
A Sociological Take on Creativity: Believe in the Unexpected



By Frederic Godart , INSEAD

Amid the relentless pursuit of creativity, it may be time to reconsider how we define it.

“The worst enemy of creativity,” said Sylvia Plath, “is self-doubt.” To the celebrated American poet and novelist, ideas and inspiration would flow for those who have the “guts to do it” and “imagination to improvise.” Plath might well raise an eyebrow at how creativity is now dissected, promoted, and obsessed over around the world. Countless studies have been conducted about instilling and nurturing creativity in everyone from schoolchildren to business executives. An entire genre of “creativity” self-improvement books has flourished over the last decades.

Yet even scholars cannot agree on how to define and assess creativity, and this has implications for society as a whole.

Psychologists, who have dominated research on creativity since its inception in the 1950s, essentially define the concept as an *individual's* ability (alone or in small groups) to create a product or idea that is deemed, by experts, to be novel *and* useful. Sociologists, by contrast, focus on society and large

collectives — [the isolated genius is a myth](#) — as well as novelty, which human beings are [hardwired to notice](#), even if it's just a matter of a bearded face in a sea of clean-shaven ones.

Usefulness, on the other hand, is deemed by sociologists as too dependent on fickle social norms and power structures to be an relevant metric. In other words, what today's experts deem as whacky may well seem creative to a future audience.

To sociologists, then, creativity becomes more accessible when it is relieved of the burden to be useful. Measured simply by novelty value, creativity can be more emancipatory and inclusive, rather than the [“performance pressure”](#) it has turned into. Could this version of creativity be what we need in the era of burnout and the [Great Resignation](#)?

Novelty over usefulness

The salience of the collective and the novel is what [Sorah Seong, Damon Phillips](#) and I found in [a review of creativity](#) from the sociological perspective, the first study of its kind. From examining classical social theories since the time of Karl Marx as well as contemporary sociological research, we arrived at a definition of creativity as “an intentional configuration of material and cultural elements that is *unexpected* for a *given audience*”.

Take the arts for example. When Impressionism and Cubism first emerged, in the late 19th and early 20th century respectively, many critics and artists ridiculed the strange, unseemly works that radically broke the rules of the accepted aesthetics of the time. Indeed Georges Braque, considered to have invented Cubism alongside Picasso, was repulsed by [Les Femmes d'Alger \(O.J. Version\)](#) (below), the early Picasso masterpiece that introduced Braque to the then-revolutionary idea of deconstructed perspectives. Few people would have thought Impressionism or Cubism would go on to dominate the art world, producing some of the most coveted (and costly!) works ever, but most would not have denied the novelty of the trailblazing styles.



So it is with contemporary fashion and luxury sectors. Bernard Arnault, CEO and majority owner of French luxury group LVMH, briefly overtook Amazon's Jeff Bezos in 2021 to **become the richest person** in the world. Arnault's success could be explained by a constant pursuit of novelty – novelty that is not defined by usefulness. After all, fans of LVMH brands including Louis Vuitton, Dior, Tag Hauer and Tiffany are unlikely to be prioritising the usefulness of function when buying exquisite handbags and watches.

From this standpoint, usefulness is rarely a prerequisite for success in the creative industries. Not so the novelty factor. Fashion houses, for one,

carefully cultivate novelty season after season, even if it is simply a new take on a recurrent motif or theme such as florals and geometrics, minimalism, and romanticism.

Managers and businesses may therefore get better returns on novelty per se, not just in the creative industries but beyond, in tech for example. When going outside the box, therefore, the overarching question should be, *Has this been done before? Or, Can this be done differently?* To fixate on usefulness could be needlessly self-constraining. And if novelty fails, having the “guts to do it” — as Sylvia Plath would say — should be sufficiently rewarding in its own right.

Why Beethoven succeeded where Mozart failed

Audiences or consumers, meanwhile, are far from passive. Whereas psychologists deem experts as the main purveyors of creativity, sociologists hold that disagreeing audiences help shape the power dynamics behind the creative process, and there is no reason why experts should be given pre-eminence, at least analytically. In matters of novelty, all voices should be heard.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart struggled to assert his creative autonomy from the Salzburg court that employed him because the Vienna bourgeoisie, whom he sought favour with, was not powerful enough in his lifetime. But a similar audience would readily hand success to Ludwig van Beethoven just a few decades later, simply because the socio-political context had changed.

For managers and businesses (and artists) navigating diverse and distributed audiences in today’s digitally connected world, this means they need to proactively convince consumers that their ideas and products have value, at least in terms of novelty. Create your own style and work with the right people to offer it with confidence. This is how the unexpected can thrive.

Creativity, as prized an endeavour as it is, should not be imposed on everyone. Mainly because it distracts us from novelty, but also because it creates unnecessary expectations. Does everyone need to channel Picasso or Beethoven? Our pursuit of creativity has become so relentless that it may be causing harm. Think developed societies in Europe, Asia, and the United States where the pressure to excel, even for young children, is overwhelming.

The act of creation should be enjoyed even when it is not deemed creative. It is high time that individuals as well as societies take the **dark side of creativity** seriously. Sociology shows us how: focus on the unexpected, nurture it despite resistance, and forget – for a while – about being useful.

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/strategy/sociological-take-creativity-believe-unexpected>

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About the research

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