognition is the extent to which an individual is acknowledged by others as a competent and valuable professional

(e.g. Dries et al., 2008; Sturges, 1999). Recognition represents an important indicator of career success for creative workers, given the instability and uncertainty of their employment relationships.

Empirically, we present a qualitative study of creative workers living in Reggio Emilia, a medium-sized city in northern Italy with a large pool of creative workers. Our article is structured as follows. First, we elaborate the theoretical background and motivation for studying the link between cities and creative workers' need for recognition. Next, we present the setting, methods and empirical results. In the last section, we discuss the results, delineate the contributions, and conclude with limitations and suggestions for future research.

Theoretical background

Creative careers: The importance of recognition

Although creative careers are complex and uncertain (e.g. Alacovska, 2018; Jones, 1996; Lingo and Tepper, 2013), they attract individuals who are driven by the 'passionate attachment to the work and to the identity of creative laborer' (Gill and Pratt, 2008: 14). Creative workers who perceive their job as a calling tend to frame their career as a creative endeavour and path to personal self-actualisation (Eikhof and Haunschild, 2007; Jones, 2010). Creative workers undergo multiple career stages, each of which poses specific challenges and requires different resources and competencies. Each career stage is thus associated with different needs (e.g. Jones, 1996; Svejenova, 2005), which are related to intrinsic elements like learning, avoidance of routine work, and collaboration with important actors in the field (Menger, 1999; Storey et al., 2005; Throsby and Zednik, 2011). Accordingly, creative workers choose between career opportunities based on the perceived potential to satisfy these needs. They also tend to define career success 'more in terms of the subjective gratification they receive from their work than in terms of objective rewards' (Arthur et al., 2005: 179–180). Creative workers therefore prioritise the 'subjective side' of career success, which refers to their interpretations of actual and future work-related accomplishments (e.g. Heslin, 2005; Ng and Feldman, 2014).

To the extent that creatives perform work 'centred on the activity of symbol-making' (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011: 9), recognition from relevant audiences such as peers, critics and consumers forms a central aspect of interpreting career success (e.g. Bourdieu, 1993; Jones, 2010; Lang and Lang, 1988). Creative workers aim to be recognised for delivering products and services that carry a personal and distinctive 'signature style' (Elsbach, 2009: 1042). They also strive to have their ideas and work appreciated by other members of their field (Cattani et al., 2014; Wijnberg and Gemser, 2000). Extant literature shows that an individual's creative work is evaluated on both its intrinsic properties and its adherence to social norms of conduct, aesthetic canons, and conventions (Becker, 1982; Uzzi and Spiro, 2005; see also Zuckerman, 2012). Thus, the social context defines both constraints and opportunities for creative action, eventually conditioning how creative workers achieve recognition (Kremp, 2010; Rao et al., 2003). Creative workers often struggle to find a balance between following these norms and conventions and

deviating from these so as to be recognised for a unique 'signature style' (Elsbach, 2009; Montanari et al., 2016).

Creative careers and cities

To explore the nexus between creative workers' recognition and the city context, we draw on literature in geography and urban sociology. These traditions view cities as bundles of resources upon which creative workers can draw to carry out their work (e.g. Florida, 2005; Scott, 2000). One stream of literature highlights the role played by 'hard' factors that are associated with a city's structural and economic properties. These include the presence and density of organisations in creative (and related) sectors, inter-firm connections, and sectoral specialisations, which increase the availability of job opportunities and access to networks, in turn sustaining creative careers (e.g. Faggian et al., 2013; Storper and Scott, 2009). From this perspective, large cities are viewed as attractive to prospective and actual workers as they offer thick labour markets, greater visibility in media discourses, and larger consumer markets (Allen and Parsons, 2006; Lingo and Tepper, 2013: 346). Creative workers are thus expected to locate in those cities that they deem more suitable for career purposes (Hracs and Stolarick, 2014).

Another stream of literature focuses on a city's 'soft' factors, which are associated with their social and symbolic properties, such as iconic buildings, cultural amenities and liveable lifestyles (e.g. Hracs et al., 2011; Markusen, 2013). From this perspective, both large and small cities are depicted as potential repositories of cultural, symbolic and social stimuli that creative workers can get inspiration from in creating distinctive products (Drake, 2003; Molotch, 2002). For example, creative workers can infuse symbolic value into their products by imparting them with a city's aesthetic features, cultural and historical traditions, and symbols. Thereby, their creative work becomes more easily recognised as distinctly coming from a certain locality (Molotch, 2002; Scott, 2000).

Although this stream of literature has studied the impact of a city's soft factors on workers' locational choices and creative processes (e.g. Drake, 2003; Hracs and Stolarick, 2014), it has not examined how individuals interpret soft factors to make sense of their future career (in terms of, for example, fresh opportunities, viable courses of action and future work-related accomplishments). Likewise, we lack an understanding of the ways by which creative workers interpret the city context as enabling (or inhibiting) their recognition by audiences.

We seek to advance an understanding of the link between a city's soft factors and individuals' career-related sensemaking by focusing on the concept of city identity, which consists of material and symbolic elements that contribute to defining the distinctive spirit or character of a city over time (Bell and de-Shalit, 2011; Molotch et al., 2000). City identity, as 'a distinct form of collective identity' (Jones and Svejenova, 2017: 204), sets out the system of norms and understandings shared among city constituents, thus defining the accepted behaviours and valued courses of action within a city (see Beebe et al., 2012, and Romanelli and Khessina, 2005, for similar considerations at regional rather than city levels of analysis). City identity sheds light on the ways by which individuals draw on the city context when construing understandings about their recognition.

To provide a fine-grained understanding of the mechanisms through which individuals interpret a city's identity, we use the concept of filters, as elaborated by cultural theorist Jurij M Lotman in his model of the semiosphere (1990, 2005). Lotman views a semiosphere as a semiotic space, which people construct to make sense of their social context. A semiosphere is a set of signs that can refer to both material (e.g. natural or built environment) and cultural (e.g. a tale or story) objects. According to Lotman (who was inspired by St Petersburg), a city consists of different semiospheres, each constituting a subset of signs accumulated over its history (Lotman, 1990). When describing a city, individuals refer to one or more of these semiospheres. In doing so, individuals use different interpretative mechanisms as filters. Through filters, individuals magnify the elements of the city that are most relevant or useful to form meanings consistent with their needs in a given moment, while blending out others that are less relevant or useful (see also Eco, 2014). Thus, filters enable individuals to translate the elements characterising a city (e.g. squares, buildings, stories, cultural outlooks) into their own 'world' of personal stories, symbols and values.

Setting and methods

To answer our research question, we adopted a qualitative approach, as it provides useful insights into answering 'how? and why? questions' (Yin, 2009: 9). A qualitative approach allowed us to build a contextualised understanding of the experiences of creative workers living in a city.

The qualitative study was conducted in Reggio Emilia, a medium-sized city in northern Italy. Although Reggio Emilia is not usually associated with the typical features of the 'creative city' (Florida, 2005; Scott, 2000), it represents a relevant setting as it is the fourth largest creative cluster in the administrative region of Emilia-Romagna and home to a large pool of creative workers (ERVET, 2018).[1] With its 170,000 inhabitants in the municipality, the city presents the typical features of medium-sized cities that 'comprise the bulk of the urban landscape where people live and work' (Sands and Reese, 2008: 9).

We used a purposeful, non-probabilistic sampling strategy to identify research participants. By drawing on a combination of structured databases, personal contacts and snowballing, we identified creative workers representing a wide range of sectors, ages, work experiences and geographical origins (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981; Zikic et al., 2010). As creative workers have different career needs and challenges (Jones, 1996; Svejenova, 2005), the diverse sample enabled us to identify variances of perceptions of recognition, needs and city context. Initially, we used databases of the municipality and the National Association of Young Creative Professionals (GAI), and the personal networks of two of the authors. Following each interview, we asked the interviewee to name five other potential informants. We stopped our search when newly suggested informants had already been interviewed.

Our final sample consists of 140 creative workers (99 males and 41 females),[2] with 60% originally from the city. Interviewee ages range between 18 and 64 years (mean = 34), and the distribution of self-declared workers in creative sectors is as follows: music (25%), photography and visual arts (18%), communication and advertising (16%), handicrafts (9%), graphic design (9%), theatre and dance (9%), writing (8%), architecture

(3%) and fashion (3%). The distribution across the creative sectors reflects their representation in the city, with the highest concentration of creative workers engaged in music recording, production and events (Municipality of Reggio Emilia, 2009).[3]

Data collection

We conducted 140 in-depth semi-structured interviews with creative workers living in the city. Our definition of creative workers comprises individuals who utilise creativity as a principal input for their work, producing products and services with symbolic content (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; Townley et al., 2009). In the interviews, we asked respondents about their careers and relationship with the city. The interview guide covered four areas: (i) information about personal, educational and professional background (e.g. age, geographical origin and work experience); (ii) main features of the work performed (e.g. sector, employment status, main achievements and collaborations); (iii) needs and perceptions related to career-related challenges and achievements; and (iv) the role played by the city context in their careers. The third section asked questions such as: 'How successful has your career been?'; 'What are your current career development needs?'; 'What are the career outcomes you are trying to achieve (nowadays and in the next two years)?'; 'How successful do your peers feel your career has been?'; and 'How much do you think that your outcomes are appreciated by others in your field?'. The fourth section probed perceptions of the city context: 'How does the city help or hinder your career aspirations?'; 'How is pursuing your profession here compared to pursuing it elsewhere?'; 'Are any distinctive characteristics of the city important for your work (in terms of your personal style, work process, generation of ideas, etc.)? Which ones?'; and 'Does living in Reggio Emilia facilitate or constrain your career? Why?'. Interviews took place between November 2017 and November 2018. They lasted 30–50 minutes and were digitally recorded and transcribed.[4]

Data analysis

Transcripts were analysed following the iterative process recommended by Strauss and Corbin (1990). As a first stage, we conducted line-by-line analysis of interview transcripts, coding any phrases, terms, or descriptions about elements of the city that interviewees perceived as relevant. At this stage, the codes adhered to interviewees' own descriptions. They referred to: the city's scale, amenities (cafés, restaurants, museums etc.), diffused values and outlooks, personal life stories, city history and iconic characters of the city. Jointly, these codes pointed to the theme of 'city identity', defined as a set of elements that constitute the creative workers' perceptions of the unique features of the city (Jones and Svejenova, 2017). Subsequently, we returned to the data to explore connections between codes across interviews. This yielded three dimensions of city identity: *material and visual features*, *narratives* and *ethos*.

Next, we coded common themes across interviews, looking for creative workers' perceptions of career-related challenges and achievements. In this stage, we worked abductively (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012), moving from evidence to the extant literature about creative workers' career-related sensemaking (e.g. Lingo and Tepper, 2013;

Svejenova, 2005). Data suggested that creative workers have a range of career-related needs which are contingent on their level of work experience. Each need is associated with different career-related actions and choices. As a result, we identified three groups, each comprising individuals displaying a prevalent need.[5] We labelled these needs *inclusion*, *experimentation* and *legacy*.

Finally, we analysed the data to identify consistent patterns across the sample. We sought to explain theoretically why and how creative workers use city identity in their interpretation of perceived recognition. We drew on the concept of *filters* (Lotman, 1990, 2005) as the interpreting mechanism that allows individuals to magnify certain elements of the city identity while blending out less relevant ones. We labelled these filters *neighbouring*, *buzzing* and *authenticating*.

Having multiple researchers strengthened the trustworthiness of our data analysis. Initially, each researcher read and coded the transcripts independently. As we collected more data, we discussed codes and interpretations face to face. We resolved divergent interpretations through clarification of the coding scheme (Wright et al., 2020). We shared coding summary sheets and tables to better visualize the data and resolve discrepancies. We stopped our analysis when theoretical saturation was achieved (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

Results

This section describes how creative workers construe city identity, before delving into how they filter the city identity to satisfy their recognition-related needs. Table 1 illustrates our findings and summarises the concepts exhibited in Figure 1.

Construing city identity

Interviewees construed city identity along three dimensions. The first dimension, *material and visual features*, relates to ecological and architectural elements (e.g. urban layout, buildings, parks) that showcase a city's distinctive history, culture and image, while also directing the (inter)actions of its inhabitants and visitors (see also Frey and Zimmer, 2001; Jones and Svejenova, 2017). For example, interviewees referred to the compact scale of the city, its pedestrian-friendly zones, and the green areas 'that are really a 10-minute bike ride away' (#88, fashion designer). They cited iconic buildings and landmark spaces, which are the stage of the everyday lives of inhabitants, contributing to the city's distinctive image: 'Squares represent the landmark of the city, especially *piazza Fontanesi* [a square in the city centre] and the food market that takes place there every Saturday' (#130, architect).

The second dimension of city identity are *narratives* about a city's historical and political events, traditions and iconic characters (Czarniawska, 2002). Interviewees mentioned instances in which the city achieved national relevance in social, cultural and political terms, and to which they attached particular emotional and symbolic meanings. A member of the local music scene stated, 'When my friends and I gather together at my place, there's a point we always get to: we start talking about when Reggio was the nightlife capital of northern Italy' (#126, DJ). Similarly, interviewees referred to traditional

Table 1. Concepts emerging from the study: definitions and additional data.

Concepts	*Definitions*	*Quotes*
City identity		
Material and visual features	Ecological and architectural features that showcase a city's distinctive history, culture and image	'For me, one of the advantages of this city is that everything is quite reachable, so you can mobilize resources in a very fast way and get in touch with customers more easily' (#132, craftsman).
Narratives	Stories about a city's historical and political events, traditions and iconic characters	'The municipality is implementing really ground-breaking innovation policies; in my field, people like it and tell stories about Reggio Emilia as the right place to be' (#131, communication manager).
Ethos	A city's characteristic spirit – its prevalent tone or sentiment – based on a set of shared values and collective mindsets	'Reggio has always stood out for the spirit of solidarity of its people who built it piece by piece, such as in the case of the church of San Prospero' (#99, sculptor).
Needs		
Inclusion	The need for socialising within a creative field, minimizing the risk of being excluded	'For me, it is important to visit places where I can meet others belonging to artistic circles' (#62, painter).
Experimentation	The need for in-depth exploration of one's own creative ideas, and for the development of a personal, distinctive style	'What I really need is a stimulating environment; something that stimulates me' (#120, graphic designer).
Legacy	The need for leaving an imprint, becoming a reference point for young creatives	'What I'd really love is leaving something behind and helping improve the city' (#139, architect).
Filters		
Neighbouring	Interpreting the dimensions of the city identity with reference to their contribution to a perceived sense of connectedness	'Aterballetto [the flagship national contemporary dance company] has helped me a lot: being able to access dance classes and get to know choreographers has allowed me to be part of a network of artists (#65, dancer). 'In Reggio, it is not always easy to meet other professionals as they tend to gather in private households rather than sustaining a common underground scene' (#21, musician).
Buzzing	Interpreting the dimensions of the city identity with reference to their contribution to a perceived sense of creative freedom	'There used to be a parish movie theatre called Capitol, and [important Italian directors such as] Pasolini, Olmi, and many others used to come here. Reggio has always been receptive, it was at the forefront' (#93, video maker). 'The city doesn't offer many stimulating cultural activities. There's a widespread mainstream approach to culture that surely is not inspiring. It is hard to find someone that triggers original ideas or discussions, I must often go elsewhere to find inspiration' (#124, copywriter).
Authenticating	Interpreting the dimensions of the city identity with reference to their contribution to a perceived sense of entanglement with and commitment to the city	'When I think about the spirit of via Roma [cultural initiative in a multicultural area of the city], I realize that I gave something to the city. We created an open space where younger creatives can experiment with us and with the inhabitants of the neighbourhood' (#90, graphic designer). 'World-renowned photographer Luigi Ghirri was based here. He attempted to gather together a lot of photographers and to create a distinctive stream with the project Viaggio in Italia [A Journey Across Italy]. This would no longer be possible nowadays, we lack such an attitude' (#86, photographer).

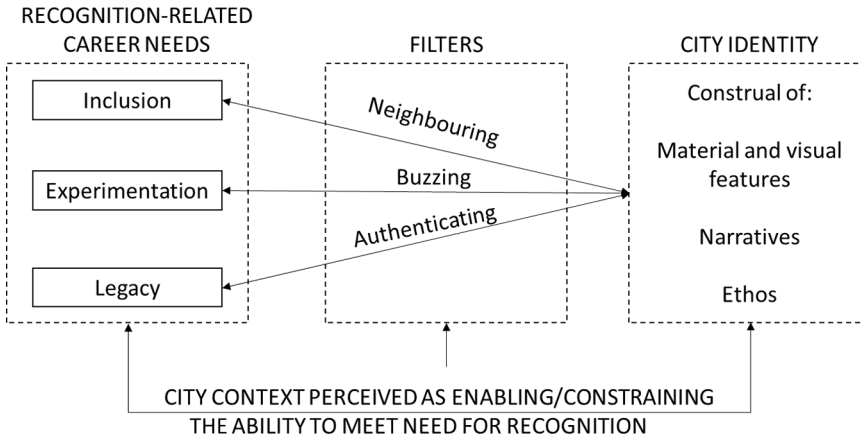

Figure 1. The relationship between creative workers' need for recognition and city identity.

local foods, events and festivities that typify the image of the city among people from other geographical areas: 'When I travel abroad, everyone knows that Reggio is the land of balsamic vinegar and Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese' (#139, architect).

Third, the dimension of *ethos* concerns a city's characteristic spirit – its prevalent tone or sentiment – based on a set of shared values and collective mindsets (Bell and de-Shalit, 2011). Interviewees described Reggio Emilia as characterised by a 'strong civic tradition based on sociality and solidarity that could be traced back to the Resistance movement during World War II and even earlier' (#91, graphic designer). The city's ethos was also described by an 'attitude to productivity' that makes 'people from Reggio Emilia really concrete' (#106, communication manager).

Neighbouring: Filtering city identity to satisfy the need for inclusion

The first group of interviewees consists of creative workers ($n = 53$) with up to 3 years of work experience. This group showed a need for *inclusion*, relating to their need to be socially connected and 'in the loop' (#116, communication designer) in order to be part of their field and compensate for their own lack of expertise. Members of this group considered socialising within their creative fields as a crucial first step towards recognition. According to one interviewee: 'I'm looking for opportunities for networking. I'd like more groups or collectives and events. They could help me make my work recognised in the sector' (#11, illustrator).

Members of this group used a filter, that we label *neighbouring*, to describe their ways of interpreting city identity. They referred to all three dimensions of city identity in terms of the perceived ease with which they can encounter other professionals in their creative field. By connecting to others, they sought to reduce the anxiety typical during the first stages of creative careers (see also Lingo and Tepper, 2013). Talking about material and visual features of the city, one young DJ said, '*Tunnel* [a music club] is the place that supports my creativity the most. I know almost everyone and I

feel at home there. The guys who work there have always been really helpful: they're the first people I had the chance to know in the music field, and they helped me figure out how this field works' (#67). With regard to the city's narratives, a copywriter noted, 'What my friends [who graduated some years earlier] told me about the job opportunities offered by creative agencies in Reggio Emilia was very important for me. Listening to their stories, I began to think that it could be easy to find a [creative] job here' (#114). As for ethos, interviewees interpreted it as founded on values such as sociality and solidarity. Thus, they perceived the city as a 'comfort zone' that could help them, as 'you always experience a lot of uncertainty when starting a career as a freelance' (#121, graphic designer).

In sum, creative workers with limited work experience interpreted city identity through the filter of neighbouring. By perceiving their city identity as affording accessible opportunities for encountering and developing relationships with other professionals, they derived a sense of connectedness. As such a perception satisfied their need for inclusion, working and living in the city sustained their sense that their talent and work can be readily appreciated by other professionals in their field. According to one videomaker, 'In Reggio, you have the feeling that it's easy to start things up. For instance, through word of mouth, we found a space [a disused shop in the city centre] where we began to show our artworks, making visible what we do. The other guys in the sector liked it and appreciated our style' (#18).

Conversely, if creative workers perceived their city context as affording limited possibilities for encountering and developing relationships with other professionals, they lacked a sense of connectedness. These creatives found it difficult to satisfy their need for inclusion and thus perceived the city as inhibiting the recognition of their work. This perception was reinforced by a lack of 'non-work situations' (Wittel, 2001: 66) like cafés, clubs and public squares, which created opportunities for spontaneous and serendipitous encounters with other professionals. For instance, a photographer remarked, 'I can't find places where I can satisfy my need for meeting other people. It's quite a shame, because young creatives need more places that help them to be seen and appreciated. I see no point in living here pretending that I will be noticed one day' (#27). Similarly, creatives who failed to derive a sense of connectedness from the city's narratives and ethos also perceived reduced chances of being appreciated by other people in the field. This is illustrated by two quotes:

> The only stories that spring to my mind relate to musicians like me that moved to other cities where they felt music was more valued . . . or stories about local clubs and musicians from the past. Nowadays, the local music scene seems to be over here, and of course this is not really supporting me. I'm thinking to relocate if I want to keep playing and being appreciated in the field. (#69, musician)

> I don't breathe an open mindset here. This makes me feel even more excluded: for instance, every time I attended public events such as readings or workshops for young creatives, I felt like a bystander or some sort of outsider just because I don't belong to an inner circle of people. (#4, writer)

Buzzing: Filtering city identity to satisfy the need for experimentation

The second group consists of creative workers ($n = 45$) with four to 12 years of work experience. This group felt included in their creative fields, as they have developed professional relationships over their career: 'I already have a relevant network of professional contacts thanks to the music school, the recording studio and the bands that I regularly collaborate with' (#80, musician). They showed a need for *experimentation*. At this stage, creative workers explore new creative paths, that may involve deviating from conventions, which hamper their articulation of a personal, distinctive style. Interviewees described a need to put themselves to the test by getting 'out of our comfort zone, [and finding something] that can give us the chance to express ourselves' (#89, musician). They aspired to developing 'a style that can help you stand out from the crowd' (#128, video-maker). Members of this group were interested in 'working in different realms and on different typologies of projects, so that one can face something new and different everyday' (#111, graphic designer).

Accordingly, this group filtered the city identity through the lens of *buzzing*. They magnified those elements of the city identity to construct a sense of creative freedom. Interviewees referred to all three dimensions of city identity as important elements in sustaining the sense of working in a vibrant city, which continuously sparks new ideas. Talking about material and visual features of the city, a dancer noted: 'The presence of internationally renowned cultural institutions such as Aterballetto and Collezione Maramotti gives me the opportunity to attend high-quality cultural events that I'd hardly find in other cities of this size. This really gives me a sense of *frizzo* [creative energy]' (#64). Members of this group referred to narratives that portray Reggio Emilia as a dynamic and vibrant city. One copywriter noted, 'I live in the very same apartment where one of the most important musicians of the [national] alternative music scene [of the eighties and nineties] used to live. Living and working here means a lot to me because it connects me to the zeitgeist of the city, which I am proud of' (#140). Members of this group interpreted the city's ethos as grounded in values of openness and tolerance for deviance from established patterns. These perceptions made them comfortable in experimenting with new paths: 'Here, creative workers are lucky because the city is really open to varied cultural stimuli; you have the chance to collaborate with people from different fields and your ideas will never be rejected just because they are different' (#123, video-maker).

In sum, creative workers in the second group interpreted city identity through the filter of buzzing. By perceiving themselves as part of a vibrant and tolerant city, they derived a sense of creative freedom that satisfied their need for experimentation. Thus, working and living in the city sustained their sense that they could produce work that carries their own signature style and which would be appreciated by other professionals and customers. In this respect, a visual artist observed:

> My grandfather used to work at Officine Reggiane [a now disused industrial plant] that was occupied at the times of the Great Strikes [after World War II]. His stories are still very vivid to me: I think they have always stimulated me and somehow affected my work. Whenever I work elsewhere, people tell me that my style and vision are strongly informed by the city

> where I come from. Indeed, I think *the city* [emphasis by the interviewee] is part of my artistic DNA. (#100)

Conversely, creative workers in this group who failed to derive a sense of creative freedom from the city identity found it difficult to satisfy their need for experimentation. They interpreted the city as inhibiting the recognition of their work. According to one graphic designer, the city did not offer spaces with 'opportunities to meet cool people or to get some hype about innovative ideas. Really, the city is too small and it suffocates your creativity. This is no place for designers!' (#117). Similarly, creative workers, whose accounts did not derive a sense of creative freedom from the city's narratives and ethos, also perceived reduced chances for developing a personal and distinctive style that would be appreciated by other professionals and customers. We illustrate these cases with two quotes:

> I always hear stories of creatives whose ideas are not appreciated in Reggio, but, in contrast, are fully supported by other companies in Milan or abroad. This makes me think that the city is not fully ready for novelty and disruption. (#101, illustrator)

> The city doesn't give you the opportunity to express yourself and experiment: it's like I could drive a shuttle, but they gave me a bike. It doesn't look like a great professional achievement, does it? (#115, graphic designer)

Authenticating: Filtering city identity to satisfy the need for legacy

The third group consists of creative workers ($n = 42$) with at least 13 years of work experience. Members of this group felt included in their creative fields, as exemplified by a graphic designer: 'In the last five years, I have been working on so many projects and with so many companies . . . Basically, I know almost everyone in the field, and everyone knows me' (#125). This group showed a need for *legacy*. The need for legacy describes the interviewees' desire to leave imprints of their career achievements that can also become reference points for subsequent generations of creative workers. According to one restorer: 'I would really like to open a school, so that young people can undertake internships and have a chance to apprentice in restoration. I am thankful to those craftsmen who taught me the art of restoration, and I would love if others could have a similar opportunity' (#134).

Members of this group filtered the city's identity through the lens of *authenticating*, drawing on the city identity in ways that underscore their entanglement with and commitment to the city. Interviewees referred to all three dimensions of city identity to assert the sense that their work was deeply intertwined with the city – as if it would not be the same if carried out in another urban context. Referring to the material and visual features of the city, several interviewees mentioned the working-class neighbourhoods built in the 1950s with a modernist architectural style:

> I like the "genius loci" of the city. The neighbourhood where I work speaks a lot of the history of Reggio as a key city for the Italian labour rights movement. When walking around my neighbourhood, I feel welcomed, and completely in line with this spirit. Somehow, this has

> contributed to who I am as a creative professional, and I am really grateful to my city for this. (#94, industrial designer)

Members of this group also referred to narratives that portray the city as a unique environment, and with which they perceived a great fit. One interviewee stated:

> There is one story that I feel is my story, the one of former tailors, mechanics and farmers that now own important companies and left a significant symbolic heritage to all of us. This motivates me a lot, because I want to leave my mark and contribute to strengthening the social fabric of our city, too. (#118, co-founder of a media company)

Similarly, they associated their reputation with the city's ethos:

> As soon as I moved here, people appreciated and supported my work almost immediately. I was backed even by people I didn't know, and the local newspaper wrote a piece about me. This is why I feel like giving something back. I strongly believe in building a sense of community. (#88, fashion designer)

In sum, creative workers in the third group interpreted city identity through the filter of authenticating. They perceived their career as linked to their sense of entanglement with and commitment to the city, which also satisfied their need for legacy. To them, contributing to their profession and creating something for the city (an educational activity, a non-profit association etc.) sustained their perception that they could leave a mark that would be recognised by other professionals and the local community. To illustrate, one interviewee claimed:

> I decided to create a co-working space because I thought it was the best way to leave a sign in the city: it's been four years now and I can safely say that the community appreciates it. Besides, it's fresh news now that the university will sustain my idea of launching a new master's degree: this is the greatest life achievement. (#119, co-founder of a communication company)

Conversely, creative workers in this group who derived neither a sense of entanglement with the city's identity nor a commitment to support it found it difficult to satisfy their need for legacy. In these cases, giving back to the city was not seen as a strategy for leaving an imprint that would be recognised by the community. To illustrate, a sculptor referred to the material and visual features of the city:

> There is no connection between architecture and landscape. Here, there is no care for beauty. And I'm worried of how the legacy of past local artists is preserved. For instance, the city commissioned a sculpture in memory of a renowned local sculptor based on one of his sketches, and then placed it in the middle of a crossroad. He was a friend of mine, and seeing his work so violently misplaced really hurts me. It makes me feel detached from the city and how it conceives art. How can I even think of donating something of mine to the city? (#99)

Similarly, when creative workers experienced a sense of disengagement from the city's narratives and ethos, they were also sceptical about the chances that their efforts to

support the city context would be recognised. As a result, they focus on consolidating their professional activities:

> Reggio Emilia used to be innovative, [it was] the capital of indie culture in Italy. There were incredible places like Maffia [a now-closed music club]. Now times have changed, but we keep celebrating times and people from the past. We obsessively go back to our past and fail to look forward, and I find it difficult to contribute to this narrative. I want to share my experience, but who would be interested in it here? (#98, musician)

> I feel that this overwhelmingly collectivistic spirit [of the city] is levelling down the cultural offer. I still live here but, besides my inner circle, I'm not expecting anything in particular from the city or other local professionals in terms of recognition. I am looking for appreciation somewhere else: for example, next month I have an exhibition in London. (#84, restorer)

Discussion

As illustrated in Figure 1, this study illuminates how creative workers' need for recognition is related to their interpretation of city identity. Contingent on their specific recognition needs (either inclusion, experimentation or legacy), creative workers choose different filters (i.e. neighbouring, buzzing and authenticating) to interpret three dimensions of city identity (i.e. material and visual features, narratives and ethos). When the filtered city identity was seen to fulfil their need for recognition, they perceived it as suitable for obtaining actual and future career achievements. Conversely, when the filtered city identity was not seen to meet their need for recognition, they interpreted it as inhibiting career success.

City identity as terrain for navigating creative careers

The model proposes that city identity serves as the terrain in which creative workers navigate their careers. As creative careers are complex and uncertain (Alacovska, 2018; Lingo and Tepper, 2013), creative workers draw on city identity to understand what unique resources they can harness from the city context to build recognition in their field. City identity encapsulates a city's 'social code' (Romanelli and Khessina, 2005: 345), which consists of values, understandings and standards of evaluation that are shared among city constituents and contribute to defining the perceived suitability of a city context for achieving desired career outcomes. Creative workers draw on city identity to create understandings about its soft factors (aesthetic stimuli, traditions etc.), and the relevant audiences' appreciation of their ideas and products. In this sense, individuals draw on city identity to envisage what ideas and behaviours adhere to the social code and may be accepted. As creative ideas and products are evaluated on the basis of the norms and standards that are shared in a social context (Becker, 1982; Wijnberg and Gemser, 2000), the ways by which creative workers filter city identity are related to their perception of a city context as enabling (or inhibiting) the recognition of their work.

Filters for interpreting city identity at different points of one's career journey

Cities are complex realities consisting of different sets of signs, symbols and material features. They are imbued with several layers of meanings that can be interpreted in varied ways (Molotch et al., 2000). Our model uses the notion of filters (Lotman, 1990) to describe the interpretative mechanisms by which creative workers use dimensions of city identity. Through filters, an individual magnifies those material and visual features, narratives and ethos of a city that are most relevant to the prevalent need for recognition that characterises their given career stage. Although creative workers' need for recognition can be understood as a compass that guides their interpretations, decisions and actions across career stages (Cattani et al., 2014; Jones, 2010), our findings indicate that their concrete articulation of recognition-related needs is contingent on their level of work experience.

Thus, our model suggests that creative workers' filtering of a city's identity corresponds to three recognition-related needs. In an early career stage, creative workers tend to show a need for inclusion, seeking social contacts in their professional field. Accordingly, they filter the city identity through the lens of neighbouring, drawing on elements of the city that are relevant for developing relationships with other creative workers. Such connections are key to sustaining the perception of recognition as they serve as informal communication channels to get job opportunities, as well as conduits for socialisation into a creative field (Jones, 1996; Uzzi and Spiro, 2005). At a more advanced career stage, as a need for experimentation arises, creative workers filter the city identity through the lens of buzzing, i.e. magnifying those elements of the city that contribute to exploration and deviance from established ways of doing. As creative ideas usually elicit controversy (Perry-Smith and Mannucci, 2017), this filter helps creative workers 'liberate their thinking' (McLeod et al., 2009: 1029; see also Edmondson, 1999), being confident that their work will be appreciated by relevant audiences. At a later career stage, as creative workers develop a need for legacy, they filter the city's identity through the lens of authenticating, i.e. magnifying those elements of the city that contribute to a sense of leaving an imprint on the local community. They may embark upon ventures that extend their creative work, such as educational activities and socially engaged initiatives (Lingo and Tepper, 2013).

Overall, our model portrays creative careers as a journey where changes in creative workers' recognition-related needs over the course of different career stages are associated with different ways of filtering a city's identity – in particular its material, social and symbolic resources. Thus, creative workers' accounts suggest their recognition-related needs, filters and construal of city identity as entwined. Jointly, the dynamic interrelationship of these three themes guides them through their career journey, particularly helping them understand if their city context is suitable for satisfying their recognition-related needs.

Theoretical contributions

Our proposed model offers three main theoretical contributions. First, we illuminate cities as a social, symbolic and material context for careers. Our study builds on urban

scholars' distinction between a city's 'hard' and 'soft' factors (e.g. Hracs et al., 2011; Markusen, 2013) and thereby extends conceptualisations of context in terms of hard factors like job opportunities, educational institutions and professional networks (e.g. Ituma and Simpson, 2009; Valette and Culié, 2015). By studying the ways by which creative workers construe a city's identity, we highlight the 'soft' factors of cities as career contexts. Consistent with urban scholars' use of the notion of soft factors to describe cities, our notion of city identity refers to a city's semiotic space that is brought into being through people's stories about their life and work in a city (Lotman, 1990), including signs, cultural norms, traditions, narratives, aesthetic and symbolic associations of its material infrastructure, and social referents (individual, community). Thus, our study provides a more nuanced account of career contexts as multilayered, multivocal and multimodal (see also Jones and Svejenova, 2017; Mayrhofer et al., 2007).

Second, we elaborate the debate in the career literature on the relationship between individuals and social context (e.g. Duberley et al., 2006; Lawrence, 2011; Tams and Arthur, 2010). Our model proposes individuals' need for recognition, and their construal and filtering of city identity as closely entwined in their accounts. Specifically, individuals' construal of city identity filters those soft city factors that they may harness to achieve recognition for their creative work. Thus, we propose that individuals' understandings of career success are entwined with their construal of the interplay between contextual elements and individual needs. Indeed, individuals' construal of city identity filters those elements that help them to orient their career in a context that is complex – and potentially open to multiple interpretations. By describing the entwinement of these interpretative dynamics that inform individuals' locational choices, our study also elaborates and supports similar arguments in studies in geography and urban sociology (e.g. Florida, 2005; Hracs and Stolarick, 2014). Our results suggest that creative workers decide where to live and work based on their interpretation of the suitability of a city for achieving career outcomes related to recognition.

The third contribution lies in elaborating recognition as an aspect of creative workers' subjective career success. Building on Shockley et al. (2016), we propose that recognition represents an avenue for fulfilment and personal realisation for creative workers who perceive their job as a calling and operate in uncertain employment contexts. We offer a fine-grained understanding of recognition by illuminating how creative workers construe recognition-related accomplishments as their careers unfold over time. Thereby, we elaborate extant literature on creative careers, which conceptualizes recognition in terms of objective measures, such as awards from critics and peers (Cattani et al., 2014) and collaborations with prestigious institutions (Giuffre, 1999).

Further implications

Beyond the above contributions, our findings suggest further implications. Our observation that individuals strive to satisfy their recognition-related needs sheds lights on how, in late career stages, they are interested in leaving imprints that can be recognized by an audience that goes beyond their professional field. Our findings are consistent with studies that show how creatives strive for being universally and durably renowned (e.g. Jones, 2010; Lang and Lang, 1988). Extant literature has highlighted that creatives

achieve recognition by creating memorable work and developing linkages with elite circles such as critics or collectors (Jones, 2010; Lang and Lang, 1988); we suggest that creatives also strive to achieve recognition by creating things and activities that evoke the local heritage, traditions and attachment to a city. In particular, our model portrays creative workers in their later career stages as mobilizing previously acquired resources (material, social and cultural) to develop new professional roles, such as educators or social activists, which enhance their impact on society. This lends support to previous studies that portrayed creative workers as 'socially engaged in their communities', instead of self-centred individuals driven by a 'desire to optimize individual opportunities for individual creativity' (Lingo and Tepper, 2013: 343; see also Throsby and Zednik, 2011).

This study offers practical implications for policy makers, organizations and creative workers. We suggest that policy makers should envisage actions aimed at improving the link between the three dimensions of city identity and creative workers' need for recognition. For example, investing in developing creative hubs and other physical spaces can contribute to the perception of a city's creative vibrancy and help creatives in the early stages of their career enter the local scene. Furthermore, the need for recognition can be supported through networking events and seminars in which experts help young creatives to understand what kind of possibilities the city offers. Moreover, policy makers can provide the institutional settings through which creative workers can mobilize their material, social and cultural resources to leave a legacy to the city – be it an artwork, a school of arts and crafts, or a non-profit association devoted to community development.

Our study also suggests that creative sector organizations consider how their workers perceive the city's identity. This can be accomplished through actions that sustain the links between the dimensions of city identity and creative workers' need for recognition. Organizations can collaborate with other prestigious organizations in the city to develop projects that sustain creative workers' perception that the local context is vibrant, dynamic and open to collaboration (see also Montanari et al., 2018). Furthermore, organizations can devise actions that have a lasting influence on city identity. For example, they can sustain local cultural initiatives, organise events accessible to citizens, and invest in buildings or artworks that become iconic artefacts in the urban landscape.

Finally, our study has implications for individuals. It suggests that creative workers can enhance the alignment between their need for recognition and the city context by adopting a proactive approach towards the latter. For example, creative workers can promote initiatives to sustain networking activities and engage with local associations to organise cultural and social activities to enhance the sense of creative vibrancy in the city context.

Limitations and future research

This study has some limitations which also suggest avenues for further research. Although we interviewed a large sample of creative workers, we did not include those who left the city for other places. Such individuals who disliked the city may have provided a more critical picture than those we interviewed. Further longitudinal research can

examine how people interpret the role of cities in their career making over time (e.g. how people's interpretation of soft factors leads them to leave the city) and across contexts (e.g. how people interpret the same city feature as they move to new urban contexts). Similarly, further research can examine the relationship between creative workers' subjective need for recognition with other more 'objective' variables, such as awards and expert evaluations. Finally, quantitative studies are required to examine our model across different urban contexts and to control for individual-level (e.g. human capital, personality) and contextual-level (economic trends, cultural factors etc.) factors.

In conclusion, our study advances an understanding of the interaction between creative careers and city identity. It extends a conventional view of cities as a context of 'hard' economic and infrastructure factors and also extends a view of context as external to and discrete from individual careers. It adds to these perspectives by illuminating how a city's 'soft' factors are mobilized through people's career needs.

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Notes

1 Reggio Emilia has a 68.4% employment rate (nine points higher than the Italian average), and the 9th highest GDP per capita among all Italian cities (Camera di Commercio di Reggio Emilia, 2018). In line with the national trend, creative workers account for approximately 5.5% of the total labour force of the urban economy and creative firms for 10% of overall firms (ERVET, 2018).

2 Although our snowballing technique yielded a predominantly male sample, its distribution reflects official data in the regional creative industries (64% males, 36% females – ERVET, 2018; for similar considerations, see also Bennett and Hennekam, 2018).

3 Municipality of Reggio Emilia (2009) *Reggio Emilia Città Creativa*. Unpublished research report.

4 To ensure interviewees' anonymity, the results section only reports job titles and interviewee IDs.

5 Although 27 workers had multiple needs, they did not show sufficient commonalities to justify a fourth group. Thus, we allocated these workers to the group matching their actual work experience.

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