Point Break? The Efficacy of Creative Differences as a Protective Label for Future Work

Spencer Huber Harrison
INSEAD
spencer.harrison@insead.edu

Patrick Reilly
University of British Columbia
pat.reilly@sauder.ubc.ca

Yanbo Song
INSEAD
yanbo.song@insead.edu

Khwan Kim
University College London
khwan.kim@ucl.ac.uk

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ABSTRACT

Creative projects require teams to both generate and integrate divergent ideas. While divergent ideas are necessary for creative success, they can also foster disagreements that can lead to collaborative breakdowns where individuals leave a project. Because creative work requires a strong reputation for moving from project to project, collaborative breakdowns threaten the ability to secure future work opportunities. We conducted a qualitative and a quantitative study to investigate the effectiveness of "creative differences" as a protective label for individuals that leave creative projects. Our inductive, qualitative analysis of interviews with Hollywood professionals reveals the potential for reputational damage following a collaborative breakdown, as well as the role of "creative differences" as a professionally ambiguous attribution meant to mitigate this damage. However, our informants offered conflicting views on its efficacy. From these insights, we abductively test hypotheses in a quantitative study examining directors who depart films due to creative differences, comparing them with those who leave for other reasons. Our study contributes by uncovering a novel dilemma in creative work – the role of collaborative breakdowns – and the potential hazards of relying on professionally ambiguous attributions as reputational shields for future career opportunities.

KEYWORDS: Collaboration, Protective Labels, Reputation, Creative Differences, Creative Careers

Most creative projects reach a moment that is both exciting and daunting—a moment when there are no definitive "right" answers, only possible right answers. This is by design. The creative process requires ambiguity (Amabile, 1988), requiring creative workers to generate different options and then "unpack" all the "newness" (Harrison & Rouse, 2015: 401) to find an integrative solution. Much research focuses on how creative teams foster divergent ideas, including leadership that nurtures individuals' motivation (Zhang & Bartol, 2010), leveraging perspective-taking in teams (Hoever et al., 2012), building supportive social contexts (Amabile et al., 1996), and minimizing conflict (Jehn, Northcraft, & Neale, 1999). Generating these ideas is the exciting part. The daunting part, however, is choosing between possibilities: both managers (Mueller, Melwani, & Goncalo, 2012) and experts (Berg, 2016) struggle to determine which creative ideas to adopt. This challenge is further complicated by the fact that creative workers strongly identify with their ideas (Lazar, Miron-Spektor, & Mueller, 2022). As a result, choosing between ideas can feel like

choosing between people. Creative project work can thus take on a competitive dynamic: "there are winners and losers … and losers suffer status losses" (Sutton & Hargadon, 1996: 710). Accordingly, not every project ends with the successful reconciliation or integration of competing ideas into a final product. Sometimes, creative collaborations break down, and collaborators are forced to walk away from a project because the different parties are unwilling to compromise on their ideas.

The fact that the collaborative process for generating creative ideas may trigger team breakdowns presents a theoretical and practical puzzle for creative workers and their future work opportunities. Advancement in creative careers requires positive reputations built through references from past collaborators (Harvey, 2014; Jones, 1996; O'Mahony & Bechky, 2006; Reilly, 2017; Soda, Mannucci, & Burt, 2021). Reputations are powerful *ex-ante* signals in creative markets, which are contexts characterized by heavy uncertainty (Caves, 2000). When a project breaks down due to an inability to integrate contrasting creative ideas, the resulting social shrapnel has the potential to damage the reputations and future work opportunities of everyone involved. Such failures can produce negative reputational spillovers that can damage impressions of a project and those involved in it. When competition among ideas can be worked out productively, everyone's reputation benefits. However, when competition among ideas leads to breakdowns, everyone's reputation might be harmed. To preserve access to future projects, former collaborators need a mechanism to avoid damaging their reputations and thereby preserve their future work prospects when a collaborative breakdown happens. In this study, we explore this puzzle by asking: "How do creative workers manage collaborative breakdowns in creative projects to avoid negative reputational spillovers?"

We were drawn to this puzzle during a multi-method study of Hollywood films. We began

with an inductive study that surfaced how insiders used the label "creative differences" to label moments when creative projects broke down and former collaborators left the project. We pivoted our study to investigate this label. Our informants emphasized that "creative differences" was a form of strategic ambiguity we call a *professionally ambiguous attribution* (Gioia, Nag, & Corley, 2012), used to provide vague justifications within the profession to mitigate reputational spillover effects associated with collaborative breakdowns. While informants suggested "creative differences" was a professional norm used to prevent embarrassing information from damaging individuals' employability they were divided about its efficacy. This suggested an additional research question about the efficacy of creative differences as protection that we abductively tested. We created an archival dataset of the use of the label "creative differences" in Hollywood projects examining a 10-year window of 124 directors which included 345 movies cumulatively grossing $30.6 billion in the US box office and 17,325 collaboration-based network ties between 3,557 directors, 9,722 producers, and 8,420 production companies.

Together, our studies offer a fresh perspective on the difficulties of creative work. First, we offer a novel perspective by combining research on the creative process with research on reputational spillovers. This allows us to surface a fundamental risk baked into creative work: that by fostering the divergent ideas necessary to research a creative outcome, participants in the process are also fostering a situation that could pit collaborators against each other and precipitate a collaborative breakdown that endangers the social standing of creative workers and their projects. Second, our work finds that collaborators depend on professionally ambiguous attributions like creative differences as a common practice in the profession to obfuscate the inner workings of collaborative breakdowns and manage audiences' impressions. But this creates a new dilemma: does the common practice actually protect former collaborators?

CREATIVE WORK AND THE DANGER OF REPUTATIONAL SPILLOVERS

Creative Projects and the Potential for Collaborative Breakdowns

Organizations often rely on project work and these projects typically require creativity (Cohen & Bailey, 1997; Drazin, Glynn, & Kazanjian, 1999) including an idea generation phase (Howard et al, 2007) that focuses on "divergence" (Guilford, 1957), "idea-finding" (Osborn, 1963), or simply "generating ideas" (Isaksen, Stead-Dorval, & Treffinger, 1994). During this phase, the multiple solutions a group has generated might be integrated or pitted against each other. Amabile (1988:144) compares this process to a maze:

> From the starting point [of a task], there is often a clear, well-worn, and straight path to the outside … however, it is not new; it is not particularly exciting or elegant; it is not creative … there are more creative ways out of the maze. But those exits cannot be reached by following the well-worn pathway. They can only be reached by exploration, and *by taking the risk of running into a dead-end*… [but creative groups] will not be overly concerned about the possible *dead-end risks* involved. (emphasis added)

The metaphor of the maze not only emphasizes the importance of exploring new paths but it also highlights that finding these paths carries "dead-end risks." These risks go beyond simply spending time on an idea that does not pan out. The real risk is that the team might not be able to complete the maze together because they have divergent ideas about what offers the most creative outcome: team members have gone down different paths in the maze and cannot find their way back to each other. Such collaborative breakdowns might be rare, but the risk of a collaborative breakdown is baked into the design of the creative process. For example, Sutton and Hargadon (1996) showed that brainstorming is often seen as a status auction: individuals involved want their ideas to win in the short term. Similarly, individuals in creative groups feel a strong sense of ownership (Baer & Brown, 2012) and emotional attachment (Lazar et al., 2022) to the ideas they offer to the rest of the group.

Research on ownership and attachment has explored how these dynamics leads individuals to bias their ideas (Lazar et al., 2022) and to shun others' ideas (Baer & Brown, 2012) in the short-

term. But more dramatic outcomes, like leaving a project might also emerge. Reviews have explicitly noted the need to better understand the effects of creative collaborations over longer time horizons. This is critical because one collaboration has repercussions on the next project (Harvey, 2014). Berg et al. (2023:3) suggest "scholars may find it helpful to zoom in on specific moments in the creative process or zoom out to consider how earlier and later moments relate to one another." Similarly, Harrison et al. (2022:11), argued:

> Moments when individuals engage in creative work likely leave traces that are visible in various ways over time. For example, rather than examining the idea that is ultimately implemented by a group as the primary focus of a study, we might examine… [how groups] move past conflict or confusion… we suggest that researchers take on studies that examine creative work over longer time horizons (years, decades, even centuries) to capture creative outputs that serve as inputs for the next phase of creative work.

The encouragement to look at longer durations of creative work begs an understanding of how a collaborative breakdown might carry over or be mitigated for the next project. How creative workers protect their reputations might provide an answer.

Protecting Against Reputational Spillovers in Creative Work

Types of reputational spillovers. One way to engage in willful blindness to doubting the potential costs of a collaborative breakdown in the creative process is to believe in professional norms that might provide remedies for these situations. Because creative careers are project-based, even if a collaborative breakdown is an unlikely event, leaving a project could create long-term reputational damage that could limit individuals' future opportunities. Reputation has been defined as "a track record of honorable behavior and high-quality output" (Rossman, Esparza, and Bonacich (2010: 34) or the "behavior expected of you. Over the course of repeated exchanges, two people build a sense of who they are in relationship, a sense of what to expect from the other person as well as themselves." (Burt, 2005: 100). Because reputation is about track records and others' expectations, reputation spreads through social networks, both for good and for bad (Kilduff &

Krackhart, 1994). For example, if a colleague was labeled a communist during the Second Red Scare, this taint can spillover to former collaborators and damage their future work opportunities (Pontikes, Negro, & Rao, 2010). As a result, harm to one individual's reputation can harm others that have conspicuous network ties to the focal individual, which is especially amplified in contexts characterized by dense social networks (Adut, 2005; Burt, 1999). This type of effect is known as a negative reputational spillover. Although this effect has been widely addressed according to firms' reputations (e.g., Connelly et al., 2006; Meyer, 2006; Park & Rogan, 2019), it is also applicable to individual social actors.

Negative events that cause reputational spillovers can be categorized as either failures of competence, such as freelance technical contractors' involvement in projects that fail (Barley & Kunda, 2004: 270-272), or failures of integrity, such as athletes doping with steroids (Sato, Ko, Chang, & Kay, 2019). Both tend to have a negative impact on the parties directly involved and, sometimes, they impact parties involved only by association. In this vein, Goffman (1963:30) observed a perceived "tendency for stigma to spread from the stigmatized individual to his close connections," thus discrediting an associate's social reputation. For example, Adut's (2005) study of Victorian scandals concerning homosexuality reported that elites kept knowledge of an individual man's same-sex liaisons as euphemism-laden open secrets within their social networks to thwart its spread to outsiders, who could mar the reputations of the network's other members. An implication from this research is that managing the message is important. Yet, how that message is managed seems to depend on the type of event and the context's norms.

Opportunities for theory building. Integrating insights from the study of reputational spillovers with research on creative project work presents opportunities for new theory building. Collaborative breakdowns in creative work represent an unexplored yet potentially career-

transforming type of reputational failure. Unlike failures of competence or integrity, collaborative breakdowns are ambiguous. A collaboration may break down simply because ideas do not align, or because each collaborator has a valid reason for believing that their idea is the best. Since the creative process does not guarantee a single "right answer," each participant may be fully competent in advocating for their approach. Moreover, individuals who walk away from a collaboration may do so out of a commitment to the "integrity of their ideas." Thus, collaborative breakdowns can occur precisely because both competence and integrity are exceptionally high. Researchers have highlighted the need to examine these types of ambiguous failures that may damage reputations (Park, 2017) to better understand their consequences and how individuals involved attempt to mitigate reputational harm.

In addition to offering a novel, ambiguous crisis event, collaborative breakdowns point to the importance of projects as a unique unit of analysis for reputational spillovers (Cohen & Bailey, 1997). Projects are temporary social structures often selecting membership based on relationships and reputations, focused on a particular outcome, with porous membership boundaries, and fewer specialized resources for dealing with crisis (compared to organizations). Research on spillovers suggests that individuals in leadership positions often receive the brunt of the blame for a crisis. Even so, there is limited research that focuses on individuals as the unit of analysis. As a recent review of reputational spillovers noted, "[M]ost spillover crisis studies focus on the spillover effect from one organization to another. On the other hand, fewer studies examine the spillover effect from one individual to another. … the individual aspect of spillover crises is worth examining by future research" (Wang & Laufer, 2024: 8). These individual dynamics are obscured when purely looking at spillovers as a field or inter-organizational issue.

The Puzzle of Collaborative Breakdowns, Reputational Spillovers, and Future Work

Our review highlights a critical theoretical and practical puzzle for creative groups.

Because the creative process itself invites ideas from different individuals who will identify with those ideas and likely feel a sense of loss if their idea is left out, there is a likelihood that some disagreements will result in collaborative breakdowns. Even if these events are rare, they are potentially significant because future work opportunities depend upon maintaining positive reputations. Research shows that negative events often create reputational spillovers. But it is unclear how this research would apply given the ambiguity of collaborative breakdowns and temporary membership of projects as a unit of analysis. Hence the importance of our overarching research question: "How do creative workers manage collaborative breakdowns in creative projects to avoid negative reputational spillovers?"

STUDY 1: INDUCTIVE STUDY OF FILM PROFESSIONALS

Data Collection

Our first study involved qualitative data gathered from semi-structured interviews (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1997) with 32 Hollywood film professionals. Authors 1 and 3 began their research into the consequences of collaborative breakdowns among creative workers on careers and projects within the context of "creative differences" in Hollywood filmmaking. However, when investigating press coverage of such events, they realized that the circumstances and meaning of the "creative differences" label were ambiguous. Therefore, they enlisted Author 2—a qualitative researcher specializing in creative industries—to conduct a study to ascertain what "creative differences" means in the context of film, the conditions that lead to them, and how insiders interpret this label in hiring and potential future collaborations.

Author 2 conducted these 32 semi-structured interviews using an interview protocol designed with Author 1 (see Appendix A). Author 2 recruited initial informants through his previous research networks and by contacting faculty at two prominent film schools and members of a women's professional film association. To expand this pool of 15, we engaged in snowball

sampling based on references from our initial informants. Interviews were conducted in two waves. The first wave occurred in 2020 and comprised 27 interviews. The second wave, which was more focused on specific roles, took place in 2024 and involved five interviews. Author 2 conducted all interviews on Zoom. We recorded the audio of all interviews and the video of 31 of the 32 interviews. The interviews' duration ranged from 58 to 119 minutes.

We purposely designed our sample to include a wide range of roles in filmmaking. As detailed in Appendix B, our sample includes high-ranking executives of film studios or production companies (six), producers (nine), directors (13), and tradespeople (ten). Many informants have occupied multiple roles within film production, which is common practice in Hollywood (Baker & Faulkner, 1991). Due to the complex division of labor within film production (e.g., Bechky, 2006), we determined that such diversity would capture a more comprehensive range of perspectives and experiences. The sample contained many high-level expert professionals—such as major production company presidents and film directors—that represent the elite of their field and are difficult for outsiders to access, which is a typical obstacle for scholars engaging in qualitative research into the highly insular world of the Hollywood entertainment industry (e.g., Ortner, 2010).

The questions in our semi-structured interviews focused on the informants' roles, career experiences, collaborative processes, hiring practices, referral networks, and instances of creative disagreement and conflict during film productions. We also included five questions that specifically addressed the label "creative differences." Notably, 13 of the 32 informants mentioned creative differences prior to these questions. We allowed the interviewees latitude in the degree of detail they chose to volunteer to help minimize perceived risk to their career. We referenced all informants with coded pseudonyms and removed all identifiable information. We transcribed all

the interviews, producing a dataset of 795 pages and more than 340,000 words. We used NVivo software to support our coding and analysis.

Data Analysis

We inductively analyzed our interview data according to the grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 2017). By identifying themes and "mysteries," questions that emerged from our qualitative data and integrating them with existing theories, we aimed to construct testable hypotheses for subsequent deductive analyses (Behfar & Okhuysen, 2018).

Our analysis unfolded iteratively through three stages. Author 2 synthesized the interviews into memos to cover emerging themes and contrast them with those in other interviews (see Charmaz, 2006:80-81). He discussed these memos with Author 1, and they collaborated on developing a preliminary coding approach. Using this approach, Author 2 conducted open coding of the transcripts grounded in emic knowledge and experiences, which "portrays a way of life from the perspective of participants… concepts drawn from the native's worldview" (Barley, 2020:136). The 32 primary codes and 30 ancillary codes covered categories such as: conditions that preceded dismissals due to creative differences (e.g., "ego over the project" and "money versus creative"), role relationships (e.g., "director as final word"), and reputation (e.g., "movie jail"). Author 2 arrived at a stable set of codes after 21 interviews. By employing a constant comparative method that involved comparing and revisiting the successive coding of the interviews and the application of each code, we achieved a consistent standard of analysis across our data set and determined that we reached theoretical saturation despite our superficially limited sample (Charmaz, 2006).

The next stage involved focused coding (Emerson et al., 1995) of our qualitative data to determine the definition, conditions, and consequences of "creative differences." Through further discussions about research memos with Author 1, Author 2 condensed these codes according to overarching patterns. We discovered that "creative differences," which was always attached to

dismissals, was a euphemism used to obscure the specific circumstances leading to a talent's exit. By investigating our informants' experiences and expertise, we identified their sensemaking concerning such occurrences. Lastly, we devised codes to capture how insiders interpret this label—whether as a stigma or an expected hazard of creative collaboration.

In the final stage of our analysis, we integrated our coded data with existing theories. Based on the themes that emerged from our data, we interpreted the patterns through the lens of existing theories concerning creative collaboration and reputational spillovers. This led us to two insights. First, our data were saturated with concern about reputation. Specifically, they worried about how the reputation earned in one project enables access to future projects. A writer-director (Int3) declared, "This is a business, it's all about reputation… If you're hard to get along with, well, you're not going to get work at all." They were particularly concerned about how collaborative breakdowns could damage reputations: "someone would have to fuck up majorly" (Int25). Looking at this link led to our second insight: informants used the ambiguous phrase "creative differences" to mitigate fallout from breakdowns. Informants noted that creative differences could describe collaborative breakdowns. One director (Int30) recounted:

> One of my producers was extremely toxic. It was really painful… I think: "one, he wants to be a director." I could not tell if there was maybe some envy there... But, every single creative decision that we would discuss, it was like, "let me argue why you are wrong, and I am right." And, just, critical debate that would spill into getting personal and mean—a lot of yelling.

But they also used creative differences for protection. A production executive (Int8) noted:

> [Creative differences] feels just broad and vague in the right way to encapsulate all those things. Most of the time, nobody wants a story that's like, "This artist got fired; this artist walked off; this studio executive went back on their word."… [T]he specifics are generally—out of context—going to be uglier… Who benefits from the specifics being in the public?

While we felt there were interesting dynamics regarding how directors try to avoid creative differences (we describe some of these in Appendix C), there is relatively little theory about how creative workers mitigate the potential reputational damage once a collaborative breakdown has

occurred. Put simply, conflict management (Carton & Tewfik, 2016) looks at how to diffuse a bomb, we wanted to understand what happens if the bomb has already gone off. Hence, our findings focus on our informants' understanding of how and why they use creative differences as a protective label and its efficacy in protecting access to future work opportunities.

STUDY 1: FINDINGS

Across our interviews, "creative differences" emerged as a widely invoked euphemism in the Hollywood film industry to explain certain professional departures. While some insiders view it as a useful tool for protecting the reputations of involved parties and maintaining project viability, others cast doubt about its actual effectiveness. This tension—between belief in the term's utility as a shielding mechanism and the risk it may convey about a party's aptitude as a collaborator—frames our exploration of how this label operates within the Hollywood.

Collaborative Breakdowns as Creative Differences

Developing and producing a motion picture is complex. As a producer (Int29) who specialized in hiring for almost two dozen Hollywood films explained:

> In our film world, it is not just having the right skills, but it is also having the right personality in blend. Because I look it as you are going on a project, all of these people are being thrown together. And, is this a group that can really function as a group and support each other and help elevate each other?

This blend of personality and skills is evaluated through reputation. An experienced producer responsible for hiring (Int29) highlighted:

> Reputation comes from the way [a director] performed on other films. And so, it is easy to find out: is this guy easy to work with? Is this guy difficult to work with? This person goes over budget; this person does not. This person works fast; this person works slow. So, you hear all of that. Then you have to make a judgment call: is it worth it?

Despite relying on reputation to improve the odds of successful collaboration, our informants described rare but profound instances of "creative differences." Collaborators "see differently the way the movie needs to be" (Int15). Disagreements are necessary in the process of

making a movie. In most cases, informants found that divergent ideas and perspectives were regularly constructive and improved projects. However, "creative differences" capture the state where disagreements escalate into collaborative breakdowns: a change in degree leading to a change in kind. As a producer (Int14) remarked, "It can be as simple as a disagreement—like the studio feels one thing, the artist feels another thing—and there's no solution to that and both sides get dug in." In the instances of individuals leaving projects that our informants shared from their direct experience and secondhand accounts, "there is some underlying set of different disagreements that [can]not be resolved amicably" (Int8). It reflects a point where "the movie is about the fall apart." (Int 17). For example, a producer (Int29) described how a director began shooting his film in a way that fundamentally differed from what the studio envisioned:

> I have been in a few situations, very few, where they replaced the director… In [one] situation, it was a movie that the director had written it and, like, it was a script with, like, 400 little scenes in it… It would have taken a year-and-a-half to shoot it all; you would have a five-hour movie. The studio came in and, after two weeks, they replaced him.

But these collaborative breakdowns have big consequences. Even if someone creates a toxic environment, it is generally impractical to have a crewmember leave due to time and budget constraints. Hiring a replacement halts production, involves significant switching costs regarding crewmember coordination, and risks production day and budget overruns. Given these risks, having someone leave due to creative differences is considered a last resort.

Creative Differences as a Contested Protective Label

Although instances of creative differences—especially when they result in a talent leaving a project—involve complex interpersonal dramas, the term is also a protective label. Ostensibly all the parties involved receive a compliment – they are all "creative" – but their versions of creativity are incompatible and, hence, "different." The incompatibility is left vague: neither side is clearly at fault. Common across the definitions shared by informants is that, as a label, "creative

differences" is a flexible euphemism that is "generic" (Int22), "a huge basket" (Int2), and also "seventy-five percent of the time, a bullshit phrase" (Int32). As a screenwriter-producer (Int19) mused, "It's the 'Aloha' of the motion-picture industry; it can mean anything." But it also acknowledges that either staying or walking away both have merit, "[creative differences means] if you don't like the ideas that [the] people who are hiring you are wanting, you really have two options: don't take the job—which might be [the] correct response—or you can be part of the creative team to get [the director's vision] on the screen" (Int23).

Emerging from our data is the premise that, when used as a label, "creative differences" acts as a *professionally ambiguous attribution* which we define as *the strategic use of vague language to publicly obscure behavioral causes of ostensibly negative professional outcomes*. Due to the intense media scrutiny and gossip networks, "creative differences" is a "public relations face-saving" (Int4) label that ensures insider information does not diffuse to outsiders. One director (Int3) stated while discussing the need for the term: "It's not in the common person's interest to know all the reasons why two people are seeing things different. It's really just private information." A producer (Int32) emphasized that this vagueness is critical in certain messy situations when he stated, "Sometimes you use creative differences because you don't want to get fucking sued."

The ambiguous attributions that creative differences offers can be contrasted with *external attributions*: *language that enables others to ascribe actions to external factors*. For example, in contrast to creative differences, some informants mentioned talent leaving a film for "scheduling conflicts". One director noted, "I've parted ways with actors and crew members due to scheduling conflicts, which is nobody's fault. Like, they got a bigger job or they had a baby or you push your dates into their summer trip or — those are not creative differences" (Int15). Another informant

noted how they lost a director of photography (DP) weeks before the start of filming because she took another job, hence scheduling conflicts, without any apparent ill-will:

> The DP they ended up getting …it's also scheduling and stuff like that… At the end of the day there was one person we really liked as well; this woman who ended up getting another job like two weeks before our movie was green lit. So they did try; the production company did try. It happens. (Int13)

But "scheduling conflicts" could also be used to obscure other information as well:

> Sometimes actresses pull out of a movie because they get pregnant. And they don't want it – their pregnancy announced, because they're like 5 weeks pregnant or 10 weeks pregnant. That's what happened with [star actress] on "[blockbuster]". 'She got injured', and then, I think it was like, 'She hasn't recovered from her injury, and we wanna keep going. So, we're recasting with [a different star].' Right? Like, okay. No problem. (Int7)

Our informants suggested creative differences and scheduling conflicts were both rhetorical strategies available in the field of film, but that they were used in different circumstances. Creative differences were used to obscure a collaborative breakdown whereas scheduling conflicts could signal a breakdown in availability. The key point, is the subtle but distinct sensemaking differences provided by each term. Creative differences offers professionally ambiguous attributions by providing enough of a justification for leaving a project that obscures unfavorable interpretations whereas scheduling conflicts offers external attributions by ascribing leaving a project to an external justification. Thus, our informants felt "creative differences" might protect the reputations of individuals and projects.

Protecting people and organizations. Our informants devoted comparatively greater attention to how "creative differences" as a euphemism protects the reputations of involved parties. Given the strife and logistical obstacles that these events involve, it seems counter-intuitive to shield the reputations of problematic players. Nevertheless, a key theme that emerged from our data was that the "creative differences" label enabled a provisional "code of silence."

In one respect, the effectiveness of "creative differences" as a label to protect reputations is buttressed by an insider norm that situates gossip as unprofessional. A studio executive (Int20) observed, "It's one of those things where you don't expose dirty laundry to the public… You don't kick somebody when they are down, right?" Similarly, a director (Int30) stated, "You do not want to be the person that is talking shit about another person. That is not professional either." When asked for the reason parties use the creative differences label rather than an accurate accounting of events, one informant (Int21) explained:

> Because they'll get sued if they talk about what really happened, because they'd be talking about it from their perspective, and the other person had a totally different perspective. And they don't have a chance to say what they wanted to say… Instead of saying, "We had creative differences," [you say], "He was impossible, and narcissistic, and rude." He could be like, "Well, whoa! Why are you maligning me in the press?"

Regarding production companies, it can minimize potential damage to their standing within the creative community, especially as they strive for long-term partnerships. As a production company president (Int4) declared, "From the studio's side, you do want other great artists to work with you, really. You don't want to be known as the studio that fires great [talent]."

In another respect, the "creative differences" label protects the reputation of the problematic party. Some informants expressed that such conflict could possibly be an isolated incident. A writer-screenwriter (Int19) expressed a common ethic: "It's hard sometimes to be honest, because you don't want to hurt people's careers." As one executive (Int8) shared, "[Someone gets] hired under a huge franchise, and they get fired off that. That doesn't necessarily change their talent level or their ability to execute on a thing that we might make together." In the above example shared by the studio president (Int7) about protecting projects, he also framed creative differences as a safeguard to prevent the impression to other executives that the superstar actor who left was unreliable or difficult in collaborations, thereby protecting the actor's reputation. Through obfuscating the actual material circumstances, some industry insiders believed the label

of creative differences minimizes reputational damage. Even so, some informants noted that its protective efficacy was not absolute. As we explain below, they sugget that gossip, repeated use, and the presence of high-status participants could erode the shield of professional ambiguity that "creative differences" was meant to provide.

Protecting projects. Informants worried that any suggestion of a collaborative breakdown might indicate the quality of a film. For example, one director described the key to a strong film:

> The number-one task or the job of the director is filtering everybody's opinions and having the understanding and the sort of audacity, almost, to keep everybody empowered and keep everybody feeling like their opinion's being heard, but only using the opinions and only using the parts of it that you know fit into what you're trying to do. (Int1)

In contrast, another director (Int17) observed how creative breakdowns undo this integration, "During a shoot, you should not have creative difference, because…when all the mechanisms are moving, it's going to be very disastrous." Any details about how these "mechanisms" break down might indicate that the underlying creative mechanisms of a film were in someway flawed.

Because of market uncertainty and the substantial investment involved in producing motion pictures, studios are extremely sensitive to minimizing negative "buzz" about an upcoming release. There's a fear that any details that might suggest failures in the creative process will drag the collaborators and the project down together, as a director of photography (Int11) surmised, "If [collaborators are] pigheaded and unwilling to listen, then their project's screwed, and you're going down with it." Hence, details about on-set dysfunction introduces additional risk. Reflecting upon an instance of creative differences in a film in our quantitative data, a former major studio president (Int7) explained:

> You're not going to say, "[Superstar actor] fell out because he hated the script"… You say, "Because he had creative differences with the filmmaker or with the studio about the direction of the" and so, you're not shitting on the script, which is going to make it harder to cast the movie… They don't want it to seem like the project is day-old bread.

Therefore, many informants believed that the label "creative differences" can help manage the optics concerning a project's viability and protect it from negative buzz because it obscures details that suggest its liabilities. However, as we will share, others contend that such ambiguity may not succed—especially when gossip circulates or high-status individuals speak openly.

Protection … compromised by collaborator status? While our informants felt "creative differences" offered protection via ambiguous attribution, they also expressed that the label was not an absolute shield for details of the episode and the involved parties' reputations. One producer (Int14) shared, "I think most of us talk to each other; most people only withhold information if they have some fear about it getting out that they say something about someone." The exact circumstances may become apparent "through rumor mills or the grapevine or something." (Int21). However, one director (Int5) cautioned that such information should be taken "with a grain of salt" as he recounted an example: "I called a producer about this one person, a director, and they said this person is fantastic. I was like, 'Are you kidding? I just worked with him, and I thought they were horrible!' And the guy goes, 'You're right.' But everyone vouched for this person." Therefore, informants shared that they would respond to individuals with a track record of creative differences by contacting personal references. Nevertheless, they generally stated that—while there may be room for forgiveness concerning such dismissals—there is often still ambiguity.

Evidence in our interview data indicated a notable exception: star actors' status might allow them to be less discrete about their displeasure with a collaborator. For example, a producer (Int12) recounted his experience with a problematic director and a star actor's response:

> It was our first movie with this director. He was a narcissist control freak. And (laughs) we had a very big actor in the lead role, who was just the loveliest human. So, we were filming outside, and the city-controlled streetlight above us, in the middle of a take, shut off… For 10 minutes, [the director] screamed in my face about it. That happened on an almost daily basis, until the lead actor saw him doing this, came over to us, and said, "If I ever see you doing that again, I will walk off this movie. I just don't give a shit. I will leave, and *you* will have no movie, and *I will tell everybody that you're a piece of trash!*"

Similarly, an assistant director (Int18) recounted how a director on a set verbally abused him, and the leading star on the project "literally went to management and said, 'It's [the director] or me!" This can be compounded because the potentially scandalous nature of these moments coupled with the attention star actors attract could invite curious speculation, rather than ambiguity. Illustrating this, a former studio executive (Int32) observed, "Things catch up with people if there is a chink in the armor. If you are not box office anymore, people will go, 'Yeah, I heard he is an asshole, too.'" Therefore, as star actors' status plays a key role in driving the commercial viability of projects, information about their dissatisfaction is more conspicuous and they hold greater power to communicate it through backchannels and gossip.

Perceived Consequences on Future Work Opportunities

Emerging from our interviews was a relatively mixed sense of how being dismissed for creative differences may affect an individual's work prospects. Such inconclusiveness may stem from reputation's construction within the Hollywood film industry. Creative leaders seek to hire talent with reputations for being reliable and professional. The euphemism of "creative differences" makes the circumstances for leaving a project ambiguous and thus may safeguard individuals from fault. However, that vagueness also may invite individuals to ascribe risk.

While creative differences can involve messy conflicts and scandalous elements, some film professionals contended that leaving a project does not lead to future work penalties. As a production company executive (Int8) remarked, "I don't think anybody getting fired off a project or leaving a project over creative difference is an automatic add to the no-fly list." When asked whether a recent dismissal for creative differences would adversely affect one's future work, a screenwriter-producer (Int19) responded, "I think the good thing about it being a super-vague thing is that it doesn't mean anything... [Producers are] like, 'The crew hates them [a person who left for creative differences], but they always bring [the film] on schedule, so I don't care.'" A

production company president (Int4) stated that producers would likely ignore a director's past dismissals for creative differences if they desired them and observed, "There's usually people who are, like, 'I'm gonna be the one who's gonna (laughs) change this person… The creative differences were more that the studio wanted to save face.'" Therefore, our informants provided some evidence that the effects of being associated with "creative differences" would not have palpable effects on a director's future employment prospects, especially if the production company saw a director as an optimal fit for their goals.

However, other film professionals judged that directors who were dismissed for creative differences, despite the ambiguity of the label, would encounter negative effects upon subsequent hiring. These informants saw this as a red flag that would signify added risk to project outcomes. When asked if a director's prior departure due to creative differences would affect the likelihood of hiring, a producer (Int29) who specializes in budgets and hiring crew and principal cast observed, "Well, it makes it harder. It makes it tough to hire them, and the person has to be a strong enough character that it is worth going through that… The studio will look at it and say, 'Does it justify?'" Such considerations are especially relevant when studio chose between prospects. Regarding creative differences, a director-screenwriter (Int28) stated:

> If it comes down in the future to between you and another person and they remember you as a nice human, that can tip the needle. I think a lot of people will even take a pretty good director who's a really great person over an amazing director who is an asshole.

Ultimately, this other perspective focuses upon how carrying the stigma of creative differences leads to the impression that a director would damage a project's collaborative dynamic.

Summary and Limitations

Our qualitative research on Hollywood insiders surfaced a key tension of creative work: that the very nature of creative work can lead to collaborative breakdowns that can negatively impact access to future projects. Across our informants' experiences, we found that the label

"creative differences" emerged as a professional norm used to mitigate the reputational risks associated with collaborative breakdowns. They noted that "creative differences" not only signify a collaborative breakdown while also offering professionally ambiguous attributions: safeguarding both the project in a highly uncertain market and individuals' professional reputations, which are crucial for securing future employment.

Despite consensus on the role and definition of "creative differences" in the Hollywood film industry, informants disagreed regarding its efficacy. Some industry insiders view a single instance of "creative differences" as not necessarily detrimental, interpreting it as an isolated case of poor fit. However, others see this label as a red flag, suggesting that departing from a prior project under this pretext introduces risks related to a director's ability to manage future projects and attract stars. The term "creative differences" is often used to mitigate reputational damage by controlling negative information from leaking to outsiders and is reinforced due to industry norms against gossip-mongering. In addition, our qualitative evidence suggests that star actors' status may make them more open to communicating details surrounding such dismissals.

While our qualitative investigation surfaced the notion of professionally ambiguous attributions as a protective device accepted with a creative field, it also surfaced a new anomaly: whether these labels actually offer the effective protection they promise. The divergent views presented by our informants raised a broader question: Does the professionally ambiguous attribution "creative differences" actually protect individual and projects as intended? Furthermore, they suggest that the status of key project collaborators is a condition that influences its effeciacy. To assess how well this industry practice holds up systematically, we conducted a follow-up quantitative study to examimen whether association with creative differences future work opportunities.

STUDY 2: TESTING COMPETING HYPOTHESES WITH QUANTITATIVE DATA

Our informants in Study 1 noted the use of creative differences as a form of professionally ambiguous attribution that was widely adopted, but they were not all sure of whether it worked. This raised a new research question: Does a reputational spillover tactic adopted by a field as common practice actually produce its intended consequence of career protection? Anomalies such as these offer fruitful starting points for abductive testing (Saetre & Van de Ven, 2021) with the aim of finding a plausible explanation for the prevalence of the strategy in the face of questions of its efficacy. Our desire to test these relationships was further spurred by Wang and Laufer's (2024) review of reputational spillover and impression management that suggested situations like those our informants described merit exploration, especially understanding these strategies' impact over time. When negative events occur, individuals can use defensive impression management tactics like apologies or excuses (Tedeschi & Melburg, 1984). Bolino et al. (2016: 381-382) note: "fewer studies have focused on the use of defensive impression management behaviors" such that "there is a need for research that broadens our understanding of impression management tactics that are less well understood."

Our qualitative study, which found that "creative differences" offer professionally ambiguous attributions suggested both null and alternative hypotheses. Informants framed professionally ambiguous attributions as accepted by the profession and likely protective (with disagreement on its effectiveness). Hence, the null hypothesis is key: that using professionally ambiguous attributions would protect creative collaborators access to future projects as well as the focal project itself. In contrast, the alternative hypothesis is that using professionally ambiguous attributions would damage access to future projects. Notably, none of our informants suggested actively avoiding the label or attempting to improvise another strategy like being transparent about the collaborative breakdown. Our induced qualitative concepts of professionally ambiguous

attribution versus external attribution feed into and enrich research on strategic ambiguity. This research suggests that the rhetorical construction of strategic ambiguity will generate curiosity and sensemaking and therefore different forms of ambiguity are likely to cause distinct types of sensemaking. These rhetorical strategies might be challenged within the field or profession but become embedded as useful concepts as they enable or legitimize key actions within the field (Jalonen, Schildt, & Vaara, 2018). Hence, actors can rhetorically construct ambiguity to exploit it (Sillince, Jarzabkowski, & Shaw, 2011) but, in fields that depend upon reputation and repeated collaborations, like creative fields, actors might find themselves in a double bind. Research shows that creative workers like Impressionist painters or architects exist in a web of relationships between peers and collaborators and critics (Wijnberg & Gemser, 2000; Boutinot, Ansari, Belkhouja, & Mangematin, 2015) and these reputational networks rely on shared norms within the field or profession to enable ground rules for collaboration (Molina, Nee, & Holm, 2023). Hence, actors are stuck: adopt the existing norms, even if their efficacy is questionable, or attempt to improvise new forms of strategic ambiguity which might create another penalty. As a result, they rely on the norms of the field to protect them against reputational spillovers. Hence, we hypothesize:

> ***Hypothesis 1a:*** Collaborators associated with professionally ambiguous attributions used to justify leaving a collaboration will be more likely to miss out on future work opportunities.

In addition, because creative projects are often closely associated with the individuals that brought the project to life, any negative reputational spillovers from the individuals involved will likely stick to the creative produce itself. Research shows that creators often embue their products a signature style such that the products feel connected to the creator (Elsbach, 2009). In turn, research also shows that consumers can detect these signature styles (Gabora, O'Connor, Ranjan,

2019). In other words, interpreting who was involved in a collaborative project is one common aspect of evaluating a creative product. The null hypothesis would be that professionally ambiguous attributions would protect the project from any negative spillovers associated with collaborators leaving the project (eg., avoiding consumer sensemaking that "because creators left, the product itself must be bad"). Hence, we test the alternative hypothesis:

> ***Hypothesis 1b:*** Projects associated with professionally ambiguous attributions used to justify collaborators leaving a collaboration will be more likely to underperform compared to similar projects.

Because professionally ambiguous attributions are meant, in part, to maintain access to future collaborations and because, in creative industries, professional relationships play a critical role in shaping future work opportunities, preserving relationships acts as a key mechanism. When individuals become publicly associated with a failed project, it can strain existing professional relationships and hinder the formation of new ones. Again, the null hypothesis is that professionally ambiguous attributions provide a shield against this relational damage by concealing the details of a breakdown thereby enabling the neutral inferences about the parties involved (eg., "it was simply a complicated project" or "it just didn't work out – no one was to blame."). Hence, we test the alternative hypothesis that professionally ambiguous attributions might damage relationships by causing negative inferences about the involved parties:

> ***Hypothesis 2***: The loss of professional relationships, as an indicator of reputational harm, will mediate the relationship between professionally ambiguous attributions and access to future projects.

Finally, because professionally ambiguous attributions are designed to allow stakeholders a degree of interpretive flexibility, high status collaborators that were involved with focal individuals leaving a project create an added layer of intrigue. This happens for two reasons. First, high status individuals are magnets for attention (Ponsi et al., 2024) and curiosity from a wide

range of stakeholders. which places a heavier burden on professionally ambiguous attributions as stakeholders search for additional information about the details of why collaborators have left a project. Second, because high status individuals have more influence and power, they are able to violate professional norms without exposure to the same sanctions. As a result, they are able, through back channel means (rumors, gossip, intermediaries, etc.) to provide details that unpack the professionally ambiguous attributions.If they unveil what might otherwise remain unsaid, such disclosures might not land lightly. Because high-status individuals are presumed competent (Fiske et al., 2002), their words lend meaning to the ambiguous, transforming rumor into revelation. In this way, status becomes both spotlight and sounding board—drawing curiosity toward hidden information and amplifying its resonance once released.

Ironically then, although collaboration with high status individuals would normally be a career boon, in situations where individuals rely upon ambiguity to protect their careers, high status collaborators may nullify the protective efficacy of professionally ambiguous attributions by making the failure more visible and curious. This heightened visibility can intensify scrutiny, leading to reputational harm for those involved. This feeds into research on reputational spillovers that suggests that individuals associated with high-status entities can experience both amplified gains and magnified losses due to their association (Rindova et al., 2005). Thus:

> ***Hypothesis 3:*** Higher status of prior collaborators will amplify the reputational harm to those associated with professionally ambiguous attributions such that access to future projects and professional relationships will be worse than for those with lower status prior collaborators.

STUDY 2: METHOD

Setting and Sample

Setting. We tested our hypotheses in the context of the U.S. film industry. Production companies and studios oversee resource allocation and product distribution. Contracted talent,

such as directors and actors, develop their careers across projects rather than inside a firm (Bechky, 2006; Faulkner & Anderson, 1987; Jones, 1996). This project-based employment relationship implies that a director's performance on one project likely has implications for opportunities on future projects, for which any member of a previous project may provide a lead or recommendation (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1998; Manning & Sydow, 2007). Given our work in Study 1, we knew that "creative differences" offered professionally ambiguous attributions.

Sample. We identified our sample of directors associated with professionally ambiguous attributions by searching the *Entertainment and Media* databases from Factiva and ProQuest. We used "creative differences" and "creative difference" as search terms for the ten-year period from January 1, 2005, to January 1, 2016. This sampling frame allowed us to capture a ten-year window of such events in the film industry. Following the Motion Picture Association of America's taxonomy (MPAA, 2017), we focused on full-length feature films associated with at least one U.S. production company and excluded student films, documentaries, or films created for direct video release. We also manually searched "creative differences" and "creative difference" on Google to see if these cases are inclusive. Following these criteria, our search returned 49 events where directors left an ongoing feature film project due to a reported reason of "creative differences" with other parties. We excluded eight projects that were canceled, which resulted in 40 projects that gained theatrical release in total as our final sample. We labeled 41[1] individuals who left those projects as "creative difference directors" and 42 individuals who replaced them as "replacement directors".

[1] Wonder Woman (2017) had two creative difference directors involved: both Joss Whedon (in 2007) and Michelle MacLaren (in 2015) left due to creative differences. Given the eight year time difference, we treat these as two separate events.

To understand the efficacy of professionally ambiguous attributions as protection against reputational spillovers, we needed to compare directors that left a project with professionally ambiguous attributions with others that left a project using a different tactic. When we searched the Wikipedia production histories of the 40 sampled projects, we found that there were 18 directors who had been attached to the project at one point but had left the project without any mention of creative differences (the most frequent reason offered was "scheduling conflict" – a form of external attribution) prior to a creative difference director joining. These attached directors provided a natural comparison with the creative differences directors because both left films, allowing us to control for leaving and better detect the impact of professionally ambiguous attributions versus external attributions. However, not all the films in our sample had prior attached directors. Therefore, we recruited an RA blind to any hypotheses to identify a matching sample of films that had attached directors who did not leave due to "creative differences" to match with the "creative difference" films that did not have prior attached directors. Using IMDb Pro's "Similar Films" search feature, we constructed matches based upon budget (+/-20%), domestic box office gross (+/- 20%), release date within one year, and genre to ensure similarity. Then we looked in the production histories of these films for prior attached directors. If those parameters did not yield a match, they were incrementally relaxed in the order listed to allow for the closest possible match. From these matched films we found an additional 23 directors that had been attached to the film and later left the film and were replaced by another director. We labeled these individuals – the 18 from the creative differences films and the 23 from the matched films as "attached directors." The backstories of the attached directors were relatively thinner than the creative differences directors but the data that was available revealed they were involved at an earlier stage of the process, usually leaving in pre-production, on average 4.23 years (min = 0.64, max = 21.13, SD = 3.83)

before the film's release date. In addition, we were able to find on-the-record justifications for leaving the film for only 14 of the 41 directors. 10 of the 14 mentioned external attributions: "scheduling conflicts" or a change in "production plans".

This created a set of directors that had all left a film project for comparison totaling 82 directors: 41 creative difference directors and 41 attached directors. For creative difference directors, we captured data on their careers for five years before and after the reported creative differences; for the last attached directors, we gathered data on their careers for five years before and after the reported attached date. Overall our data covers ten years of film projects in each director's career. In addition, for films that already had both a creative difference and an attached director, we collected an additional "twin" film following the procedure above so that we had a set of comparable films to test the impact of creative differences on the performance of the film. Table 1 lists the films and directors in our sample.

---------- INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE ----------

Measures

Dependent variables. To compare films associated with professionally ambiguous attributions and twin films of similar budget, genre, and release season, we gathered the films' *U.S.* domestic and global gross box-office figures using data collected from the Internet Movie Database (*IMDb*). The success of a feature film has been commonly measured by its box-office revenues, which reflect audience preference and the success of those receiving them (Eliashberg, Hui, & Zhang, 2007; Kim & Jensen, 2014; Sorenson & Waguespack, 2006). We used the Consumer Price Index data from the *U.S.* Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS, 2022) to adjust this monetary measure into the 2015 U.S. dollar inflation-adjusted value.

In analyses among individual directors, we measured their access to future projects with two metrics. First, we collected the reported production budgets from *IMDb* of each feature film

directed by a sampled director (Christopherson, 2008). We also adjust these monetary measures into the 2015 U.S. dollar inflation-adjusted value. This provides a measure of the relative size and scope of the project the director was employed on. Second, we counted the amount of feature film projects directed by a sampled director in the given period. This dual operationalization captures both the financial scale of directors' future projects and the frequency of their employment, providing a comprehensive assessment of their sustained work opportunities.

Independent variables. For between-individual analyses, we created a binary variable to with 1 indicating individuals who left with professionally ambiguous attributions, and 0 indicating they left as formerly attached directors of matched films with external attributions (as a robustness check, we also made comparisons with directors who replaced the creative differences directors). To analyze access to future projects, we include both between-individual and within-individual analyses. In the within-individual analyses, we developed a binary variable to represent the time phase experienced by individual directors, with 1 denoting the time phase after creative differences, and 0 denoting the time phase prior.

To compare films associated with professionally ambiguous attributions to films without this potential stigma, we constructed a dichotomous variable to capture the film type, with 1 indicating the creative differences films and 0 indicating the twin films.

Mediator. Burt explicitly noted that relationship determines how "two people build a sense of who they are in relationship" (2005: 100). Using this logic, along with our interviews in Study 1 that highlighted reputation as a key determinant of repeated project work, we use the (dis)continuation of professional relationships as a proxy of reputational change caused by reputational spillovers. Because work with major studios is coveted, we focused on these relationships. Our informants from Study 1 noted that when a director carries the impression of

risk, producers are less likely to grant them the necessary opportunities or resources associated with projects within the core of the industry. As former major studio president (Int7) declared:

> You wanna go hire someone to make a $3 million film, and you trust that he knows what he's doing, and he's the best guy for the job? Maybe you'll take that risk. But this is a high-stakes game. People are risking *billions of dollars a year*—between production and marketing—I'm talking about the major studios. They don't want to inject—I mean, it's a risky enough business. Why inject a degree of unnecessary risk [hiring that person]?

We collected the distributor information on *IMDb* to capture whether a feature film directed by sampled directors was distributed by a core studio, with 1 indicating distributed by a major studio, mini-major studio, or one of their subsidiaries, and 0 denoting otherwise.

Moderator. To measure previous collaborator status, we collected the *IMDb Pro* STARmeter ranking of the top-two billed actors. STARmeter represents the number of visits to a talent's personal web page on *IMDb*, where the top-ranked star is one and lesser-ranked stars receive a higher figure. Importantly, directors and executives often consider an actor's STARmeter rank in casting giving it strong ecological validity as a measure. For example, a director from Study 1 (Int17) remarked, "With making a movie with a bigger budget... the financier is always like, 'We need to get this cast. We need to get this person.' And I always had to defer to that and say, 'This guy is so great. I love him, but he is like only ranked like 10,000 on *IMDb* [STARmeter].'" We manually collected each star's STARmeter ranking and used the median ranking in eight-week or 16-week intervals (which vary according to an actor's career length) around the report date of creative differences. Then, we calculated the peak ranking of collaborated stars by taking the minimum of the reversed individual median STARmeter rankings of the top two stars in each film (M = 659.9, SD = 1819.4). This ensures that the metric reflects the peak status of the leading actors. Average of peak STARmeter ranking of collaborated stars were also calculated as a robustness check (M = 3086.6, SD = 6967.9).

Control variables. To compare films associated with creative differences and twin films,

we included budget as a control and release year as fixed effects. To compare individual directors' work opportunities, we included both individual-level and project-level controls. Individual-level controls include the director's age (the difference between their birthday and the date of the reported creative differences in years, $M = 45.72$, $SD = 8.94$), gender (coded as 1 for male or 0 for female, 91% male), education (coded as 1 for "attended film school" based on their profile on *IMDb* and Wikipedia, 52% attended film school), and Directors Guild of America membership (coded as 1 for member or 0 for non-member of the Directors Guild of America, 91% are guild members). For between-indivedual analyses, we included previous budget as a key control variables in multiple models ($M = 8.56 \times 10$, $SD = 1.11 \times 10$), calculated as the cumulative budget of all projects directed in the five years prior to the reported creative differences event. This variable captures directors' baseline career capital and commercial track record (Bourdieu, 1986; Zuckerman, Kim, Ukanwa, & Von Rittmann, 2003), serving as a proxy for their historical access to resources, reputation, and bargaining power within the industry—factors that are known to influence future project opportunities independently of stigmatizing labels. By controlling for this measure, we aim to differentiate between reputational exclusion driven by the creative differences label and potential self-selection effects by directors with higher prior standing who may voluntarily pivot away from large-scale, commercial work (cf. Bielby & Bielby, 1999; Lutter, 2015). We included several project-level controls that could impact the performance of the film or the subsequent reputation of the director. We include controls for animation and action genres, whether the film was part of a franchise, creative difference stickiness, and negative sentiment of the news article originally reporting creative differences. For genre, we controlled for whether the film was an animated or action film. Animated films typically have longer development periods than live-action films, and action films typically have higher budgets. Using *IMDb* genre labels,

we created a binary variable to capture the action genre of sampled film projects with 1 indicating action films or 0 indicating otherwise (47% are action films). Similarly, we identified the animation genre with 1 indicating animation films or 0 indicating otherwise (7% are animation films). We controlled for franchise films because such projects have a built-in audience and stable casts. We created binary variables with 1 indicating franchise and 0 indicating otherwise (37% are franchise). We also created a measure of "creative difference stickiness" to capture how much the label stuck to the directors' public history. We constructed this variable by reviewing each creative differences film's Wikipedia page to determine if the "creative differences" event was explicitly mentioned. We created a binary variable to capture this, coding it as 1 if mentioned and 0 if not mentioned (85% are mentioned). It reflects whether the label of creative differences has become part of the film's public history beyond its initial reporting. We also controlled for critics review for the foci creative difference film based on the Top Tomatometer on rottentomatoes.com (i.e., percentage of approved critics who have given the film a positive review, $M = 52.1$, $SD = 29.6$, e.g., Simonton, 2005; Hsu, 2006). This variable captures the public-facing critical reception of the creative difference project, which may influence future work opportunities and perceived competence independently of the creative difference label. Accounting for critics' reviews allows us to disentangle the effect of reputational stigma from that of creative output quality (Cattani, Ferriani, & Allison, 2014). By including this control, we ensure that the observed penalties associated with the creative differences label are not merely reflections of poor project quality or critical failure. Finally, we constructed a variable to capture the severity of reporting the creative difference in the initial press report, as it might hint at the underlying collaborative breakdown's severity. We used Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (*LIWC*) to analyze the first news report for each film concerning creative differences to quantify the negative tone (ranging from 0 to 4, $M =$

0.84, *SD* = 1.07) , a measure capturing the relative presence of negative affective language (e.g., "failure," "frustrated"). This measure allows us to assess whether and how the public framing of the director change—especially when it involves creative differences—may shape reputational perceptions. Prior research has shown that media tone influences audience attributions, stakeholder responses, and evaluations of professional legitimacy (e.g., Pollock et al., 2019; Zavyalova et al., 2012). Including this measure thus helps capture the valenced context in which creative differences are reported and allows us to test whether more negatively framed coverage amplifies or dampens the reputational consequences of being labeled with "creative differences." These controls allow us to mitigate other factors that influence access to future projects.

Analyses

Film and work opportunity analysis. We employed Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression to examine the relationships between our independent and dependent variables. To address skewness in our dependent variables—partly due to missing values being replaced with zeros—we applied a log transformation to all right-skewed dependent variables to normalize their distribution. All numerical variables, including the transformed dependent variables, were standardized to facilitate the comparison of regression coefficients and enhance the interpretability of our results. To address potential heteroscedasticity and autocorrelation, we computed robust standard errors clustered by the reporting year of "creative differences." This adjustment improves the reliability of inference by accounting for within-year dependencies in unobserved shocks or industry dynamics.To assess whether professional relationships mediate the relationship between creative differences and future opportunities, we used a two-step mediation approach. We used nonparametric bootstrapping with 1,000 simulations to estimate indirect effects and generate bias-corrected confidence intervals. This bootstrapped approach improves the robustness of mediation tests, particularly under conditions of non-normality in the sampling distribution of indirect effects.

For the moderation analysis, we included an interaction term between the previous collaborator status and the primary independent variable. This allowed us to test whether the effect of "creative differences" on the dependent variables varied based on the status of previous collaborating actors or actresses.

Network analysis. Our network analysis assessed whether leaving directors, replacing directors, attached directors, and producers experienced any change in their structural position before versus after the event. We computed the mean difference between pre- and post-creative differences across the six centrality measures for each group. We then emphasize two examples suggesting a structural change a leaving director and an attached director experienced. We assessed the mean differences of centrality measures by independent samples' *t*-tests.

STUDY 2: FINDINGS

Main analyses

Creative difference directors' access to future projects. Hypothesis 1a predicts a decrease in directors' access to future projects due to professionally ambiguous attributions. As shown in the between-individual models with full controls in Tables 2a and 2b, compared to the attached directors, creative difference directors got a marginally significant[2] and lower budget (*coeff.* −.331, *SE* = .189, $p = .085$, Model 5 in Table 2a) and access to significantly fewer projects (*coeff.* −.513, *SE* = .181, $p = .006$, Model 5 in Table 2b) in the five years after the reported creative differences. In additional analyses, compared to replacement directors, creative difference directors received a significantly lower budget (*coeff.* −.667, *SE* = .139, $p < .001$) and access to significantly fewer

[2] While scholars have argued for statistical cutoffs that are more exacting than the traditional .10 or .05 cutoffs, there are some situations in which marginal significance makes sense. In this case we have gathered the entire population of a phenomenon that is rare (reducing the ability to obtain statistical power) and difficult to observe. Hence, finding consistent patterns of results under these conditions, while still requiring care and circumspection, merits openness to adapting cutoffs that are appropriate with the benefits and drawbacks of the data rather than viewing cutoffs in a vacuum.

projects (*coeff.* −.683, *SE* = .149, $p < .001$). As shown in the within-individual models in Tables 3a and 3b, compared to the five years before the reported creative differences, creative difference directors had significantly lower budgets (*coeff.* −.447, *SE* = .153, $p = .006$, Model 3 in Table 3a) and significantly fewer films (*coeff.* −.388, *SE* = .173, $p = .028$, Model 3 in Table 3b) compared to the five years after the reported creative differences when including all controls[3]. We also ran regression models with varying control specifications as robust checks and the findings are largely consistent (see Models 1-4 in Table 2, Models 1-2 in Table 3). This pattern of results – professionally ambiguous attributions decreased access to future projects – supports Hypothesis 1a. Practically, these differences amounted to the creative difference directors receiving an average of $51.35 million in budget over the next five years whereas the attached directors received an average of $115.96 million and the replacement directors received an average of $154.17 million (there was no statistical difference between attached and replacement directors in budget or work amount).

---------- INSERT TABLES 2 & 3 ABOUT HERE ----------

Film comparisons. Hypothesis 1b predicts projects associated with professionally ambiguous attributions will perform worse than comparable projects. When controlling for franchise, genre, creative difference stickiness, and report negative tone, creative difference labels had a significant and positive relationship with U.S. domestic gross box office (*coeff.* .396, *SE* = .129, $p = .003$, Model 1 in Table 4) and global box office (*coeff.* .198, *SE* = .078, $p = .013$, Model 2 in Table 4) compared to twin films. To account for the potential selection bias in only analyzing completed films, we further included all films by assigning a box office value of zero to those

[3]As a comparison, attached directors had no significant decrease in budgets (*coeff.* −.161, *SE* = .100, $p = .111$) or amount of films (*coeff.* −.018, *SE* = .090, $p = .839$) in the five years post-creative differences compared to what they got in the five years pre-creative differences. Furthermore, replacement directors had significantly higher budgets (*coeff.* .459, *SE* = .223, $p = .043$) and significantly more films (*coeff.* .610, *SE* = .202, $p = .004$) in the five years post-creative differences compared to what they got in the five years pre-creative differences.

never finished (18% of creative difference cases). With these values included, creative differences underperformed significantly in both domestic US box-office (*coeff.* = −.369, SE = .125, p = .004, Model 3 in Table 4) and global box-office (*coeff.* = −.384, *SE* = .123, p = .003, Model 4 in Table 4). Thus, we find mixed support for Hypothesis 1b. It seems professionally ambiguous attributions might protect the film, but it might have a negative impact on the likelihood of a film being completed as 18% of the films with creative differences never were.

---------- INSERT TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE ----------

Mediation of Professional Relationships

To test Hypothesis 2—that professional relationships mediate the impact of professionally ambiguous attributions on future career opportunities—we conducted a series of bootstrapped mediation analyses (1,000 simulations), using major distributor involvement as the mediator and varying control specifications as we did in testing Hypothesis 1. Across all between-individual models predicting future project budgets with varying control specifications, the indirect effect of director type (professionally ambiguous vs. external attributions) on future budget via major distributor involvement was consistently negative and statistically significant (ACME range: –0.448 to –0.558; $p < .05$). This pattern supports the interpretation that professionally ambiguous attributions lead to a reduction in major distributor involvement, which in turn constrains budget levels on future projects. The direct effect (ADE) remained small and non-significant ($p > .45$) across specifications, and the proportion of the total effect mediated exceeded 100% in all models ($p < .05$), consistent with a suppression effect wherein the indirect and direct paths operate in opposing directions. The total effect of professionally ambiguous attributions on future budget was marginally significant in the fully controlled model (p = .09) but became statistically significant ($p < .05$) once pre-CD budget was removed as a covariate. Turning to models predicting future work amount, the indirect effect of creative difference lables via major distributor involvement

was again significant and negative (ACME range: –0.514 to –0.598; $p < .01$), while the direct effect was small and non-significant ($p > .36$). The total effect of the creative differences label on future work amount remained significant across all models ($p < .05$), and the proportion mediated ranged from 85% to 88%**,** offering evidence of full mediation. As a robustness check, we re-estimated all between-indivudal models using replacement directors as the comparison group. The indirect effect remained significant and negative across all budget models (ACME range: –0.444 to –0.445; $p < .05$), while the direct effect remained non-significant ($p > .10$). The proportion mediated ranged from 66% to 69% ($p < .02$), indicating substantial mediation even when comparing professionally ambiguous attributions directors to another comparison group.

As a robustness check, we examined whether directors' positions in the Hollywood collaboration network changed following a departure for "creative differences." The full methodology, figures, and detailed results are reported in Online Appendix D (Figures D1–D6). In brief, the network analysis confirms our mediation findings: directors associated with creative differences experienced measurable declines in network centrality and professional ties, consistent with reduced access to future opportunities.

Moderation of Previous Collaborator Status

Table 5 presents evidence to test Hypothesis 3, which posits that previous collaborator status amplifies the reputational harm of professionally ambiguous attributions. Across all models in Table 5a, directors associated with professionally ambiguous attributions were consistently penalized with lower subsequent budgets compared to directors with external attributions. In the fully controlled model (Model 5 in Table 5), this negative main effect remained significant (β = −.367, SE = .150, p = .018) while the interaction between director type and previous collaborator status (reverse-coded) was significant and positive in all models (β = .413, SE = .138, p = .004). Given the reverse coding of the moderator, this finding indicates that directors who previously

collaborated with higher status actors or actresses faced greater budgetary penalties due to professionally ambiguous attributions. Conversely, those with lower status collaborators suffered smaller penalties. This supports the idea that high-status associations raise expectations and visibility, thereby intensifying the reputational costs due to professionally ambiguous attributions. To further test Hypothesis 3, we examined whether previous collaborator status also moderates reputational harm in terms of future work amount (number of projects). Across all models, directors associated with creative differences experienced a significant decline in future opportunities compared to what the attached directors aquired ($\beta = -.540$, $SE = .179$, $p = .004$) suggesting that directors with higher status past collaborators were more severely penalized in terms of future project volume. In contrast, those with lower status collaboration histories experienced relatively less reputational damage.

Together, these findings provide support for Hypothesis 3: prior associations with high status collaborators can magnify the negative career consequences of professionally ambiguous attributions. Our qualitative data suggest this penalty may stem from heightened industry scrutiny tied to working with high status actors, making professional missteps more damaging along with these powerful actors being less fearful of leaking information about the collaborative breakdown meant to be obscured by professionally ambiguous attributions. Hence, high status collaborations could amplify reputational risks, leading distributors to perceive these directors as inept collaborators or riskier to support in future projects.

---------- INSERT TABLE 5 & FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE ----------

Moderation Robustness Checks

We also used the average of the median STARmeter of the top two collaborated stars to operationalize previous collaborator status, and the negative main effect and positive interaction effect remain consistent across all models with varing control specifications. In the fully controlled

model regarding budget, the effect of the creative difference label is negative and statistically significant between directors with professionally ambiguous attributions and those with external attributions ($\beta = -.344$, $SE = .162$, $p = .038$) and the interaction term between director type and status remains significant ($\beta = .416$, $SE = .143$, $p = .005$). Similarly, when it comes to the number of future projects as the dependent variable, the main effect of the creative difference label is again negative and significant in the fully controlled model ($\beta = -.524$, $SE = .186$, $p = .007$) and the interaction between director type (1 = professionally ambiguous attributions and 0 = external attributions) and previous collaborator status remains positive and significant ($\beta = .431$, $SE = .159$, $p = .009$). Together, these robustness checks support the core argument of Hypothesis 3: prior associations with high status collaborators amplify the reputational penalties incurred from being publicly labeled with creative differences. These results provide additional confidence in the moderating mechanism, even under alternative moderator measurement specifications.

STUDY 2: DISCUSSION AND LIMITATIONS

Overall, we find that the norm of using professionally ambiguous attributions as reputational protection for a collaborative breakdown is largely ineffective at safeguarding the parties involved, except for the film itself. Notably, departing directors experienced diminished access to future projects, as evidenced by reductions in both their first subsequent film and their aggregate film budgets over five years. Additionally, departing directors and the producers involved in the "creative differences" film suffered declines in their reputations as evidenced by decreasing work with major studios and their network position becoming more peripheral. In contrast, directors with external attributions did not see these declines.

Although our sample size is small, our sampling strategy offers two key advantages. First, it encompasses the entire population of publicly reported collaborative breakdowns within the study's time window. Second, the sample should be assessed not merely by the number of

individuals involved but by the total impact it captures. For each individual, we track ten years of work experience to assess the efficacy of creative differences as a protective label. The strengths of our study should also be considered alongside its limitations. We focused on departing directors' and producers' access to future projects. We prioritized these roles due to the need for greater attention to creative leadership (Mainemelis, Kark, & Epitropaki, 2015), particularly when they are also sources of creative ideas (Rouse & Harrison, 2022). These roles were the most frequently mentioned in media discussions of "creative differences." Such dismissals represent extreme cases due to the logistical and contractual constraints that make these firings particularly challenging. Even so, it raises the question of whether projects can proactively facilitate a collaborative break*up*, where parting ways might be a mutual positive decision, rather than merely reacting to a collaborative break*down*.

Our comparison sample of directors who left film projects without professionally ambiguous attributions suggests that these individuals did not suffer comparable harm to work opportunities. This is not to imply cynically that these directors were simply employing a more effective defense strategy against reputational damage, but it does highlight the need for creative professionals and researchers of creative industries to better understand the professional norms that sustain creative projects and access to future work across multiple projects linked over time.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Our mixed method approach was guided by the question "How do creative workers manage collaborative breakdowns in creative projects to avoid negative reputational spillovers?"

Our qualitative findings showed that, endemic to the creative process, is the potential for disagreements that lead to individuals leaving a project, which could damage the reputations and future work opportunities of those involved. In addition, we unearthed a unique convention to mitigate this hazard: the use of creative differences as a protective label. However, informants

were mixed about its efficacy. Using a multi-method design, we abducted hypotheses from our qualitative findings and tested them quantitatively revealing that the creative differences label rarely protects those involved. Together, this research makes three theoretical contributions. First, we build a theory on collaborative breakdowns and their emergence. Second, we induced and analyzed professionally ambiguous attributions as a protective strategy for those involved in collaborative breakdowns and by so doing link the creativity and reputational spillover literatures. Third, we address calls for studies of creativity over time.

Collaborative Breakdowns

Research on creativity has traditionally prized idea generation as a key to creative work (Amabile et al., 1996; George, 2017; Li et al., 2018; Osborn, 1963; Paulus & Yang, 2000), with recent work highlighting the downstream struggles of evaluating and integrating these ideas (Harvey, 2014; Harvey & Kou, 2013; Harvey & Mueller, 2021; Harrison & Rouse, 2015). But these downstream tasks are risky. Professional collaborators might not struggle generating ideas, indeed they might even be so good that choosing among the generated ideas might be difficult without upsetting the collaboration. In these moments there are both short-term risks for the current project – leaders need to keep the current project moving – but also long-term risks – to secure access to future projects will require reputational recommendations from current project members. Researchers have provided compelling hints about these problems. For example, Mainemelis et al.'s (2015: 418) review of creative leadership noted a need to study how leaders balance "behaviors [that] focus on the employees and how they should be treated" with behaviors that "focus on the task and how the creative process should be structured." Hence, one of our contributions is clearly identifying a new dilemma: creative workers engage in a process that, by design, fosters divergent and competing ideas, which also has the potential byproduct of triggering

collaborative breakdowns. Ironically, the thing creatives need to do to accomplish their work can harm their access to future work.

Notably, these dynamics are endemic to real-world creative professions. And even though collaborative breakdowns are likely rare and extreme cases, they are potentially highly traceable through social networks. A single collaborative breakdown can cast a detrimental shadow on future work opportunities. Significantly, by highlighting the downsides of collaborative breakdowns, our study reveals that it is not enough for leaders to worry about managing the creative process to generate a great idea, but they also need to manage the creative process to generate great reputations. By emphasizing the importance of collaborative breakdowns and by highlighting the difficulty of mitigating the reputational harm they can cause, our findings help reorient research on creativity. Specifically, there is a large literature that links behaviors and characteristics that would make collaborations difficult to creative success. For example, research shows that creative workers are likely to be more disagreeable than the average person because this allows them to produce different ideas without worrying about the social costs (Batey & Furnham, 2006; Feist, 1998), that low levels of agreeableness mix with other creative traits that might cause abrasive interactions like non-conformity and impulsivity that (Fürst, Ghisletta, & Lubart, 2016), or that a lack of humility can make creative workers seem "cantankerous" (Silvia et al., 2011), arrogant and hostile (Burch et al. 2006). Future research is needed to integrate these insights with the danger of collaborative breakdowns to create a scientific account of creativity that better balances the short-term benefits of generating an idea with the long-term needs of sustaining a collaborative reputation.

Creativity, Reputational Spillovers, and Strategic Ambiguity

By examining creative differences as a label for protecting involved parties, we integrate ideas from the creativity, reputational spillovers, and strategic ambiguity literatures. This

integration reveals that while a great deal of creativity research emphasizes the importance of networks (Mannucci & Perry-Smith, 2022; Perry-Smith & Mannucci, 2017), our work uncovered a dark side of the networked nature of creativity. Specifically, we highlight how hiding collaborative breakdowns with professionally ambiguous attributions can damage reputations and professional relationships, not just among the collaborators, but within a broader professional network. In difficult collaborative situations professionally ambiguous attributions makes sense as a professional norm meant to protect everyone. But our findings suggest that something that is meant to salvage a bad situation might do the opposite. Future research could examine other ways that professionally ambiguous and external attributions might be used. For example, attached directors who left projects during an earlier stage of production and relied on using the protective labels of "scheduling conflicts" or "production changes" were able to avoid reputational damage. This raises the question of whether collaborative breakdowns are not perceived as breakdowns if they happen early, or if external attributions are simply a more effective tactic. Perhaps more fundamentally, if professional norms do not offer protection, what options do creative workers have to fix their reputations?

Abstracting out from the context of creative professions, we believe our findings also challenge extant strategic ambiguity research, by highlighting that ambiguity can backfire, perhaps most surprisingly in cases where we might expect it to be especially effective: when ambiguity is combined with status. Counterintuitively, we found that working with others that had high status actually exacerbated the negative impact of professionally ambiguous attributions. These findings suggest that strategic ambiguity can be devilishly tricky. By nature, ambiguity, by cocooning a potentially negative experience in a code of silence, might invite curiosity and scrutiny. In turn, if that ambiguity is associated with high status individuals, it might heighten the curiosity while also

creating back channels for rumors and gossip to seep out. These two dynamics, although intending to mitigate attention seem to amplify it. While we could not test more perceptual mechanisms in these studies it could be that high status creates a dangerous cocktail for attention. High status individuals attract attention (Ponsi et al, 2024) but they are often treated with deference (Freeland & Hoey, 2018) which might create a sense, for the high status person, of respect making them feel a need to reciprocate that respect, especially in tight professional relationships, by divulging information. In turn, because high status individuals are perceived as highly competent (Fiske et al, 2002) there explanations of previously ambiguous events likely take on greater significance. Hence, status might create greater curiosity for information and greater credence for information that emerges. These dynamics raises new questions about when and for whom ambiguity can be strategic or self-defeating.

Creativity Over Time in Projects and Creative Careers

We also contribute by showing how collaborative breakdowns impact the future work opportunities of creative leaders. Harvey (2014) has suggested that a key input for creative groups is not just the personality of the group (Taggar, 2001) or the supportive environment (Amabile et al., 1996), but what happened on the last project. Several authors have suggested a need to focus on exactly these dynamics (Berg et al., 2023; Harrison et al., 2022). For example, Rouse and Harrison (2022) examined choreographers as creative leaders on crafting a single dance performance, but noted "we know less about how these processes play out over longer periods of time or across multiple projects" (2022: 407). Research on creative groups in television has shown that groups' experience is a key indicator of whether a sitcom is renewed (Patterson, Reilly, & Kashkooli, 2024). We contribute by showing that it is not just positive experiences that get carried over but also the reputations from negative ones.

Paying attention to what becomes portable from one creative project to the next opens new space for future research. For example, feature films, like many creative projects such as video games, fashion, theatre, theme park design, haute cuisine, and technology development, are expensive ventures. To be successful in film, the integration of writing, acting, makeup, camera work, lighting, special effects, music, and a variety of other creative skills is required. Simply managing all these inputs would be a struggle. Managing all the inputs in a way that leads to strong reviews or awards seems unlikely. Doing all this without making decisions that might ostracize collaborative partners seems almost impossible. Given the inherent volatility in large creative projects, creative leaders are potentially risking future work opportunities with each collaboration. As a result, highlighting collaborative breakdowns and the ineffectiveness of "creative differences" as a protective label should encourage researchers to give greater attention to both the positive and negative career consequences of creativity. For example, studies that focus solely on the creativity of a product, one that might even win awards, might ignore that the cost of the collaboration is that the group might be unwilling to work together again. Research examining this outcome might see this as a creative success but the future consequences for the creative leader might be extremely negative. Our research highlights the need to examine not just the qualities of the creative product but the quality of the creative collaboration because the latter might be the determining factor in creative workers' future work opportunities. Thus, researchers can move beyond examining skills, motivation, and personality, to examining other constructs that would be equally portable, yet also malleable, from project to project. For example, there are likely interpersonal and professional carryovers, as we measured here, reputation ("who am I willing to work with again and why?") and intrapersonal carryovers, like meaning ("what am I taking away from this collaboration?") or

narratives ("how do I link how my projects together and what consequences does that story have for how I act in the future?").

Although our project primarily focuses upon creative domains, some of our findings are theoretically transferable to project-based freelance careers more broadly. Reputation in these external labor markets is both a resource for workers to signal their capabilities and quality and a signal for gatekeepers to guide their hiring decisions (Gandini, 2016; O'Mahony & Bechky, 2006; Osnowitz, 2010). However, the rapid circulation of reputation throughout professional "small world" networks can amplify the impression of risk that accompanies a job candidate's association with a doomed project or external references to a past lackluster performance. Illustrating this point, Barley and Kunda (2004:272) quote a software developer who observed about technical contractors, "It's a small world, a very small community of people who end up doing the same kind of work over and over again… That's why it's more important to not burn bridges and to do quality work, because you find yourself in the same circle over and over again." Although technical work involves different inputs and team structures compared to creative work, the interpersonal nature of collaboration involved, reliance on reputation, and centrality of social networks in shaping opportunities suggest that managing reputational spillovers extends beyond Tinsel Town into a variety of project-based employment fields.

Limitations

While our use of both inductive and deductive methods represents a strength of our study, the transferability of our inductive findings and generalizability of our deductive findings might be somewhat limited due to our empirical context. Recommendations regarding sampling and theoretical transferability for inductive studies suggest that features of the context should be taken into account when examining how the induced theory might apply to other contexts (Tracy, 2010). Two features might be key: the film industry relies on project work in tight professional networks

(Jones, 1996) and films can be linked to their creators. Our inductive findings transfer to contexts that share these features like music, art, fashion, architecture, or high-end cuisine. It could be that collaborative breakdowns within more traditional project-based organizational settings might still impact the creative leader, but the effects on access to future projects remain within the organization rather than spilling into a wider professional network (Müller & Turner, 2010; Turner & Müller, 2005). However, if a collaborative breakdown impacted a delivery deadline with a client the spillovers would then likely impact the organization and not the individuals involved. These possibilities deserve investigation.

Second, it is worth counterposing the size of each of our studies' samples against the richness each provides. As Tracy (2010: 841) mused, "How much data is enough? This question must be asked and answered anew with every research study. If data are new, unique, or rare, a valuable contribution could be achieved with very little data." Our data reflects a "unique" and insular social world (particularly those of high-ranking film studio executives) being exhaustive in our deductive sample of a publicly rare but illuminating extreme event. Our inductive study included 32 interviews with Hollywood insiders. Other well-cited inductive studies have ranged from examining a single director (Svejenova, 2005) to 55 directors (Mainemelis et al., 2016), but these studies did not involve direct interviews. In contrast, our inductive study offers first-hand accounts from individuals experiencing collaborative breakdowns as they happen in a context that is typically hard for outsiders to gain access (Ortner, 2010). Similarly, while our deductive study examines a small number of directors, it incorporates the full population of publicly available instances of "creative differences" from 2002 to 2018 and incorporates lengthy longitudinal data encompassing 10 years of each individual's work history, subsuming 345 films. Both the inductive and deductive samples offer depth and together provide a compelling portrait of how collaborative

breakdowns occur and their long-term consequences.

CONCLUSION

Our findings reveal how fraught creative projects are by highlighting a novel obstacle: collaborative breakdowns. These breakdowns harm reputations, damaging future work opportunities. As research continues to recognize creative successes as a collective accomplishment (Hargadon & Bechky, 2006), perhaps it is appropriate then that collaborative breakdowns are collective failures. We invite further investigation into strategies that sustain collaborative careers and the reputations of those involved.

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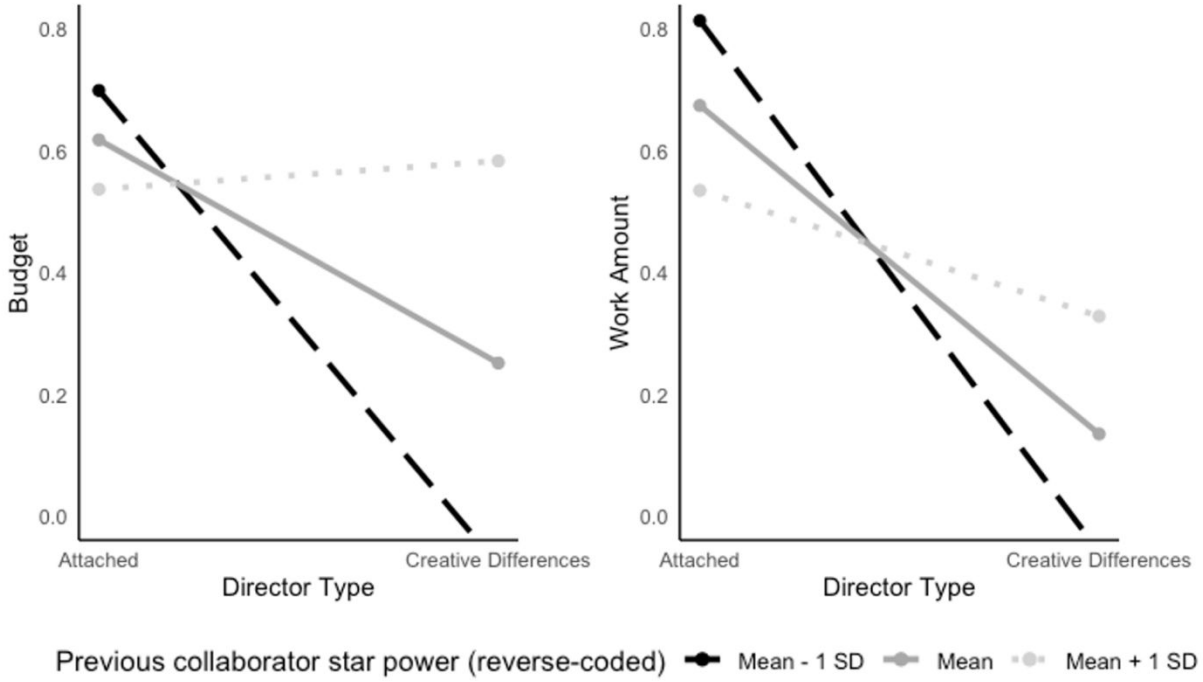
Figure 1: Prior Collaborator Status Moderates the Effect of Creative Differences Label on Access to Future Projects



Note: These figures illustrate the moderating effect of prior collaborator status (reverse-coded) on the relationship between director type and (a) budget and (b) work amount in the five years after the reported creative difference. At a high level of prior collaborator status (Mean – 1 SD), creative difference directors are associated with significantly lower career outcomes relative to attached directors; while this penalty is attenuated—and in some cases reversed—when prior collaborators had lower status (Mean + 1 SD). Predicted ourtcomes are adjusted for a full set of control variables (log-transformed and scaled).

Table 1: Sample of Films Labeled with Creative Differences and Directors with Matched Films and Attached Directors

	A: Creative Difference Film (Release Date)	B: Creative Difference Director	C: Previously Attached Director	D: Matched Film (Release Date)	E: Attached Director of Matched Film	F: Twin Film (Release Date)
1	Fat Albert (2004-12-25)	Forrest Whittaker	David Gordon Green			In Good Company (2005-01-14)
2	Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan (2006-11-03)	Todd Phillips		The Notebook (2004-06-25)	Martin Campbell	
3	Night at the Museum (2006-12-24)	Stephen Sommers		Sherlock Holmes (2009-12-25)	Neil Marshall	
4	I Think I Love My Wife (2007-03-16)	Charles Stone III		House of Sand and Fog (2004-01-09)	Todd Field	
5	The Golden Compass (2007-05-20)	Anand Tucker	Sam Mendes			Shrek the Third (2007-12-09)
6	I Now Pronounce You Chuck & Larry (2007-07-20)	David Dobkin	Tom Shadyac			Get Smart (2008-06-20)
7	Bobby Z (2007-09-04)	Doug Aarniokoski		The Informers (2009-04-24)	Nicholas Jarecki	
8	Juno (2007-12-09)	Brad Silberling		The Fault in Our Stars (2014-06-06)	Stephen Chbosky	
9	Hancock (2008-07-02)	Jonathan Mostow	Michael Mann			Angels & Demons (2009-05-15)
10	Bolt (2008-11-21)	Chris Sanders	Dean DeBlois			Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa (2008-11-07)
11	Law Abiding Citizen (2009-10-16)	Frank Darabont		Knowing (2009-03-20)	Richard Kelly	
12	The Twilight Saga: New Moon (2009-11-20)	Catherine Hardwicke		Four Christmases (2008-11-26)	Adam Shankman	
13	The Wolfman (2010-02-12)	Mark Romanek		Hugo (2011-11-23)	Chris Wedge	
14	Jonah Hex (2010-06-18)	Mark Neveldine & Brian Taylor		Punisher: War Zone (2008-12-05)	John Dahl	
15	The Green Hornet (2011-01-14)	Stephen Chow	Kevin Smith			Mission: Impossible – Ghost Protocol (2011-12-21)
16	The Lincoln Lawyer (2011-03-18)	Tommy Lee Jones		Prisoners (2013-09-20)	Antoine Fuqua	Man on a Ledge (2012-01-27)
17	Moneyball (2011-09-23)	Steven Soderbergh	David Frankel			Here After (2010-10-22)
18	Footloose (2011-10-14)	Kenny Ortega		Step Up 2: The Streets (2008-02-14)	Anne Fletcher	
19	Brave (2012-06-24)	Brenda Chapman		How to Train Your Dragon (2010-03-26)	Peter Hastings	
20	The Amazing Spider-Man (2012-07-03)	Sam Raimi	Kathryn Bigelow			Skyfall (2012-11-09)
21	The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey (2012-12-14)	Guillermo del Toro		The Chronicles of Narnia: The Voyage of the Dawn Treader (2010-12-10)	Andrew Adamson	

	A: Creative Difference Film (Release Date)	B: Creative Difference Director	C: Previously Attached Director	D: Matched Film (Release Date)	E: Attached Director of Matched Film	F: Twin Film (Release Date)
22	Thor: The Dark World (2013-11-08)	Patty Jenkins	Daniel Minahan			World War Z (2013-06-23)
23	The Equalizer (2014-09-26)	Nicolas Winding Refn	Paul Haggis			Non-Stop (2014-02-28)
24	Cinderella (2015-03-13)	Mark Romanek		Maleficent (2014-05-30)	Tim Burton	
25	Ant-Man (2015-07-17)	Edgar Wright		X-Men: First Class (2011-06-03)	Bryan Singer	
26	Black Mass (2015-09-18)	Barry Levinson	Jim Sheridan			Free State of Jones (2016-06-24)
27	The Good Dinosaur (2015-11-25)	Bob Peterson				Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2 (2017-05-07)
28	Jane Got a Gun (2016-01-29)	Lynne Ramsay		The Current War (2019-10-25)	Ben Stiller	
29	London Has Fallen (2016-03-04)	Fredrik Bond		The Dark Tower (2017-08-04)	Ron Howard	
30	The Huntsman: Winter's War (2016-04-22)	Frank Darabont	Rupert Sanders			
31	Bridget Jones's Baby (2016-09-16)	Paul Feig	Peter Cattaneo			How to Be Single (2016-02-12)
32	Deepwater Horizon (2016-10-02)	J.C. Chandor		Trolls (2016-11-04)	Anand Tucker	
33	Collateral Beauty (2016-12-16)	Alfonso Gomez-Rejon		The Mountain Between Us (2017-10-06)	Gerardo Naranjo	
34	Wonder Woman (2017-06-02)	Joss Whedon	Ivan Reitman			
35	Wonder Woman (2017-06-02)	Michelle MacLaren				Suicide Squad (2016-08-05)
36	The Mummy (2017-06-09)	Andres Muschetti	Len Wiseman			Jason Bourne (2016-07-29)
37	All Eyez on Me (2017-06-18)	John Singleton	Antoine Fuqua			Whiskey Tango Foxtrot (2016-03-04)
38	Wonder (I) (2017-11-17)	John Krokidas		The Imitation Game (2014-12-25)	David Yates	
39	Black Panther (2018-02-18)	Ava DuVernay	Tim Story	Now You See Me 2 (2016-06-10)	Louis Leterrier	
40	Bohemian Rhapsody (2018-11-02)	Dexter Fletcher		A Star is Born (2018-10-05)	Clint Eastwood	
41	Uncharted (2022-02-18)	David O. Russell		The Divergent Series: Insurgent (2015-03-20)	Neil Burger	

Notes: Column A shows films that were reported to have creative differences leading to a director leaving the project (listed in column B) in entertainment media. Column C shows directors who were attached but left the films in column A prior to the creative differences. Column D shows films that were matched with films in column A on budget, year and season of release, and genre that also had a previously attached director that left the film without creative differences. Column E shows "twin films" – films matched on budget, year and season of release, and genre with films in column A. Column D & F together represent a set of comparable matched films to column A (for testing hypothesis 1b). Columns C and E together represent a set of directors that left films for comparison with column B, directors who left films with creative differences (for testing hypotheses 1a, 2, and 3).

Table 2a: Between-individual Effects of Creative Differences Labels on Budget (Compared to Attached Directors)

DV_1: Budget	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5	
	Coeff. (*SE*)	*p*	*Coeff.* (*SE*)	*p*	*Coeff.* (*SE*)	*p*	*Coeff.* (*SE*)	*p*	*Coeff.* (*SE*)	*p*
Cont.	.227 (.095)	.018	−.107 (.676)	.875	−.116 (.693)	.868	.126 (.723)	.862	.152 (.751)	.841
IV: Director type (1= creative difference, 0 = attached)	−.455 (.182)	.015	−.447 (.204)	.032	−.447 (.204)	.032	−.334 (.193)	.087	−.331 (.189)	.085
Individual controls										
Gender (1 = male, 0 = female)			.223 (.359)	.537	.225 (.365)	.539	.055 (.432)	.899	.047 (.441)	.916
Age			−.079 (.072)	.277	−.077 (.074)	.303	−.079 (.061)	.200	−.084 (.066)	.205
Guild membership			.784 (.349)	.028	.790 (.363)	.033	.625 (.330)	.062	.608 (.347)	.084
Education			−.164 (.269)	.545	−.163 (.266)	.542	−.160 (.258)	.537	−.162 (.260)	.535
Previous budget							.309 (.088)	.001	.314 (.097)	.002
Project controls										
Animation			−1.10 (.433)	.013	−1.10 (.432)	.013	−1.03 (.426)	.019	−1.03 (.427)	.019
Franchise			−.330 (.259)	.206	−.337 (.263)	.203	−.401 (.220)	.073	−.385 (.209)	.070
Action			.042 (.186)	.823	.049 (.185)	.792	.073 (.165)	.662	.056 (.166)	.739
Critics review			.170 (.062)	.007	.168 (.061)	.008	.127 (.075)	.094	.131 (.077)	.091
Stickiness			−.331 (.248)	.186	−.331 (.247)	.184	−.322 (.239)	.183	−.322 (.246)	.195
Report negative tone					.015 (.077)	.845			−.036 (.081)	.657
R^2	.0523		.2477		.2479		.3326		.3337	
Adjusted R^2	.0405		.1387		.1263		.2247		.2144	
RSE *(df)*	.9796 (80)		.9265 (69)		.9332 (68)		.8791 (68)		.8849(67)	
AIC	233.3		227.0		229.0		219.4		221.3	
BIC	240.5		255.6		260.0		250.4		254.6	

Note: $N = 82$ (41 creative difference directors and 41 attached directors). Standardized coefficients and robust standard errors clustered in the year of reported creative differences are reported (two-tail test).

Table 2b: Between-individual Effects of Creative Differences Labels on Work Amount (Compared to Attached Directors)

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5	
***DV*$_2$: Work amount**	*Coeff.* (*SE*)	*p*	*Coeff.* (*SE*)	*p*	*Coeff.* (*SE*)	*p*	*Coeff.* (*SE*)	*p*	*Coeff.* (*SE*)	*p*
Cont.	.300 (.119)	.014	.183 (.583)	.754	.168 (.622)	.788	.357 (.634)	.575	.366 (.680)	.593
IV: Director type (1= creative difference, 0 = attached)	−.599 (.180)	.001	−.598 (.190)	.003	−.598 (.189)	.002	−.514 (.186)	.007	−.513 (.181)	.006
Individual controls										
Gender (1 = male, 0 = female)			.165 (.307)	.594	.169 (.315)	.594	.039 (.353)	.912	.036 (.366)	.921
Age			.005 (.090)	.960	.008 (.094)	.932	.004 (.082)	.957	.003 (.088)	.973
Guild membership			.798 (.317)	.014	.808 (.340)	.020	.679 (.307)	.030	.674 (.334)	.048
Education			−.363 (.247)	.146	−.361 (.244)	.143	−.360 (.247)	.150	−.360 (.247)	.149
Previous budget							.231 (.087)	.010	.233 (.092)	.014
Project controls										
Animation			−1.14 (.321)	.001	−1.14 (.319)	.001	−1.08 (.309)	.001	−1.08 (.309)	.001
Franchise			−.459 (.265)	.088	−.472 (.263)	.077	−.513 (.250)	.044	−.508 (.236)	.035
Action			.001 (.183)	.994	.014 (.185)	.939	.025 (.177)	.890	.019 (.174)	.913
Critics review			.158 (.082)	.060	.154 (.087)	.080	.126 (.094)	.188	.127 (.098)	.200
Stickiness			−.311 (.291)	.289	−.311 (.290)	.288	−.304 (.290)	.299	−.304 (.292)	.301
Report negative tone					.026 (.083)	.753			−.011 (.090)	.898
R^2	.0909		.3407		.3413		.3878		.3879	
Adjusted R^2	.0795		.2452		.2348		.2888		.2783	
RSE *(df)*	.9594 (80)		.8707 (69)		.8766 (68)		.8451 (68)		.8513 (67)	
AIC	229.9		217.0		219.0		213.1		215.1	
BIC	237.1		245.6		250.0		244.1		248.4	

Note: $N = 82$ (41 creative difference directors and 41 attached directors). Standardized coefficients and robust standard errors clustered in the year of reported creative differences are reported (two-tail test).

Table 3a: Within-individual Effects of Creative Differences Label on Creative Difference Directors' Budget

	Model 1	Model 2		Model 3			
***DV*$_1$: Budget**		*Coeff.* (*SE*)	*p*	*Coeff.* (*SE*)	*p*	*Coeff.* (*SE*)	*p*
Cont.		.220 (.144)	.129	−.481 (.733)	.513	−.518 (.775)	.506
IV: Director type (1= after, 0 = before)		−.441 (.150)	.004	−.447 (.153)	.005	−.447 (.153)	.005
Individual controls							
Gender (1 = male, 0 = female)				.513 (.325)	.118	.531 (.332)	.115
Age				−.268 (.179)	.138	−.272 (.181)	.138
Guild membership				.895 (.439)	.045	.922 (.466)	.052
Education				−.112 (.268)	.678	−.126 (.267)	.638
Project controls							
Animation				−.052 (.359)	.886	−.061 (.362)	.866
Franchise				−.016 (.221)	.944	−.033 (.221)	.883
Action				−.268 (.193)	.169	−.245 (.189)	.198
Critics review				.125 (.078)	.115	.118 (.076)	.124
Stickiness				−.364 (.237)	.129	−.362 (.222)	.108
Report negative tone						.063 (.075)	.406
R^2		.0492		.2809		.2845	
Adjusted R^2		.0373		.1767		.1687	
RSE *(df)*		.9812 (80)		.9156 (69)		.9201 (68)	
AIC		233.6		225.1		226.7	
BIC		240.8		253.7		257.7	

Note: $N = 82$ (41 creative directors' before and after creative differences). Standardized coefficients and robust standard errors clustered in the year of reported creative differences are reported (two-tail test).

Table 3b: Within-individual Effects of Creative Differences Label on Creative Difference Directors' Work Amount

DV_2: Work amount	Model 1 Coeff. (SE)	Model 1 p	Model 2 Coeff. (SE)	Model 2 p	Model 3 Coeff. (SE)	Model 3 p
Cont.	.189	.014	−.109	.877	−.165	.824
	(.103)		(.704)		(.740)	
IV: Director type (1= after, 0 = before)	−.378	.001	−.388	.028	−.388	.028
	(.169)		(.173)		(.173)	
Individual controls						
Gender (1 = male, 0 = female)			.315	.394	.342	.349
			(.367)		(.362)	
Age			−.236	.159	−.242	.165
			(.166)		(.172)	
Guild membership			.715	.074	.755	.081
			(.394)		(.426)	
Education			−.102	.756	−.125	.710
			(.329)		(.334)	
Project controls						
Animation			−.520	.001	−.535	.001
			(.144)		(.153)	
Franchise			−.137	.600	−.163	.529
			(.260)		(.258)	
Action			−.329	.148	−.294	.164
			(.225)		(.209)	
Critics review			.174	.051	.163	.060
			(.088)		(.085)	
Stickiness			−.323	.266	−.320	.212
			(.288)		(.254)	
Report negative tone					.096	.163
					(.068)	
R^2	.0362		.2504		.2585	
Adjusted R^2	.0242		.1417		.1386	
RSE *(df)*	.9878 (80)		.9379 (69)		.9396 (68)	
AIC	234.7		228.9		230.1	
BIC	241.9		257.5		261.0	

Note: $N = 82$ (41 before and 41 after creative differences). Standardized coefficients and robust standard errors clustered in the year of reported creative differences are reported (two-tail test).

Table 4: Comparison of Film Performance

	Model 1 *DV:* US Box Office (Completed)		**Model 2** *DV:* Global Box Office (Completed)		**Model 3** *DV:* US Box Office (All)		**Model 4** *DV:* Global Box Office (All)	
	Coeff. (*SE*)	*p*	*Coeff.* (*SE*)	*p*	*Coeff.* (*SE*)	*p*	*Coeff.* (*SE*)	*p*
Cont.	−.519 (.423)	.224	−.840 (.545)	.127	−.814 (.375)	.033	−.830 (.352)	.021
IV: Film type (1= creative difference, 0 = twin)	.396 (.129)	.003	.198 (.078)	.013	−.369 (.125)	.004	−.384 (.123)	.003
Project controls								
Animation	.521 (.216)	.018	.474 (.175)	.008	.303 (.132)	.024	.315 (.118)	.009
Franchise	.726 (.267)	.008	.980 (.268)	.000	.313 (.159)	.052	.367 (.154)	.019
Action	−.047 (.245)	.849	−.055 (.241)	.819	.321 (.191)	.096	.351 (.183)	.059
Stickiness	.005 (.342)	.988	.394 (.492)	.426	.951 (.358)	.010	.951 (.328)	.005
Report negative tone	−.131 (.120)	.279	−.021 (.120)	.864	−.084 (.064)	.197	−.063 (.065)	.330
R^2	.1723		.2814		.3371		.3712	
Adjusted R^2	.1043		.2231		.2886		.3257	
RSE *(df)*	.9464 (73)		.8814 (74)		.8434(82)		.8211(83)	
AIC	226.9		218.1		231.0		.228.6	
BIC	246.0		237.3		250.9		248.6	

Note: $N = 90$ (50 creative difference films and 40 twin films). Standardized coefficients and robust standard errors clustered in the year of reported creative differences are reported (two-tail test).

Table 5: Moderation of Previous Collaborator Status on Creative Differences Label's Effects on Budget

DV_1: Budget	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5	
	Coeff. (*SE*)	*p*	*Coeff.* (*SE*)	*p*	*Coeff.* (*SE*)	*p*	*Coeff.* (*SE*)	*p*	*Coeff.* (*SE*)	*p*
Cont.	.373 (.081)	.000	.394 (.848)	.644	.384 (.857)	.656	.593 (.806)	.465	.601 (.822)	.468
IV: Director type (1= creative difference, 0 = attached)	−.430 (.171)	.015	−.457 (.173)	.011	−.458 (.174)	.011	−.368 (.152)	.019	−.367 (.150)	.018
Moderator: Previous collaborator status (reverse-coded)	−.292 (.165)	.080	−.197 (.082)	.020	−.194 (.082)	.023	−.080 (.089)	.373	−.081 (.087)	.354
IV × *Moderator*	.449 (.164)	.008	.490 (.144)	.001	.489 (.146)	.001	.414 (.139)	.004	.413 (.138)	.004
Individual controls										
Gender (1 = male, 0 = female)			−.198 (.467)	.673	−.192 (.466)	.681	−.292 (.491)	.554	−.297 (.497)	.553
Age			−.145 (.082)	.083	−.143 (.081)	.082	−.146 (.075)	.058	−.147 (.076)	.059
Guild membership			.717 (.531)	.182	.722 (.537)	.184	.547 (.459)	.239	.543 (.464)	.247
Education			−.258 (.250)	.308	−.257 (.249)	.306	−.229 (.247)	.358	−.229 (.248)	.359
Previous budget							.245 (.087)	.007	.247 (.093)	.010
Project controls										
Animation			−1.33 (.266)	.000	−1.34 (.267)	.000	−1.39 (.309)	.000	−1.39 (.311)	.000
Franchise			−.175 (.227)	.446	−.183 (.233)	.437	−.247 (.208)	.240	−.242 (.201)	.233
Action			.102 (.266)	.702	.111 (.261)	.673	.138 (.259)	.597	.132 (.250)	.601
Critics review			.130 (.051)	.014	.128 (.049)	.012	.098 (.061)	.112	.100 (.059)	.095
Stickiness			−.308 (.261)	.243	−.309 (.258)	.236	−.343 (.241)	.160	−.342 (.241)	.161
Report negative tone					.016 (.058)	.789			−.011 (.062)	.863
R^2	.1145		.3007		.3010		.3634		.3636	
Adjusted R^2	.0730		.1454		.1296		.2073		.1922	
RSE *(df)*	.8809 (64)		.8519 (54)		.8598 (53)		.8205 (53)		.8282(52)	
AIC	181.6		182.2		184.2		177.9		180.0	
BIC	192.7		213.1		217.3		211.0		215.2	

Note: $N = 82$ (41 creative difference directors and 41 attached directors). Standardized coefficients and robust standard errors clustered in the year of reported creative differences are reported (two-tail test).

Spencer Huber Harrison (spencer.harrison@insead.edu) is a Professor of Organisational Behaviour at INSEAD. He researches creative work and culture and is always on the lookout for an offbeat context to study.

Patrick Reilly (pat.reilly@sauder.ubc.ca) is an Assistant Professor of Organizational Behaviour-Human Resources at the University of British Columbia's Sauder School of Business. He is a sociologist whose research investigates careers and practice in creative industries.

Yanbo Song (yanbo.song@insead.edu) is a Ph.D. Candidate in Organisational Behaviour at INSEAD. Her research examines how individuals and teams communicate, evaluate, and collaborate around novel ideas amid tensions and uncertainty.

Khwan Kim (khwan.kim@ucl.ac.uk) is an Assistant Professor of Organisations and Innovation at the UCL School of Management. His research examines how market actors produce novelty and navigate structural change in creative industries. He also studies social network dynamics and their organizational implications.

Appendix A: Interview Protocol

1. You worked as a [role]. Explain to me the role of a [role] in creative process of filmmaking. Is it uniform across projects?

2. Has your understanding of the creative process changed as you have gained more experience?

3. Is movie-making always creative?

4. How does collaboration impact creativity in movie making?
   4a. Describe a positive experience where collaboration enhanced creativity.
   4b. Describe a negative experience where collaboration enhanced creativity.

5. (If it is a studio executive) Are you a creative?

6. How is the creative dynamic changed when you are working with someone that you have worked with previously or routinely?

7. How do you manage the gray are between disagreements about a creative idea and those disagreements spilling over so that a collaboration becomes impossible? Have you been in that scenario / heard about a scenario like that? What happens?

8. In your experience what does the phrase "creative differences" mean? How would I see "creative differences" unfolding if I were a fly on the wall?

9. What impact does getting the label "creative differences" associated with you have on a career?

10. How do people recover from "creative differences"? How do people forestall or pre-empt a "creative differences" situation?

11. Are there any people that who have a reputation for encouraging “creative differences” that tend to make production difficult, but people forgive it? Why is that?

12. Are you a member of a guild or union? How are union and non-union projects different?

13. We've talked about creativity, collaboration, and creative differences on films. Are there any ideas about these concepts that we have not discussed that would be important for me to understand? Are there any additional stories that came to your mind, but I didn't give you a chance to share them?

Appendix B: Description of Informants for Study 1

Informant	Professional Roles	Gender	Interview Length (in Minutes)
Int1	Director; Screenwriter	Man	77
Int2	Producer; Actress	Woman	64
Int3	Director; Screenwriter	Man	71
Int4	Production Company President	Man	60
Int5	Director; Screenwriter	Man	59
Int6	Production Designer	Woman	81
Int7	Studio President; Producer	Man	80
Int8	Production Company Executive	Man	64
Int9	Director; Screenwriter	Woman	67
Int10	Director; Actress	Woman	86
Int11	Director of Photography	Man	116
Int12	Production Company President	Man	71
Int13	Director; Screenwriter	Woman	61
Int14	Producer	Man	75
Int15	Director; Screenwriter	Man	100
Int16	Editor	Man	73
Int17	Director; Screenwriter; Producer	Man	67
Int18	Assistant Director	Man	80
Int19	Screenwriter; Producer	Woman	78
Int20	Production Company President	Woman	74
Int21	Director	Woman	72
Int22	Screenwriter; Story Artist	Man	76
Int23	Sound Designer	Man	84
Int24	Costumer	Woman	69
Int25	Editor	Man	77
Int26	Hair and Make-Up	Woman	64
Int27	Special Effects; Make-Up	Woman	64
Int28	Director; Screenwriter	Man	82
Int29	Producer	Man	69
Int30	Director; Screenwriter	Man	80
Int31	Director; Actor	Man	53
Int32	Talent Manager; Studio Executive	Man	63

Appendix C: Management of Creative Breakdowns

Emerging from our interview data were three types of responses by creative teams to manage collaborative breakdowns within filmmaking, which we labelled *compromise*, *public confrontation*, and *mutual separation with the promise of silence.* Each response engenders its own typical motivations and consequences. We detail these responses in Table A1, where we provide representative narratives or quotes, reported frequency, and general outcomes.

Compromise

The most frequent response to potential collaborative breakdowns is compromise, whereby the filmmaking team anticipates that interpersonal dynamics within the team could exacerbate present disagreements concerning ideas into highly disruptive conflicts. Three core understandings orient filmmaking teams to strive for compromise in these situations. First, as evident in how our interviewees define their occupational roles, film professionals situated the capacity and inclination for comprise as a core skill. For example, speaking to ability to strike this balance, one director (Int1) stated:

> The number-one task or the job of the director is filtering everybody's opinions and having the understanding and the sort of audacity, almost, to keep everybody empowered and keep everybody feeling like their opinion's being heard, but only using the opinions and only using the parts of it that you know fit into what you're trying to do.

Accompanying such definitions of their roles is a default normative understanding that one's collaborators—whether in artistic or management roles—are qualified and contribute to the project's success. As a long-time actress and rookie director (Int10) realized in her early projects, "You [the director] describe your vision and then you work with them and there has to be this mutual respect. I'm telling you that's — and, and because everyone on the set is a creator, except maybe — I mean, even the gaffer, even the guys doing the lights." Second, our data indicated that response of compromise is grounded in the ethos of prioritizing the project over self-interest. As a screenwriter and story editor (Int22) surmised, "I think generally, everybody recognizes each other, hopefully, as a professional. And you – and again, you understand where it's coming from, which is just a – in the end, the only work of art that matters is the film." Interviewees framed prioritizing projects over self-interest as a defining component of professionalism, which should "override everything, regardless of how you feel about someone" (Int5). Lastly, the impetus to compromise also reflects the potential costs of money and time that accompany creative breakdowns. A director of photography (Int11) surmised, "If [collaborators are] pigheaded and unwilling to listen, then their project's screwed, and you're going down with it."

In our interview data, we found that the compromise response typically involved two strategies. The first was eliciting and integrating (even symbolically) alternatives based upon external suggestions. Such experimentation could be pre-planned during the development process, allowing producers and directors to disagree during a phase where results are mostly speculative. As a production company president (Int4) outlined, within such situations, "The best thing you can do if you're kinda like, 'Well, I feel one way, and the filmmaker feels another way,' if you can…shoot both versions. Do your thing, do my thing, because let's give ourselves the option." This is frequently done within production to address disagreements to allow for additional, perhaps better, possibilities and to defuse potential conflict quickly. For example, when recalling an

instance when his cinematographer contended that a planned shot would be suboptimal and initially refused to do it, a director (Int15) recounted:

> [I was] like, well, let's do one for you and one—you know, I can decide later. If I'm in the edit room and he's not, I can do what I want again. But the thing is that a lot of times you disagree and the other person's right. But you don't know that at the time, 'cause in your head, it's this way and only later you could see, oh, that person was right.

The second, which typically involved disagreements between financiers and directors, was "horse-trading," whereby a creative leader may cede their proposed vision for a single scene, or even multiple scenes, to fully realize their prioritized scene. Echoing a common procedure during development and production, one producer (Int12) stated:

> First thing we say to every director when we start a project, is, 'It's a horse trade. You want two of this. So, you're only gonna get one of this or none of this…You wanna blow up that building, whatever.' Say that costs a million dollars … That's like, 'Okay. That means we have to cut a scene. That means you have to write a couple of these parts out. That makes you can't do these two things you want.' And then, we sort of put it to the director like, 'Do you wanna make that trade?'

Interviewed directors observed that such trades were inevitable when working with a production company. Facing such conditions, directors will identify the "most important couple of scenes of the movie" and approach the rest through "running and gunning, because it's not as important or you just know there's no way you're gonna get a beautiful visual out of it" (Int21). As our informants identified compromise as the ideal response to potential looming breakdowns, it typically yields positive reputational effects. As a producer (Int29) observed:

> Every great director is also a great actor. And often they do not like the cast or often the cast and the director do not see eye to eye, and they have to kind of work it out. And they do not always agree. And often, you know, you get a compromise, or you get something that does not work as well because it is neither fit -- what you do not want is for something to be neither fish nor fowl, and a good director realizes that.

Public Confrontation

Based upon our interview data, the rarest response involved film professionals revealing their displeasure with collaborators to external audiences—especially to journalists or through social media. Such public confrontations breach industry norms by taking information beyond from the insider realm of film productions and allow it to be common knowledge to outsiders. Citing the example of Josh Trank, the dismissed director of *The Fantastic Four*, a former studio president (Int7) elaborated upon the negative reputational consequences of this strategy:

> [Laughing] before *Fantastic Four* comes out, he basically disavows the whole [movie]… 'I hate the way the movie came out. They didn't treat me right. They took the movie away from me.' Movie's a big bomb. That guy's in director jail! Why? Well, he directed a bomb. He was immature. And he committed *the cardinal sin*, right? He publicized the fact that he wasn't happy with the movie. It cost the studio tens of millions of dollars. Who wants to work with that guy?

According to our interview data, articulating the details of creative breakdowns threatens the commercial viability of the project and the reputations of the members of the filmmaking team. Beyond potential scandal, public confrontation also can introduce sensitive information regarding the production that is highly sensitive or bound by contractual non-disclosure. As a talent manager and former studio executive (Int33) explained:

> But nobody wants to either – shame is not the right word. What the hell; there we go. You know you could get sued if you fired somebody and said they were grossly unprofessional. Then somebody sues them and then the actor says, "It's a lie. The director fucked me over." You don't want that.

Because of the costs regarding both reputation and resources associated with public confrontation, it is the rarest response to collaborative breakdowns in our research context.

Mutual Separation with the Promise of Silence

The third response involves mutual separation of collaborators, whether through voluntary exit or dismissal, with the promise of silence regarding the circumstances of the collaborative breakdown. Although this outcome is relatively rare, it happens with enough frequency that such shields exist. As we cover in Study 1, this promise of silence concerning the detailed reasons motivating a talent's departure or vague causes (e.g., creative differences, scheduling conflicts, shifting visions during development) seeks to preserve the standing of the project and the reputations of the involved talent. As one director (Int17) observed:

> If this happens with an independent film, it means the independent film doesn't get made. You wouldn't hear about it. But you would hear about these big movies of these stars, or like directors have creative differences or something like that because the movie still got made, and somebody has to say something. They replaced the director, or they replaced the actor… it is very much a Hollywood kind of thing.

Such silence also extends a courtesy to protect the reputation of a departing party, but it also can ameliorate conflicts or stalemates that could potentially incur costly and damaging consequences for producers, talent, and the project. A former studio president (Int7) explains:

> On one hand, you don't want to destroy someone's career… Oh, but here's another example. An actor commits to the movie, and [the studio says], "We're gonna rewrite the script for you, with your notes." And the actor says, 'Great!' Whether they have a contractual right to approve the new draft or not, they show up in rehearsal, two weeks before shooting, and they're like, "I hate this fuckin' script. They didn't do anything I wanted." And the studio says, 'We're gonna sue you, you know, if you walk off.' And he's like, "Okay. Sue me, and I won't work for however long I'm obligated not to work, but you can't force me to show up," which is true. And so, the studio needs to go find an actor to replace the actor who didn't approve the screenplay or hated the script or whatever… *All that kind of stuff* gets covered up with euphemisms.

Likewise, a major production company president (Int20) drew this parallel: "When somebody gets fired from a very high-profile position, you say that they're leaving for greener pastures, it's one of those things where you don't expose a lot of dirty laundry to the public. It's respect."

In this study, we draw a distinction between directors who are dismissed due to creative difference and those who leave for other reasons, who occupy our comparison sample. In our interviews, film professionals did not articulate distinctions between departures due to creative differences or departures due to other claimed reasons. Furthermore, they did not explicitly state that creative differences are merely code for one's dismissal or firing, as it could accompany a director's voluntary exit from a project. Rather, it is a device of shielding the detailed circumstances behind such occurrences.

Table C1: Additional data illustrating response strategies to collaborative breakdowns

Response Type	Definition	Frequency	Reputational Consequences	Representative Narratives
Compromise	Parties engage in practices to remedy disagreements about ideas or practice to deescalate conflict and preserve the project and core relationships	High	The involved parties enhance their reputation as effective collaborators.	"She introduced me to the term, shits and giggles. I'd never heard it before and when we went back into edit and I said, I want to do something instead of fighting about it as before. She just wanted to discuss it before she would even push a button. She said, okay just for shits and giggles, why don't we try that? I'm like, oh that's our safe word, I get it, okay. So then we start doing things for just shits and giggles, and suddenly the lines of communication opened up, and then we started having fun." (Int9) "This was a moral difference, but it was creative, is that I was in – I was offered a film. It was about four years ago and shooting in Bulgaria. We went to Bulgaria. I – there was a scene that involved horses, riding horses. Now, I'm a vegan, who doesn't do anything with animals in films where there are animals. And so, I talked to them, beforehand and said, 'Is there any way we could change this scene' -- it wasn't a very important scene – 'so that maybe it's something else?' Like, 'Do we have to have this stampede?', which is so difficult [laughs] to stage. So, I said, you know, 'It's really difficult to stage, anyway. How are you gonna stage a stampede?' And the —and the director got all [laughs] excited. He's like, 'Yeah! Well, maybe it could be on a motorcycle. That's much cooler!'" (Int2)
Public confrontation	Aggrieved parties express the details of a conflict within the project team to outsider audiences, whether a firing happened or not	Very low	Both parties are likely to suffer penalities.	"You have to call people and sometimes people are reluctant to tell you the truth, because they can't talk shit. I mean I would never – especially over email; I would never email somebody and say, "Oh, I'm hiring a crew on this show. How do you like this production designer?" If they didn't like them they're not going to say it. They're not going to put it in writing. So you call them and you hope – you know and sometimes someone will be your friend and they'll go, "The guy is the greatest fucking production designer ever" and you go, "OK, I believe that." But if they start to say, "You know I wasn't really around for that one very much and I didn't really have a lot of personal interaction" you know then you're like, "Oh, that's code for be careful." You know you have to like – but you have to do your homework." (Int33)

Mutual separation with the promise of silence	Disagreeing parties terminate the collaboration with a tacit or explicit agreement that the details concerning the collaboration are not spread to outsiders, whether through obsfucsatory labels such a "creative differences," vague reasons, or no reported cause.	Moderately low	Both parties might be protected – informants believed in the efficacy of these labels as a norm but hedged on their efficacy.	"[The director] said, 'Okay. Do it.' And what I'm – what she meant by, 'Do it', was, 'Bring the writer in, put him in your conference room, lay out all the scripts, do a cut-and-paste, and give me a script by the end of the week… Otherwise, we will flush $100 million down the drain of money that we spent, you know, to shoot part of a movie.' The producer got off the plane. I told him what the plan is. He was so offended that he basically walked off the movie, which was the best thing that ever happened to the completion of the movie, because with him involved, we would never have gotten there… At the end of the day, what we went back to shoot was pretty good. The resulting movie was fairly satisfying. It was commercially successful." (Int7) "They recast an actress for a voice that I didn't, I wasn't even around for. Yeah, I wasn't part of that at all. It was crazy. The end product I saw. It was fine. I mean, it was fine. It was not my taste, but again, it was a job for hire. I didn't write the script. I was hired to direct. And I don't even know if I was contracted to be in the editing room, but I showed up for like the first week in the editing room and they just told me to go home. They were like, 'We wanna do what we wanna do with it. Just get outta here.' And I was like fine, pay me. And they paid me and I left." (Int15)

Appendix D. Network Analysis

Purpose

This appendix reports the full network analysis that was summarized in the main text. The purpose of this analysis is to assess whether leaving a project due to "creative differences" alters directors' collaborative positions in the Hollywood production network. Whereas our mediation models tested the role of professional relationships with major distributors, the network analysis offers a broader structural view of career-relevant ties.

Data, Network Construction, and Variables

Network construction. Major studio relationships are one of many professional relationships that might change with damage to a reputation. For robustness and as an additional way to analyze the evolution of professional relationships as a proxy for reputational spillovers, we used subsets of the *IMDb* non-commercial datasets as of March 18, 2024.[1] The specific datasets used include 'title.crew.tsv,' 'title.principals.tsv,' 'title.basics.tsv,' 'name.basics.tsv,' and our custom dataset containing production company information. We applied a few rules to our sample selection. First, we limited our samples to films released in the US between 2000 and 2019 with information about their production studio, director, producer, or non-producer crews. Second, we included only films and TV movies (excluding pornographic films). Lastly, we excluded directors who appeared only once in our 20-year observation period, as they do not provide enough data to analyze patterns in their work opportunities. This sample yielded 3,557 directors and 9,722 producers across 9,283 films by 8,420 studios. Films often involve multiple producers and studios while having a single director. Using NetworkX, a Python package for network analysis, we constructed two-mode networks for each year from 2000 to 2019, projecting the networks onto the set of directors annually (see Cattani & Ferriani, 2008).

Figure D1 illustrates the resulting director-level network. In a two-mode network for a given year, one set of nodes represents producers (top nodes), with the other representing directors (bottom nodes). The edges between producers and directors indicate collaborations on specific films. The two-mode network was then projected onto the set of director nodes to create a one-mode network. It demonstrates directors' relative positions in the network structure each year, inferred through their common collaborations with producers. Directors can also work with multiple producers within or across films, thus linking different parts of the network (*e.g.*, Directors 3, 8, and 9). With Directors 8 and 9, their interconnectedness is stronger (hence the thicker edge) since they collaborated with the two producers (*e.g.*, B and C) on multiple films.

Network variables. Using the yearly one-mode (unipartite) network of directors, we calculated six centrality measures to analyze the directors' influence and connectivity. *Degree centrality* indicates the number of direct connections a director has within the network. A higher degree centrality suggests that one is more connected and potentially more influential (Ranganathan & Rosenkopf, 2014). *Eigenvector centrality* evaluates a director's relative status based on the influence of their connections (Podolny, 1993; Wang et al., 2014). Those who are connected to other highly influential peers receive higher scores. *Betweenness centrality* quantifies how much a director acts as a bridge along the shortest path between other directors (Freeman, Borgatti, & White, 1991). Directors with high betweenness centrality connect different parts of the network and facilitate communication. *Katz centrality* considers the total number of walks between

[1] See https://developer.imdb.com/non-commercial-datasets/ to access the datasets.

nodes, with shorter paths receiving more weight (Bushee, Keusch, & Kim-Gina, 2023; Katz, 1953). It identifies directors who are influential through both direct and indirect connections, highlighting those with extensive network reach. *Closeness centrality* assesses how close a director is to all other directors in the network, capturing the degree of closeness of a given node to a core (as opposed to a periphery) of densely connected nodes in the network (Cattani & Ferriani, 2008). *Harmonic centrality* is more robust to disconnected components by avoiding the infinite path length problem in a network where nodes are disconnected (Riccaboni, Wang, & Zhu, 2021; Schilling & Phelps, 2007). In networks with disconnected components, conventional closeness centrality can be problematic because it results in undefined values for unreachable nodes. Harmonic centrality resolves this by assigning a distance of zero for unreachable nodes, providing a finite and more interpretable score. We rescaled the above measures to standardize with a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1 each year to ensure we accurately assess directors' relative network position in a given year.

Analysis and Results

Impact on network and professional relationships. As a robustness check for our mediation analyses, we sought to measure a broader set of relationships, beyond relationships to major distributors, that might change due to negative reputational spillovers. We did this by capturing changes in directors' networks over time. We assess mean differences in centrality measures using independent samples' *t*-tests. While this approach is somewhat simple and does not control for potential unobservable factors—such as prior professional ties, self-selection, or broader industry trends—that may also influence centrality measures, it has the advantage of descriptive interpretability while simultaneously examining a wider range of relationships beyond just the relationship between the director and the studio.

Figure D2 illustrates *creative difference* directors who left a project experienced a significant decline across all six centrality measures: closeness centrality suffered a mean decline of −0.59 ($p < .01$), eigenvector centrality suffered a mean decline of −0.82 ($p < .05$), degree centrality suffered a mean decline of −0.62 ($p < .01$), harmonic centrality, suffered a mean decline of 0.57 ($p < .01$), Katz centrality suffered a mean decline of −0.68 ($p < .01$), and betweenness centrality suffered a mean decline of −0.42 ($p < .05$). In contrast, Figure D3 demonstrates that *attached* directors tend to experience an increase in centrality—significant for Katz centrality (mean difference of 0.57; $p < .05$) and marginally significant for between centrality (mean difference of 0.66; $p < .10$). Figure D4 further shows a decline in centrality measures among producers overseeing films that reported creative differences. *Replacing* directors did not undergo any significant change in centrality measures (Figure D5).

To illustrate these patterns, Figure D6a tracks the network position of Alfonso Gomez-Rejon over three consecutive projects. In 2014, with *The Town That Dreaded Sundown*, Gomez-Rejon's Katz centrality was 0.78, placing him at the 98th percentile among Hollywood directors in our data—a central position for a rising filmmaker. He maintains this high status by 2016, when his Katz centrality increased to 1.84 (96th percentile) during *Collateral Beauty*, indicating strong integration and visibility within the director-producer collaboration network. However, this period of centrality proved short-lived. By 2017, while working on *The Current War*, Gomez-Rejon's Katz centrality dropped to 0.13, corresponding to the 81st percentile. Although still above average, this shift is a notable decrease in his network status and collaborative reach compared to prior years. In contrast, Figure D6b follows Zack Snyder as an example of an attached director. He was "attached" to *Wonder Woman* (2017) whose creative differences were reported in 2016. Snyder's

Katz centrality started at the 35.3th percentile with *300* (2006), rose to the 74.7th percentile with *Man of Steel* (2013), and peaked at 99.3rd with *Justice League* (2017).

Figure D1: Unipartite Projection of a Two-Mode Director-by-Producer Network

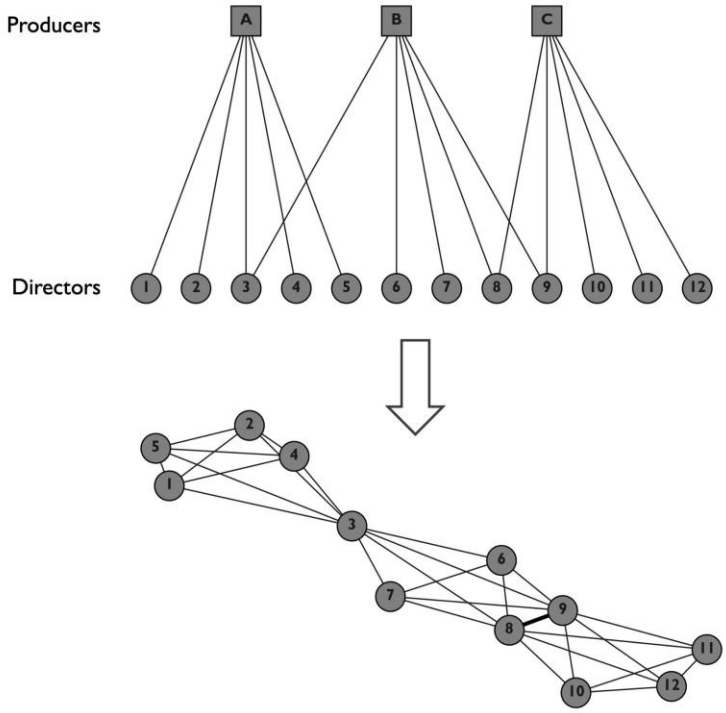


Figure D2: Mean Difference in Six Centrality Measures between Pre- and Post-CD for *Leaving* Directors

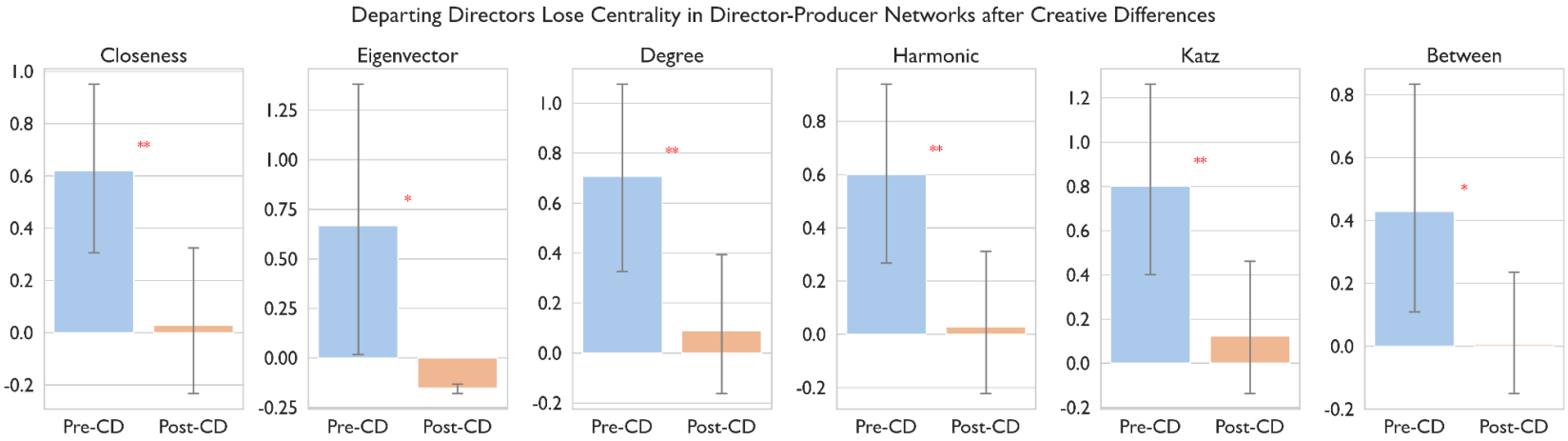


Figure D3: Mean Difference in Six Centrality Measures between Pre- and Post-CD for *Attached* Directors

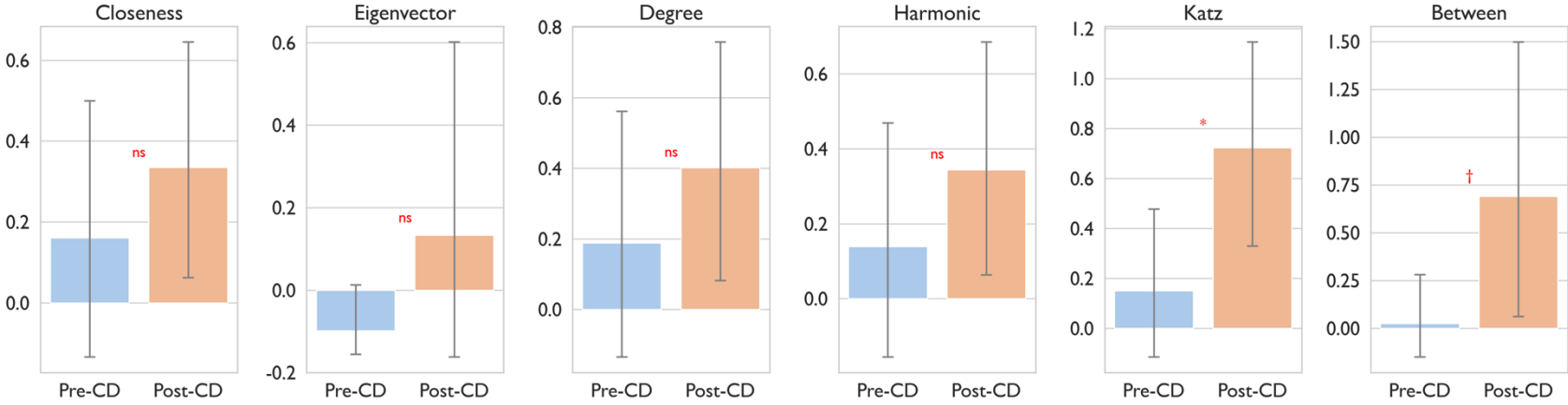


Figure D4: Mean Difference in Six Centrality Measures between Pre- and Post-CD for Producers

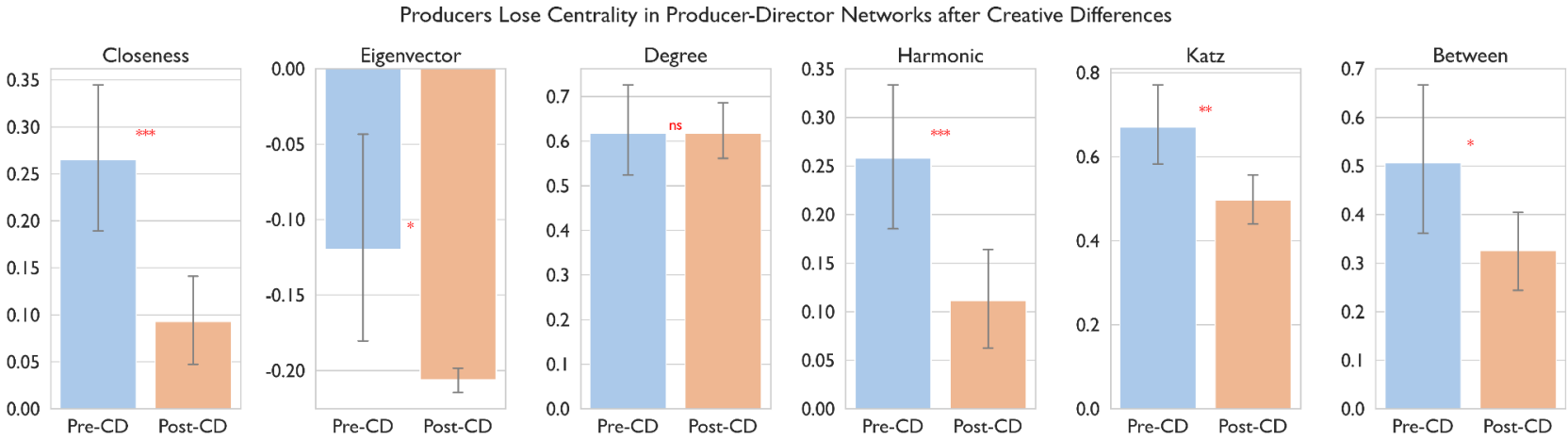


Figure D5: Mean Difference in Six Centrality Measures between Pre- and Post-CD for *Replacing* Directors

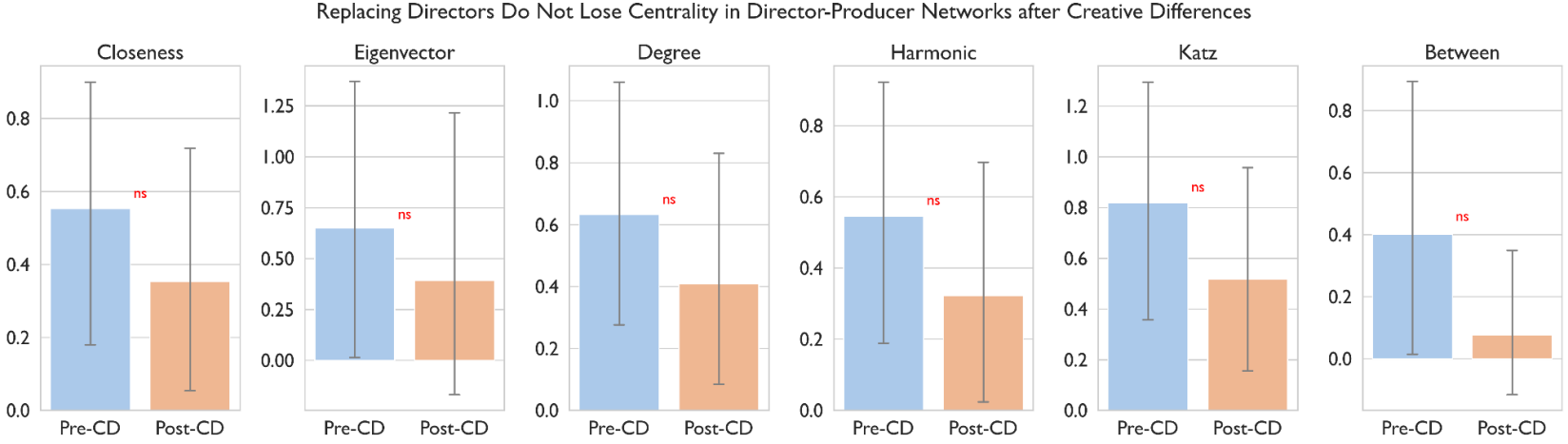
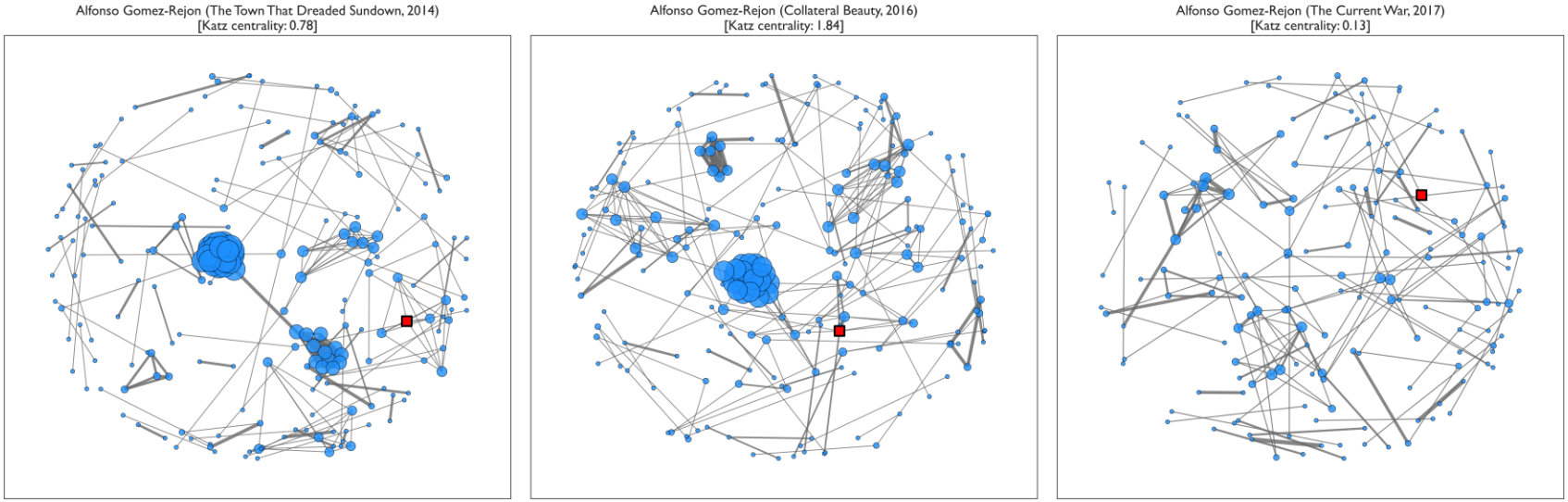
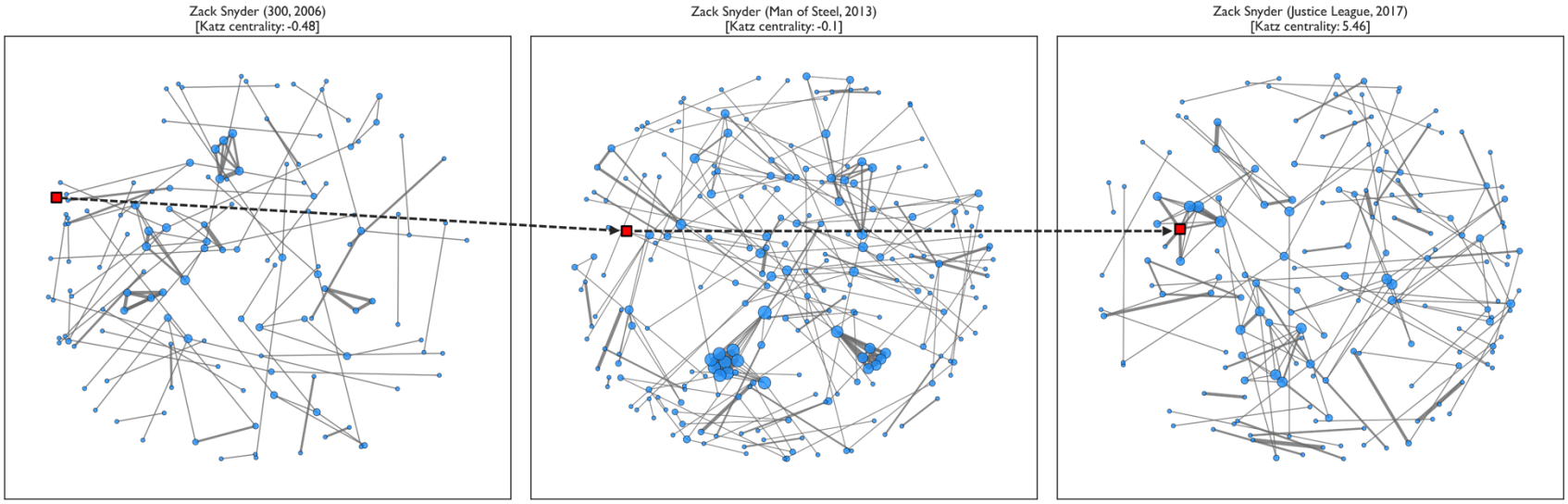


Figure D6a: The Case of Steven Soderbergh as an Example of a Leaving Director in the Network Position



Note: The three panels in Figure D6a illustrate annual networks of directors in the US film industry based on shared collaborations with producers. Blue nodes represent directors, with size proportional to their number of connections (degree). Grey edges reflect the number of shared producers, and Alfonso Gomez-Rejon is highlighted in red. This sequence—from *The Town That Dreaded Sundown* (2014), through *Collateral Beauty* (2016), to *The Current War* (2017)—shows Gomez-Rejon moving from a position of high centrality and strong collaborative ties to a less central role, highlighting changes in his industry standing as measured by Katz centrality percentiles.

Figure D6b: The Case of Zack Snyder as an Example of an Attached Director in the Network Position



Note: The three panels similarly depict the US film director network across different years—2006, 2013, and 2017—with node size reflecting the number of connections (degree) and edge width indicating shared producers. Zack Snyder, marked in red, appears relatively peripheral early on (e.g., *300* in 2006), moves to a more central position with *Man of Steel* (2013), and by *Justice League* (2017) becomes highly connected—mirroring his rising Katz centrality.