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Designers' road(s) to success: balancing exploration and exploitation

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Abstract

This study unravels different paths to success for independent designers and focuses on the balance between the artistic and economic considerations they have. Therefore, a comparative case study is presented for 48 designers looking into both business growth and perceived success. The configurational analysis explores the combination of different variables regarding success: exploration (artistic consideration), exploitation (economic consideration), job rate and tenure. The application of fuzzy set qualitative comparative analysis contributes to the exploration of a configurational theory of conditions that explains why some designers achieve business growth and perceived success. To achieve both, a fulltime occupation as designer is essential. No significant proof was found for simultaneously balancing exploration and exploitation to achieve growth. However, most pathways leading to perceived success show a balance between exploration and exploitation. These findings enhance the configurational understanding of the design industry and the development of a configurational theory of performance for creative professions.

Key words: independent designers, success, ambidexterity, fsQCA, careers

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1. Introduction

Creative professions, including design, are globally recognized as a driver of contemporary economic growth, and creativity has become a key economic resource (Scott, 2001; UNESCO & UNDP, 2013). These professions are increasingly seen as key economic drivers for cities and nations. In our current global economy, many scholars have argued that specifically art, culture, entertainment and media will increasingly represent a growing portion of the gross domestic product (Lingo & Tepper, 2013). Likewise, creative industries have attracted the interest of scholars from different disciplines, which have led to them being viewed as an avant-garde of innovation and knowledge intensive production (Lampel et al., 2000; Townley & Beech, 2010). Moreover, creative industries are fragmented and include a large number of small enterprises and a small number of large enterprises (Bakhshi & Throsby, 2009) with numerous independent professionals or freelancers (Eikhof, 2013; Hennekam & Bennett, 2016), which is also reflected in the Belgian furniture and fashion design industry (van Andel & Schramme, 2015). Likewise, in such small creative firms, the entrepreneur is the person who manages and is the founder of the business. He or she represents the firm's core resource and enjoys a high degree of decision-making authority (Camelo-Ordaz et al., 2012; Walker & Brown, 2004). However, in existing research on the creative industries, considerable attention has been given to the macro level (Jeffcutt & Pratt, 2002) and research in the creative industries that is related to work dynamics and individual careers is surprisingly limited. Designers' work is often sporadic and features multiple concurrent roles. This group is particularly known to be severely underrepresented in official data collections (Hennekam & Bennett, 2016; Lingo & Tepper, 2013; Throsby, 2008).

Furthermore, careers in the creative industries typically involve multiple employers or clients, work that is largely navigated on an individual basis, and minimal opportunities for stable employment within a firm (Cunningham & Higgs, 2010; Lingo & Tepper, 2013), and work is often performed on a freelance basis (Eikhof, 2013). As such, there is a need to better understand what occurs at the micro-level, especially looking into particular variables that influence the performance of creative firms (Mellander, 2010) or the individual career when taking independent professionals into account. While designers' careers are driven by passion, intrinsic motivation, and the need for independence and achievement and creative individuals exhibit a substantial amount of self-management (Eikhof & Haunschild, 2007), there are also challenges pertaining to the sustainability of their career (De Vos et al., 2018). For independent designers, these challenges include specifically balancing their multiple concurrent roles (Hennekam & Bennett, 2016; Throsby, 2008) and balancing their artistic and economic considerations, or in other words, exploration and exploitation (Granados et al., 2017; Jacobs et al., 2016b, 2016a; Knight & Harvey, 2015; Kolsteeg, 2014). The performance of organizations has also been a major yet complex issue in management and organization studies (Murphy et al., 1996). Especially in SMEs, success and performance are multidimensional issues (Komppula, 2004; Murphy et al., 1996; van den Born & van Witteloostuijn, 2013), which can be measured both objectively and subjectively (Reijonen, 2008; Marchand et al., 2013). Walker and Brown (2004) found that small business owners measure their success using both financial and nonfinancial factors and that nonfinancial lifestyle criteria are occasionally more important. Likewise, designers acting as managers of a creative firm are individuals who focus more on sustaining a lifestyle orientated toward involvement in creative output than on being financially successful (Chaston, 2008; Komppula, 2004).

Given this knowledge, this study adopts a configurational approach to examine the combinatorial effects of exploration, such as searching for, discovering, creating, and experimenting with new opportunities (cf. March, 1991); designers' exploitation activities, such as selecting, implementing, improving and refining existing certainties (cf. March, 1991); and two specific context conditions (designers' fulltime or part-time dedication and tenure) on self-reported business growth and perceived success. Previous research suggests that these conditions are important conditions related to success in creative industries (e.g., Camelo-Ordaz et al., 2012; Guiette et al., 2011; Jacobs et al., 2016a, 2016b; Kolsteeg, 2014; Komppula, 2004). A configurational approach suggests that "*organizations are best understood as clusters of interconnected structures and practices*" (Fiss, 2007, p. 1180); thus, organizational fit and competitive advantage depend not on a single condition but instead on synergistic relationships between multiple attributes or conditions (Fiss, 2011; Ketchen et al., 1993; Miller, 1996). Hence, increased understanding of designers' growth and perceived success can be better achieved by identifying distinct configurations of conditions than by seeking to uncover relationships that hold across all designers. Accordingly, we employ a set-theoretic method, namely, fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA), in this study to analyze configurations of conditions that explain business growth and perceived success of designers. This analysis is based on a sample of 48 independent small-sized furniture and fashion designers located in Belgium. The conditions of interest in this study are the designers' strategy concerning exploration and exploitation (ambidexterity) in combination with their job rate, namely, if they work as a fulltime or part-time designer and tenure.

We contribute to the literature and practice in several ways. First, by applying the fsQCA method, we are able to provide empirical evidence on the complex interrelations between

exploration, exploitation, job rate and tenure, and how they jointly affect the business growth and perceived success of small-sized fashion and furniture designers. This approach is a meaningful addition to the well-known approaches of qualitative studies and econometric modeling in creative industries research, and it explores the construction of a configurational theory on performance in the creative industries. Second, this study looks into two different measures of performance, growth and high perceived success, which is not common in creative industries research (Choi, 2012), and answers the call to research success as a multidimensional issue (Komppula, 2004; Marchand et al., 2013; Murphy et al., 1996; van den Born & van Witteloostuijn, 2013; Walker & Brown, 2004). Third, when looking into exploration and exploitation, we measure and analyze these variables at the level of the designer. By taking into account the individual level, we respond to scholarly calls to shed more light on exploration and exploitation at the manager level of analysis (Mom et al., 2007; Raisch & Birkinshaw, 2008; Volery et al., 2015) and the micro-level in creative industries research (Mellander, 2010). In addition, we also contribute to the practical level by providing designers and policy-makers with a more tangible understanding of individual pathways for career success in the furniture and fashion design industry.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. In the next section, we start with an overview of literature on exploration, exploitation, job rate and tenure (section 2). Next, we describe the used method, the research population, and the measurement and calibration of the conditions and outcomes investigated in this study (section 3). Afterwards, the results are shown based on a sample of 48 small-sized fashion and furniture designers (section 4). Finally, we discuss the findings and end with a conclusion (section 5).

2. Theoretical background and propositions

The roads to success for fashion and furniture designers are researched from a strategy perspective. The primary interest of strategic management researchers is to explain differential firm performance (Ireland et al., 2001) and in this paper independent designers' firm performance. Strategic management researchers want to increase understanding about the determinants of organizational performance and explain how managers can create superior performance (Combs et al., 2005; Meyer, 1991). Based on the literature on strategy and creative industries, the joint relation of exploration, exploitation, job rate and tenure will be taken into account. Previous research suggests that exploration and exploitation (ambidexterity) are important conditions related to success in creative industries (e.g., Guiette et al., 2011; Jacobs et al., 2016b; Kolsteeg, 2014), and the condition job rate is also important (e.g., Jacobs et al., 2016a; Komppula, 2004). Tenure is another key variable impacting firm performance in creative companies (e.g., Camelo-Ordaz et al., 2012; Jacobs et al., 2016a, 2016b). Although we can report expectations about the impact of each single condition on business growth and high-perceived success, we cannot make a configurational proposition about the combined effect of the conditions. We therefore expect that all conditions are INUS conditions, or in other words: conditions being *insufficient* but nonredundant parts of different configurations, which are themselves *unnecessary* but sufficient for the occurrence of the outcome. Thus, our conditions of interest will form multiple configurations leading to an outcome and thereby combining at least two conditions.

2.1. Exploration and exploitation (ambidexterity)

To target both commercial success and artistic expression to ensure long-run survival, designers need to balance artistic and economic considerations (Granados et al., 2017; Kolsteeg,

2014; Lampel et al., 2000). This tension is presented as a pull between ‘exploration’ and ‘exploitation’ (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009; March, 1991) and is also a recurring theme in a variety of organizational literatures. Successful organizations are then so called ‘ambidextrous’: aligned and efficient in their management of today’s business demands while also sufficiently adaptive to changes in the environment such that they will still be around tomorrow (Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004; Tushman & O’Reilly, 1996).

In this research, contextual ambidexterity is taken into account: simultaneously balancing seemingly contradictory tensions (Earley & Gibson, 2002; Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004; Lewis, 2000; Morgeson & Hofmann, 1999). Following Raisch and Birkinshaw (2008) and Chang and Hughes (2012), the best firms are increasingly those that can carefully balance explorative innovation with exploitative innovation in an ambidextrous fashion. Contextual ambidexterity is especially important at the level of the individual, i.e., the capability of individuals to perform contradictory activities and switch between different mindsets and action sets (e.g., switching from unconstrained creativity to scrutinizing the usefulness of ideas) (Volery et al., 2015). Individuals can switch between different mind and action sets in accordance with situational demands (Bledow et al., 2009). Additionally, empirical evidence suggests that under conditions of market and technological uncertainty, ambidexterity has a positive effect on organizational performance (O’Reilly & Tushman, 2013; Volery et al., 2015) and is also positively associated with subjective ratings of performance (Burton et al. 2012; Cao et al., 2009; Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004; O’Reilly & Tushman, 2013).

However, within the theory of ambidexterity, to date, almost all of the recommendations put forward by conceptual and empirical works are designed for large, multiunit firms (Chang & Hughes, 2012) and more recently also for SMEs (Broersma et al., 2016; Gabriel Cegarra-Navarro

et al., 2011; Lubatkin, 2006; Senaratne & Wang, 2018). However, with a few exceptions (Mom et al., 2007; Turner et al., 2013; Volery et al., 2015), work on ambidexterity has failed to account for independent professions, an important group of workers within the creative industries (Bagwell, 2008), and accordingly the fashion and furniture design industry. Independent professions may operate differently and display different operating conditions and characteristics to large, multiunit firms such that generalizing current recommendations for ambidexterity into innovation strategies for these firms might prove incorrect (Chang & Hughes, 2012; Volery et al., 2015). In this study, we thus look at the designers' individual level (manager level) of exploration and exploitation. Thus, we explore in this study the extent to which a manager (designer) engages in exploration activities (e.g., searching for new opportunities, learning new skills) and the extent to which the designer engages in exploitation activities (e.g., activities with short-term goals or with existing products).

2.2. Job rate

Creative industries are typically characterized by a high rate of self-employment (Eikhof, 2013; Markusen et al., 2008), and numerous creatives combine multiple jobs (Throsby & Zednik, 2011) or work part-time (McAuley & Fillis, 2005). This characteristic of fulltime or part-time dedication (or job rate) is thus typically connected with self-employment in the creative industries (Jacobs et al., 2016a). The study of Markusen and Schrock (2006) shows that in the US, self-employment among designers represents 32%. Additionally, in this group, 21% are self-employed designers as a secondary occupation. In addition, Throsby and Zednik (2011) found that numerous artists, including designers, spend various amounts of time working outside their creative sector. Of 45% of artists in their study who engage in non-art work, approximately one-third are content

with their present work pattern, but a majority would like to spend more time on the arts. Higgs et al. (2008) also found that many creative professionals work outside their 'own' sector.

2.3 Tenure

Tenure is seen as an important firm specific variable regarding performance. A premise of the upper echelon theory is that managers' demographic characteristics (such as age or organizational tenure) have an impact on organizational outcomes because they are key variables in the way that the manager makes strategic choices (Hambrick & Mason, 1984). In general, firms improve with age because they show increasing levels of productivity, higher profits, larger size, lower debt ratios and higher equity ratios (Coad et al., 2010). However, on the other hand, a firm also deteriorates with age (Anderson & Eshima, 2013; Coad et al., 2010; Navaretti et al., 2014). Within the context of creative industries, Camelo-Ordaz et al. (2012) found that as tenure increases, flexibility decreases, and resistance to changes in the firms' strategy increases, which affects the company's performance. Previous research in the fashion design industry shows that this sector is more tolerant toward young firms deviating from established patterns, which affects business growth in a positive manner (Jacobs et al., 2016b).

2.4. Success

As mentioned in the introduction, performance (which we interpret as success in this study) is a multidimensional issue (Murphy et al., 1996; van den Born & van Witteloostuijn, 2013). Researchers often use employee numbers or financial performance, such as profit, turnover, or return on investment, to measure success (Walker & Brown, 2004). However, many small business owners and freelancers do not run their businesses to maximize financial performance. Instead, they run their businesses for other reasons, such as lifestyle reasons (Jennings & Beaver, 1997; Komppula, 2004; Walker & Brown, 2004). Small business owners often present a satisficing

behavior (Simpson et al., 2012), which means that success for them represents the ability to sustain an acceptable level of income for themselves through maintaining an optimum level of activity with which they can cope (Beaver, 2002; Marchand et al., 2013). Managers of most small creative firms are individuals who focus more on sustaining a lifestyle orientated toward involvement in creative output than on being financially successful (Chaston, 2008; Komppula, 2004). Therefore, this research looks into business growth and perceived success.

2.5 Theoretical propositions

The previous sections indicate a deeper understanding of designer's business growth and high perceived success by taking into account the single influence of ambidexterity (exploration and exploitation), job rate and tenure. Set-theoretic approaches allow the relationships between these conditions and business growth and perceived success to be understood through the examination of subset relations (Fiss, 2007; Fiss et al., 2013). This requires the formulation of propositions that link a condition with an outcome. These propositions make a statement about the sufficiency and necessity of that condition to achieve the outcome (Thiem et al., 2015). On one hand, a necessary condition denotes that an outcome can only be obtained if the condition in question is present or absent (Fiss, 2007). In the context of this paper, the presence of necessary conditions would mean that business growth and perceived success can only be achieved if a particular condition is present or absent. On the other hand, a condition that is sufficient denotes that the condition can by itself produce the outcome; thus, it does not need to be combined with other conditions (Fiss, 2007). The literature review suggests however that there are no unequivocal theoretical reasons or empirical evidence to assume that the presence or absence of ambidexterity, job rate or tenure is necessary or sufficient as a single condition to achieve business growth or perceived success (see also sections 2.1-2.4).

Hence, a configurational approach suggests that a firms' performance does not depend on a single condition but instead on synergistic relationships between multiple attributes or conditions (Fiss, 2011; Ketchen et al., 1993; Miller, 1996). As such, we expect in this study that business growth and perceived success can be explained by multiple (i.e., conjunctural) (combinations of) conditions.

The absence of any necessary or sufficient condition indicates furthermore that our conditions of interest will form multiple configurations combining at least two conditions. This has also been referred to as conditions being *insufficient* but nonredundant parts of different configurations, which are themselves *unnecessary* but sufficient for the occurrence of the outcome (i.e., INUS conditions; Fiss et al., 2013). Hence, we propose the following:

*P1: Exploration, exploitation, job rate and tenure are INUS conditions for fashion and furniture designer's business growth. (P1: EXPLOR*EXPLOIT*JOB*TENURE -> G)*

And

*P2: Exploration, exploitation, job rate and tenure are INUS conditions for fashion and furniture designer's perceived success. (P2: EXPLOR*EXPLOIT*JOB*TENURE -> PS)*

The “*” sign denotes the logical “AND”, while the forward arrow -> indicates “is sufficient for”.

3. Research method

While an in-depth explanation of the fsQCA method is beyond the purpose of this study (Fiss, 2011, 2007; Ragin, 2000, 2009; Schneider & Wagemann, 2012 for more information), the central features of fsQCA that pertain to the current study in this section are briefly explained. The configurational method is based on three assumptions. Assumption one, *asymmetric causation*, implies that the set of factors that bring about an outcome may be different from the set of factors

associated with the absence of the outcome (Fiss, 2011). Assumption two, *equifinality*, means that “a system can reach the same final state from different initial conditions and by a variety of different paths” (Katz & Kahn, 1978, p.30). Assumption three, *conjunctural causation*, indicates that case-specific factors affect the outcomes in combination rather than in isolation (Schneider & Wagemann, 2012). Applying fsQCA requires the mapping of cases in terms of their multiple memberships in sets of conditions. This process requires the calibration of the conditions according to three qualitative thresholds: full membership, the crossover point, and full non-membership (Fiss, 2007; Ragin, 2008). For a continuous variable, decisions about full membership and non-membership involve an assessment of what values are generally considered high and low, respectively. The crossover point is the score that indicates maximum ambiguity, i.e., a firm has a degree of membership of 0.5 and a degree of non-membership of 0.5. Contrary to usual measurement scales, the crossover point establishes the difference in kind. Identifying the values of full membership, the crossover point, and full non-membership is unequivocal when measurement scales suggest clear cut-off points, such as seven-point Likert scales, with 1 being the lowest and 7 being the highest possible score (Ragin, 2008). Otherwise, identifying qualitative thresholds should be based on theoretical or substantive criteria external to the data (Ragin, 2008). In the next section, more information about the calibration of the conditions and outcomes of interest in this study is provided. Another key feature of the fsQCA method is that it relies on Boolean algebra to compute a “*truth table*”, which reports all the logically possible combinations of the conditions, including those that are empirically observed in our sample and those that are not (Ragin, 2009). Since this study investigates $k = 4$ conditions, the truth table has $2^k = 16$ rows or combinations of conditions (i.e., configurations). The researcher is now required to (1) set a priori minimum thresholds for consistency and the frequency of cases per configuration to identify

configurations that lead to the outcomes business growth and perceived success and (2) specify the assumptions based on which difficult counterfactual analysis (see below) will be based (Greckhamer et al., 2007). *Consistency* indicates the extent to which the results are in line with the statements of necessity and sufficiency. Furthermore, the proportional reduction in inconsistency (PRI) indicates the degree to which a given causal configuration is not simultaneously sufficient for both the occurrence and the non-occurrence of the outcome. *Coverage* depicts how well the causal model explains the available empirical information (Schneider & Wagemann, 2012). We have set the minimum acceptable frequency to one case per configuration (e.g., Ragin, 2009), which is in accordance with the intermediate sample size used in this study. With respect to consistency, all configurations that have a minimum raw consistency of > 0.75 and/or a PRI consistency of > 0.75 are identified (Ragin, 2008). The different parameters of fit that were used with strategies to address possible error sources are shown in Table 1.

-----INSERT TABLE 1-----

Consistent with prior studies (Fiss, 2011; Garcia-Castro & Casasola, 2009; De Vos & Cambré, 2017), the intermediate and parsimonious solution is reported in this study, and the presence or absence of the conditions is denoted as follows: conditions are denoted by full circles (present) and crossed circles (absent). Large circles indicate core conditions, and small circles refer to peripheral conditions. This offers us the interesting possibility to make a causal distinction between core causal conditions and peripheral conditions (Fiss, 2011; Ragin, 2008). With Fiss, we conceive causal coreness in terms of strength of the evidence in relation to the outcome (Fiss, 2011). Blank spaces in a solution indicate a situation in which the condition may be either present or absent (Fiss, 2011). Furthermore, to account for different possible model specifications and to

assess robustness, we calculated models using three different raw consistency thresholds via R with package QCA (Duşa, 2018).

3.1 Sample

No exhaustive list of independent fashion and furniture designers exists in Belgium to date. Therefore, this study uses the databases of Design Flanders and Flanders Fashion Institute. This institute consists of 315 designers in Flanders and Brussels (in April 2014). The study expands this database with 5 more furniture designers via snowball sampling. From this group of 320 designers an initial selection of 90 small-sized cases was made following a most similar/most different strategy (Yin, 2009). From this group, 40 cases responded positively to a request for an interview, and all respondents were subsequently interviewed by the authors. The semi-structured interviews had a duration of 40 to 90 minutes and were tape-recorded and transcribed. These interviews are used to gain field knowledge, within-case knowledge and to interpret and give meaning to the findings.

In the next step, an online survey was sent to a group of 50 fashion and furniture designers who did not respond to the request for an interview and to the 40 interviewed designers. Survey data on several indicators of business growth, perceived success, exploration, exploitation and job rate were collected, resulting in 54 responses. We dropped six cases because they did not meet the selection criteria of being small sized. Thus, the total sample for this study was 48 cases (28 surveys from the interviewed cases and 20 additional surveys).¹

3.2 Measures and calibrations of set membership

As mentioned earlier, the application of fsQCA as a set-theoretic method requires the calibration of our conditions according to three qualitative thresholds: full membership, the

¹ The anonymous raw dataset, survey questions and analyses can be obtained from the corresponding author.

crossover point, and full non-membership (Fiss, 2007; Ragin, 2000). For this study, the direct method of calibration was used (Ragin, 2008). This method requires the numerical specification of the full membership score, the full non-membership score and the crossover point. Table 2 provides an overview of the calibration decisions made in this research.

-----INSERT TABLE 2-----

4. Results

The analysis did not show necessary conditions for business growth or perceived success. The results from the sufficiency analysis for the presence of business growth and perceived success are presented in the form of a configuration chart. The results include only those configurations with a consistency threshold greater than 0.85. This threshold is higher than those between 0.75 (Ragin, 2008) and 0.80 (Fiss, 2011), which are the thresholds recommended in the literature. Following the assumption of asymmetric causation, an analysis of the absence of the outcome was also performed. However, these results do not pass the recommended threshold for the overall solution consistency.

4.1 Configurations for business growth

The results shown in Table 3 represent the two configurations of conditions (i.e., solution 1-2) found to be sufficient for fashion and furniture designer's business growth. The overall solution consistency is 0.85 (above the recommended threshold of 0.80), and the overall solution coverage 0.43, which is substantially higher than solution coverages in other configurational studies (Fiss, 2011; Meuer et al., 2015). The latter indicates that the two configurations of conditions account for 43 percent of membership in a designer's business growth. This value

indicates that our configurations contain other elements not taken into account in this study that relate to business growth (Fiss, 2011). All conditions are core conditions.

The two solutions show that at least two conditions need to be present or absent to achieve designer's business growth. Thus, the presence or absence of a single condition is insufficient to obtain this outcome. In combination with our finding that none of our conditions are necessary for business growth, we confirm proposition P1 in which we expected that exploration, exploitation, job rate and tenure are INUS conditions for fashion and furniture designer's business growth.

-----INSERT TABLE 3-----

With respect to the first solution, "*Fulltime 'young' designers with a focus on exploration*", we find that young fulltime designers achieve higher growth if they exhibit a high level of exploration. Solution 2 indicates that higher growth can also be achieved (i.e., equifinality) if young fulltime designers exhibit a low level of exploitation. In the different solutions, we could not find a balance between exploration and exploitation that was reflected in high or low levels of both. More important for business growth is rate of employment; all of the solutions account for fulltime designers.

4.2 Configurations for perceived success

The results shown in Table 4 represent the four configurations of conditions (i.e., solution 3-6) found to be sufficient for fashion and furniture designer's perceived success. The overall solution consistency is 0.88 (above the recommended threshold of 0.80), and the overall solution coverage 0.67, which is substantially higher than solution coverages for other configurational studies (Fiss, 2011; Meuer et al., 2015). The latter indicates that the four configurations of

conditions account for 67 percent of membership in designer's high-perceived success. All conditions are core conditions.

The four solutions show that at least two conditions need to be present or absent to achieve designer's perceived success. This means that the presence or absence of a single condition is insufficient to obtain this outcome. Thus, we confirm proposition P2 in which we expected that exploration, exploitation, job rate and tenure are INUS conditions for a fashion and furniture designer's perceived success.

-----INSERT TABLE 4-----

Solutions 3-5 show all the important features of being a fulltime designer. For perceived success, achieving a balance between exploration and exploitation is important, as three out of four solutions show this notion in their pathway. This balance can be both a high focus on exploration and exploitation (solutions 5 and 6) or a low focus on both aspects (solution 3).

5. Discussion and conclusion

To shed more light on the interrelationships among ambidexterity, job rate, tenure and their effect on business growth and perceived success, we applied the fsQCA methodology (Fiss, 2007, 2011; Ragin, 2009). Drawing from this comparative case study, all conditions are core conditions in the solutions paths and thus play an important role in relation to the outcome in different types of configurations and with differences in being present or absent. As such, we can confirm propositions P1 and P2 in which we expected that exploration, exploitation, job rate and tenure are INUS conditions for fashion and furniture designer's business growth and perceived success.

Four major conclusions can be drawn from this study. First, business growth is achieved through an imbalance between exploration and exploitation in combination with having a fulltime occupation as designer and being a young firm. From the literature review, however, we expected to see the importance of simultaneously balancing exploitation and exploration (Chang & Hughes, 2012; Raisch & Birkinshaw, 2008). This balance is only found for perceived success (solutions 3, 5 and 6). As such, the pathways for perceived success and business success are very different for small-sized designers. Reflecting on this, it is challenging to excel both exploration and exploitation for individuals (Gupta et al., 2006), which results in tensions between the two practices. Moreover, creatives start from artistic values (Lampel et al., 2000) and thus tend naturally more to exploration. Individuals' typical responses to tensions or paradoxes are defensive, wanting to eliminate the tension (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009; Lewis, 2000). This explains the finding that balance is important for perceived success; however, an imbalance seems better for business growth. Ebben and Johnson (2005) suggest that smaller firms' performance suffers when they implement complex, ambidextrous strategies, which can explain the advantages of an imbalance between exploration and exploitation regarding business growth. We thus concur with Turner et al. (2013) that much still need to be done to obtain a granular understanding of the micromechanisms enabling ambidexterity.

Second, as is shown in the solution paths for business growth, tenure plays also an important role. In this study, business growth is achieved as a 'young' design firm. This finding is in accordance with previous research demonstrating that a firm deteriorates with age (e.g., Anderson & Eshima, 2013; Coad et al., 2010; Navaretti et al., 2014). It is also in line with the finding of Camelo-Ordaz et al. (2012) and Jacobs et al. (2016a) regarding creative industries. They found that as tenure increases, flexibility decreases, and resistance to changes in the firms' strategy

increases, which affects the company's performance. The results regarding tenure and perceived success are however still ambivalent. The presence as well as the absence of tenure in combination with other conditions leads to high-perceived success; thus, it is the conjunction with other conditions that gives meaning to this condition. Third, being a fulltime designer (job rate) is an important condition in most of the pathways for business growth and perceived success that always occurs in combination with the presence or absence of other conditions. This finding is in line with previous research (Jacobs et al., 2016a) and contributes to the literature on artistic and creative careers. Creatives often hold multiple jobs (Hennekam & Bennett, 2016; Throsby & Zednik, 2011), which presents a challenge for those hoping to secure creative occupations as a first choice (Ashton, 2015). As such, our findings support the importance of continuity in work for the sustainability of independent creatives' careers (De Vos et al., 2018). It is clear that for creatives that success increasingly requires meta-competencies, such as broad creative skills, commercial acumen, and the ability to work across multiple media platforms (Bain & McLean, 2013; Bridgstock, 2011; Haukka, 2011; Mietzner & Kamprath, 2013). As Bridgstock (2005) notes, this portfolio of skills allows artists to switch from seeking employment security to security in employability. In this sense, agreeing with Bridgstock (2011), we argue that it is critical for arts training institutions to help students develop an entrepreneurial artist identity.

A final conclusion concerns the condition exploration. This condition is present in half of the solution paths for business growth and perceived success. The importance of exploration in these paths is in line with the findings of Chaston (2008) and Walker and Brown (2004) who state that managers of most small creative firms are individuals who focus more on sustaining a lifestyle oriented toward involvement in creative output than on being financially successful.

These conclusions can best be illustrated with cases to honor the rich qualitative data that were gathered. We highlight two cases with regard to a balance and an imbalance between exploration and exploitation.

The first case highlights the importance of an imbalance between exploration and exploitation to show business growth. This designer studied painting and restoration. After her studies, she started immediately as a freelance art restorer. In the following years, she took evening courses in pattern drawing, stitching and design. She graduated in 2007 and got good feedback on the presentation of her collection, so she decided to start working fulltime as a fashion designer. She makes women clothing, and her first collections were distributed through different shops. After a few years, she started her own shop, and she also started to design male collections last year. This designer is successful as a designer; she displays business growth and is very focused upon the business side of her fashion firm. She translates perceived success into the possibility to pay everyone and everything at the end of the month. However, she does not show a balance between exploration and exploitation. Her exploitation skills are much stronger than her exploration skills. For her, exploration is the designing of a new collection. She invests more time in exploitation. In addition to her own shop, she has an online shop, and she distributes to other shops. She found this shop by active prospecting. She finds herself having a commercial mindset. She designs clothes that are not too high-flown and that sell well. The production of the prototypes and the clothing is also performed by a manufacturer in Poland.

The second case illustrates a balance between exploration and exploitation to achieve perceived success. This designer has a background in history. As a hobby and out of interest, she studied pattern making and theatre costumes design. In 2007, she started her label together with a friend. They were focused on children clothing made from old fabric. In 2009, they also started

working with women's clothing and tailored-made clothing. She works fulltime for her label. Today, she is the creative brain of the firm. She finds herself and the label successful on a personal level in the sense that she obtains adequate recognition and appreciation from the field and their customers. However, her label shows no business growth today. The designer tells us that they have been in an unfavorable climate for approximately 5 years. For the time being, they wait and want to keep the business. She is happy with the current state of her business. The interview and survey show that there is a balance in the field of exploration and exploitation: both aspects score high. The exploitation is mainly characterized by three factors: the children's collection is divided among a number of shops in Flanders, they work with the patterns of the current and past collections for the tailored-made clothing, and the shop/studio for women's clothing is situated in a good location in Antwerp. For this designer, exploration means the development of new fabrics and prints, new collections and research into shapes.

In conclusion, combining a configurational method of thinking with fsQCA as method of analysis suggests that focusing on the joint and interdependent effects of multiple growth and perceived success predictors is particularly fruitful to develop an integrative model of designer's business growth and perceived success that is broad in scope yet parsimonious in its solutions. The use of fsQCA enables further empirical exploration of configurations of conditions that explain more profoundly designer-level and firm-level outcomes (Fiss et al., 2013). In addition, the detection of causal asymmetry by fsQCA can contribute to a more accurate understanding of relationships between variables.

The findings of this study are important for the designers themselves and policy-makers and other stakeholders. To achieve business growth and perceived success, designers must find sufficient stimuli and support to be a designer as primary occupation. Looking back into the cases,

most of the part-time designers have other jobs to maintain financial security. This advice may be of use for fashion and furniture designers when defining their strategy. The implications of our findings also extend to policy-makers, support organizations and educational institutions that are preparing and helping creative independent workers. According to this study and previous scholars, it is important for the creative industry to integrate artistic values with economic considerations. The mix of these creative and business skills is best learned from experience in addition to educational institutions (Rae, 2004). However, it is not sufficient to focus simply on developing these competences. Research is needed to take an in-depth view into what lies within a portfolio across a creative independent career. As such, designers can be prepared specifically for entrepreneurial activity and provided with a realistic view of freelance work and an understanding of how to develop and manage their own career portfolios.

5.1 Limitations and further research

Like any study, this study is subject to a number of limitations. First, like any methodology, fsQCA has its limitations in its own right. One limitation is that apparently small changes in calibration or the choice of cut-off values regarding frequency and consistency thresholds can lead to significant changes in the solutions obtained (Fiss et al., 2013). As a robustness check, we advanced this limitation by examining the impact of different cut-off values concerning frequency and consistency thresholds. In some situations, we found that fewer or more solutions emerged that are however not different from those reported. Another limitation is that although core and peripheral conditions provide an expression of the relative importance of conditions, an exact figure of how much more or less important a condition is for an outcome to occur is not computed by fsQCA. Second, our study has a cross-sectional research design. Thus, we cannot explore causality. Future studies may replicate the models with longitudinal data that accounts for potential

variances in the conditions and outcomes over time. For this purpose, Garcia-Castro and Arinõ (2013) recently developed a novel approach to apply set-theoretic methods to panel data. Finally, we focused on the conditions that seemed most important for business growth based on the literature and our experience in the fashion and furniture industry. Future studies could examine whether other variables have different combinatorial effects as those we find in this study.

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Table 1: Strategies to address errors and evaluate models

<i>Issue</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Strategy</i>	<i>Application</i>
Measurement errors	Sensitivity to changes in raw consistency levels	Raw consistency Robustness test	Use of three different raw consistency thresholds
Plausibility & tenability	Limited diversity & contradictions can trigger inferences that are implausible and/or contradictory	Enhanced Standard Analysis	Intermediate solution based on directional expectations and exclusion of contradictory rows and untenable assumptions
Causal relevance	Only a parsimonious solution removes causally irrelevant conditions from solution terms	Comparative presentation of parsimonious & intermediate solutions	A parsimonious solution is causally interpretable and less sensitive to errors
Skewness	Skewed distributions can produce simultaneous subset relations, exacerbate limited diversity, and strongly distort parameters of fit	Skewness statistics	% of cases with membership > 0.5 in sets in reported. Skewness is problematic if the vast majority (> 85%) of the cases cluster in only one of the four possible intersecting areas of the XY plots with two digitals
Accuracy	Degree to which observations correspond to set relation	Consistency	Necessity: ≥ 0.9 Sufficiency: ≥ 0.75
Explanatory power	Empirical relevance of model	Coverage	Necessity: ≥ 0.6 RoN: ≥ 0.8 Sufficiency: Low coverage indicates low explanatory power

Table 1: Strategies to address errors and evaluate models. Based on Baumgartner (2015), Baumgartner and Thiem (2015), Fiss (2011), Ragin (2000), Schneider and Wagemann (2012).

Table 2: Calibration overview

<i>Condition</i>	<i>Question/measure</i>	<i>Min (full non-membership)</i>	<i>Max (full membership)</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Crossover point calibration</i>	<i>% cases with set membership > 0.5</i>
Growth	Combination of 3 indicators: (1) growth in amount of employees; (2) growth in turnover; (3) growth in sold products / a score from 0 to 3 on 3	0	3	1.40	1.50	52
Exploration	Five-point Likert scale / Question: <i>To what extent did you, last year, engage in work related activities that can be characterized as follows... (5 items; derived from Mom et al. (2007)) / average score</i>	1	5	3.64	3.50	62
Exploitation	Five-point Likert scale / Question: <i>To what extent did you, last year, engage in work related activities that can be characterized as follows... (6 items; derived from Mom et al. (2007)) / average score</i>	1	5	3.63	3.50	67
Job rate	Do you work fulltime or part-time as a designer? / 1= fulltime; 0= part-time	0	1	0.71	0.5	70
Perceived success	Indicate on a five-point Likert scale how you perceive your own success following your own definition of success / a score from 1 to 5	1	5	3.21	3.50	37
Tenure	Years of existence of the creative organization	1	25	7.52	6.90 (percentile 0.5)	42

Table 2: Calibration overview

Table 3: Solutions for the presence of business growth

Condition	Solutions	
	1	2
Exploration	●	
Exploitation		⊗
Job rate	●	●
Tenure	⊗	⊗
Consistency	0.86	0.89
Raw coverage	0.42	0.31
Unique coverage	0.12	0.01
Solution consistency	0.85	
Solution coverage	0.43	
Solution PRI	0.77	
# cases	10	

Table 3: Solutions for the presence of business growth. The notation is based on Fiss (2011) and Ragin (2008). Full circles: presence of a condition. Crossed-out circles: absence of a condition.

Table 4: Solutions for the presence of perceived success

Condition	Solutions			
	3	4	5	6
Exploration	⊗		●	●
Exploitation	⊗	⊗	●	●
Job rate	●	●	●	⊗
Tenure		●	⊗	●
Consistency	0.90	0.90	0.91	0.95
Raw coverage	0.38	0.34	0.38	0.08
Unique coverage	0.01	0.06	0.13	0.08
Solution consistency	0.88			
Solution coverage	0.67			
Solution PRI	0.64			
# cases	13			

Table 4: Solutions for the presence of perceived success. The notation is based on Fiss (2011) and Ragin (2008). Full circles: presence of a condition. Crossed-out circles: absence of a condition.