

"It's Just a Tool" — Until It Isn't:

Understanding the Professional Identity of Creative Professionals
in Response to the Promotion of Human-LLM Co-Creativity

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Abstract

Title	“It’s Just a Tool” – Until It Isn’t: Understanding the Professional Identity of Creative Professionals in Response to the Promotion of Human-LLM Co-Creativity
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Supervisor	Stephan Schaefer, Program Director and Associate Professor at Lund University, School of Economics and Management, Sweden
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Purpose	This study explores how creative professionals understand their professional identity in technology organizations that actively promote human-LLM co-creative processes. It examines the identity work performed in response to opposing professional identity norms, standards and expectations, and how engaging with LLMs influences the PI of creative professionals.
Methodology	This research employs a qualitative, abductive study, following the symbolic interactionism research tradition. Empirical material consists of 12 semi-structured interviews, conducted within a singular Swedish ICT company.
Theoretical Framework	The theoretical framework draws on professional identity theory, extended through Carter and Grover's (2015) IT identity concept. Identity work, including threats, liminality and provisional selves, serve as analytical lenses through which creative professionals' responses are examined.
Contribution	This thesis makes two theoretical contributions. First, it contributes to human-LLM co-creativity literature by offering an empirically grounded view on how creative professionals understand their professional identity in organizations that promote human-LLM co-creative processes, and how this is influenced by engaging with the LLMs. Second, it offers an insight into how engaging with the LLMs leads to subconscious cognitive entanglement, against which professional identity is continuously under construction.
Keywords	Human-LLM co-creativity, Creative Professionals, Professional Identity, Identity Construction, IT Identity, LLM Identity, Identity Work.

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Best regards,

Britta Regling and Mathijs Driessen

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List of Abbreviations

AI = Artificial Intelligence

LLM = Large Language Model

PI = Professional Identity

SI = Symbolic interactionism

IT = Information Technology

1 Introduction

“So in a sense, I don't want to be a part of it, but in a sense, I feel obliged to continue to use it... But it's like a bittersweet relationship with LLMs right now.” – Tom

1.1 Research Background

In recent years, we have witnessed a new industrial revolution with the introduction of, and continuous advancements in, Artificial Intelligence (AI). The introduction of AI is impacting all industries globally, further interconnecting the physical with the digital world, and strengthening human-machine interactions (Pereira et al., 2023). Organizations are increasingly integrating AI to improve performance by elevating task execution, productivity, and efficiency (Pereira et al., 2023). For organizations to remain competitive, there is a need for increased human-AI collaboration, requiring employees to positively identify with the technology (Shonhe & Min, 2025a). Within this broader wave of AI integration, Large Language Models (LLMs) – AI systems that can generate human-like text, content and ideas like ChatGPT – are rapidly integrating into organizations and reshaping how creativity is performed (Kortenbach et al., 2026; Wiggins, 2020). What sets them apart from previous technologies are its conversational and generative features providing broader and easier access to AI capabilities, than was previously possible (Ritala et al., 2023).

The technology industry sits at the forefront of this integration. Across OECD countries, ICT firms demonstrate the highest adoption of AI (which includes LLMs) in their work processes, with Sweden leading at 87.9% of ICT firms actively using AI in 2025 (OECD, 2026). This makes the Swedish technology sector a particularly relevant context for studying how LLMs impact the creative workforce, as it has arrived in their organizational reality.

As LLMs are introduced to the creative fields, creative professionals find themselves in a particularly complex position. In organizational contexts, creativity can be understood as the ongoing activity of individuals and groups that generate, develop and evaluate potentially transformative ideas continuously over time (Schaefer, 2023). Creative work, the operational dimension of creativity, entails both the ideation and execution of ideas that are both novel and appropriate into practice (Chen & Chan, 2024; Runco, 2023). For creative professionals, being

creative and engaging in creative work, is considered a large part of their everyday work, and stands central to how they understand themselves as professionals (Inie et al., 2023). When organizations promote the use of LLMs in creative processes, something more than just workflow changes. The conditions under which these professionals construct their understanding of what it means to be a creative professional shift, posing a tension to their professional identity (Barker Caza & Creary, 2016; Shonhe & Min, 2025b).

1.2 Research Objectives

1.2.1 Problematization

Since the rise of LLMs, it has dominated debates on intelligence (Wang et al., 2023) and creativity (Hattori et al., 2024). In the creative fields, the collaboration of humans and LLMs receives various opposing opinions concerning its creative value, posing stress on the professional identity of the creative professional (Shonhe & Min, 2025a).

To gain a solid understanding of the significance of the impact that LLMs have on the creative professionals, it is important to note that the emergence of LLMs even has urged scholars to review the definition of creativity itself. Over the past decades, scholars like Sternberg & Lubart (1998), Amabile (2013) and Runco & Jaeger (2012) understood creativity as the ability to create ideas or outcomes that are both novel and appropriate to an individual or societal group. Runco (2025) states this original definition requires adjustment, agreeing that this definition could allow for LLMs to be considered as creative. He suggests adding authenticity and intentionality as additional requirements, to ensure that human creativity is distinguished from artificial creativity (Runco, 2023, 2025). This adjustment means that human creativity is considered “true” creativity, something not feasible for LLMs.

Recent studies build on the existing research concerning the creativity of LLMs. They state the distinction between human creativity and LLM creativity provides an opportunity for a partnership; human-LLM co-creativity. Claiming LLMs to be considered as amplifiers of human creativity, a “second mind” for ideation, not replacers (Davis & Rafner, 2025; Kortenbach et al., 2026). In human-LLM co-creativity, creativity is seen as an emergent, distributed property of collaborative systems, which involve human and non-human agents (Kortenbach et al., 2026; Wiggins, 2020).

Despite the hype concerning the opportunities of human-LLM co-creativity, a fear of LLMs impacting current jobs and professional identity remains (Alahmad & Robert, 2020). One's professional identity (PI) comprises a role identity and social identity. In role identity, socialization allows professionals to learn and adopt the behavioral expectations of their professional roles. Concerning social identity, socialization provides a foundation for attachment to one's professional group (Barker Caza & Creary, 2016). PI is considered a vital cognitive mechanism that affects workers' behaviors and attitudes in work settings and beyond. It serves as an organizing framework for an individual's self-concept, and dissociation can affect overall psychological well-being. Individuals thus take an active role in the construction of their PI, by "acting, doing and interacting" in the social context (Barker Caza & Creary, 2016).

LLM integration into the workplace changes the established beliefs shaping one's PI at work, through redefining job roles. When LLMs assume core tasks of one's profession, it triggers a professional identity threat, leading to resistance (Shonhe & Min, 2025b). Particularly for the creative professionals this is interesting, as scholars like Runco (2025) distinguish human creativity from artificial creativity, claiming "true" creativity a core human capability not feasible for LLMs. The PI tension of creative professionals is therefore not emerging from the fear of LLMs taking over the core task of their profession, but rather on what this collaboration means to the perceived quality of their creative output in the social context of the creative professional community (Barker Caza & Creary, 2016; Shonhe & Min, 2025a).

In the social context of the creative professional community, human-LLM co-creativity sparks skepticism about the quality and value of human-LLM co-created work (Heimstad et al., 2025). A common concept for explaining why humans prefer non-AI alternatives is called algorithmic aversion (Mahmud et al., 2022). Central to this stands how effort is perceived. People consistently attribute significantly less cognitive, motivational and physical effort to an LLM than to human creators, perceiving these machines as tools capable of "effortless" production (Heimstad et al., 2025; Magni et al., 2024). We can consider these individuals as averse to accepting LLMs in the creativity community, which has implications on the PI of creative professionals (Magni et al., 2024).

Creative professionals express both collaboration with and resistance to LLMs, highlighting the tension between embracing LLMs to improve their creative output and preserving their creative identity (Shonhe & Min, 2025a; Torres et al., 2025).

As established above, current research focuses primarily on the challenges of: whether LLMs can be creative (Runco, 2025), how LLMs can benefit creative professionals (Kortenbach et al., 2026), the creative quality of human-LLM co-creative output (Heimstad et al., 2025; Magni et al., 2024) and the professional identity threat that is imposed on the creative professionals (Shonhe & Min, 2025b). The question therefore is no longer whether LLMs disrupt PI – the literature has answered that. What remains underexplored is *how* creative professionals understand their PI in the disruptive human-LLM partnership. By bringing a symbolic interactionist perspective to the human-LLM co-creativity studies, this research moves from documenting identity threats to understanding identity work as it happens.

1.2.2 Purpose and Research Question

Current research primarily analyzes the impact of the explored human-LLM co-creativity partnership, rather than studying the processes this tension is experienced through in practice. By adopting the symbolic interactionism (SI) tradition, this study aims to contribute an understanding of how creative professionals understand their PI in technology organizations that actively promote human-LLM co-creativity. Without examining how these role- and social identity tensions unfold in practice, our understanding of the impact of human-LLM co-creativity in organizations remains incomplete. The study therefore asks and aims to answer the following research question:

How do creative professionals understand their professional identity in technology organizations that promote human-LLM co-creative processes?

1.3 Case Background

To answer our research question, we conducted this study within the context of a single global Swedish ICT company, hereafter referred to as TechCo. As an ICT firm operating in Sweden, where LLM adoption among ICT companies is the highest in OECD countries, TechCo represents a relevant and timely case context.

TechCo actively promotes the integration of LLMs into work processes and describes its organizational approach to be driven by curiosity, creativity and innovation. Among the 3,000 employees at its headquarters, creative professionals are thus central to delivering on this value in practice. TechCo therefore meets both conditions this research requires: It employs creative professionals and promotes LLM use.

1.4 Thesis Outline

This research is structured into six chapters, each building on the last to arrive at a comprehensive understanding for addressing our research question.

Chapter 1 introduces the research topic by situating LLM integration within the broader organizational context, with particular attention to creative professionals in the technology sector. It outlines the research background, problematization, purpose and research question that guide this thesis.

Chapter 2 provides the theoretical foundation for the study. It defines who the creative professional is in our understanding and establishes the theoretical perspective through which identity is explored. It examines the concept of PI and its construction dynamics, to which it subsequently provides a nuance by introducing IT identity as a material dimension in PI. It explores what make LLMs in relation to PI different than other ITs. Finally, it explores how individuals respond to PI disruptions, by introducing identity work, liminality and provisional selves, and establishing discursive identity as the orientation for this research.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodological approach we took in this study. It describes the pilot study that shaped the research design, explains our philosophical grounding in social constructivism and symbolic interactionism as a research tradition, details the sampling and data collection process, and presents the analytical strategy we used to move from empirical data to findings.

Chapter 4 presents our empirical findings and their analysis in two parts. The first examines how creative professionals understand their role- and social identities, respectively and in relation to one another. The second explores how continuous engagement with the LLMs

themselves shapes creative professionals' self-understanding over time, and what kind of IT the LLMs seem to be in practice.

Chapter 5 discusses the empirical findings of chapter 4 in relation to the literature introduced in chapter 2. It addresses the research question that guides this study, by discussing how the creative professionals perceive the human-LLM co-creative promotions, how this leads to differing PI understandings amongst the creative professionals, and how engaging with the LLMs gradually influences the self-understanding of the creative professionals.

Chapter 6 concludes the thesis by summarizing the main insights derived from the study. It describes the theoretical contributions this study offers, acknowledging the study's limitations, and proposes directions for future research.

2 Literature Review

This literature review defines and demarcates the concepts relevant to addressing our research question: *“How do creative professionals understand their professional identity in technology organizations that promote human-LLM co-creative processes?”*.

It establishes the theoretical foundation that shapes this study. We provide a thorough description of the key concepts, elaborate why they are relevant for you as a reader to understand, and clarify how these inform our empirical analysis and interpretation. The review is structured into four sections, developed around two themes.

The first two sections explore the foundational concepts necessary for understanding the research context and our theoretical lens. In the first section, we examine what constitutes organizational creativity, establish what creative work is, and clarify who we understand the creative professional to be in practice. In the second section, we explore PI as our central theoretical concept. We establish symbolic interactionism as our theoretical perspective through which identity is understood and explore the two foundational dimensions that shape PI: role- and social identities. We examine how misalignment in these identities leads to tension and round off by addressing the dynamics that influence identity construction.

The subsequent two sections introduce additional concepts necessary for addressing how creative professionals respond to the PI tension derived from promoting human-LLM co-creative processes. In the third section, we provide a nuance to the concept of PI and introduce the concept of the IT Identity – a concept we recognize as vital for understanding how LLMs influence the PI of creative professionals. It explores how ITs can become integral to one’s self-understanding as a professional and explains why LLMs are particularly disruptive. The fourth section then moves to how individuals respond to PI disruptions in practice, introducing identity work, liminality and provisional selves. Lastly, it explores various modes of identity work, through which we establish discursive identity work as the analytical focus of this study.

The final section synthesizes the key theoretical concepts addressed, and establishes understanding the role-, social and LLMs as IT identity respectively, and in relation to one another, as vital for addressing our research question.

2.1 Who is the Creative Professional?

In modern society, individuals often hold multiple professional identities (Ashforth et al., 2008; Stets & Burke, 2003). Stryker and Burke (2000) argue that individuals organize their identities into a hierarchy of salience, meaning some identities are more central than others. The more central an identity, the more frequently it is activated and the more it guides behavior. A creative professional is thus someone who considers being creative as a large part of their everyday work (Inie et al., 2023), and understands this as integral to their understanding of self as a professional (Stryker & Burke, 2000).

Before exploring what creative work entails in practice, we briefly address what constitutes organizational creativity. In organizational contexts, creativity can be understood as the ongoing activity of individuals and groups that “generate, develop and evaluate potentially transformative ideas continuously over time” (Schaefer, 2023, p.10). This framing is useful for our study as it moves beyond individual traits and captures creativity as a sustained practice in organizational life.

Creative work, the operational dimension of creativity, tends to consist of two interrelated elements. The first is the ideation dimension, meaning coming up with ideas and exploring new perspectives. The second concerns the executional dimension, meaning the skilled translation of ideas into finished work through craft, technique and professional judgement (Chen & Chan, 2024, p.9103). Though scholars like Florida (2012, as cited in Schaefer, 2023, p.153) distinguish between levels of creativity, we base our study on the assumption that creative professionals engage in the development of ideas and problem solving.

Some scholars recognize someone's identification as “being creative” as a personal identity that contributes to the construction of one's PI. The concept of personal identities is considered as the elementary type of identities that “denotes a unique individual with self-descriptions drawn from one's own biography and singular constellation of experiences” (Owens et al., 2010, p.479). Individuals create their own unifying themes that connect their past and current experiences, claiming themselves to be considered as for example a “strategic thinker” (Caza et al., 2018). This can be translated to seeing “being creative” is a personal identity that someone applies to all roles they adopt in life (e.g. the creative parent, the creative designer, the creative professional etc.). Whilst we acknowledge the personal identity concept and its line of

argument, we refrain from further exploring this concept as we find it does not cover the operational aspect of being a creative professional. It is therefore less relevant for addressing our research question.

In summary, we adopt a more operational understanding of the creative professional; the creative professional in the context of our research is someone who engages in the development of ideas and problem solving. They consider being creative as a large part of their everyday work (Inie et al., 2023), and understand this as integral to their understanding of self as a professional (Stryker & Burke, 2000).

This section outlines who the creative professional is in our understanding and defines the boundaries of our research. Now that we know who the creative professional is, we move on by exploring the concept of PI; a foundational concept for addressing our research question.

2.2 Understanding the Professional Identity Concept

As we have established before, the tension that emerges between organizational expectations and community expectations with regards to human-LLM co-creativity, corresponds to the concept of PI. The concept of PI thus serves as the theoretical foundation of our study. In this section, we introduce our theoretical perspective on identity theory, examine the concept of PI and explore the dynamics through which it is constructed.

2.2.1 Identity Theory

Across the social sciences, the concept of identity has received extensive attention from researchers, resulting in a notable variation in its conceptual meaning (Stryker & Burke, 2000). In this study, we build on the foundational premise that identity is socially constituted; one of the core understandings of symbolic interactionism (Prasad, 2018, p.22). A historical starting point for understanding identity as socially constituted was developed by Cooley (1918, as cited in Prasad, 2018, p.20). He proposed the concept of the “looking-glass self”, which established that our sense of who we are is shaped by how we believe others perceive us. Mead (1977, as cited in Prasad, 2018, p.20) developed this further in, arguing that the self is a social product formed through symbolic interaction. Central to his account is the idea of the “Generalized Other”. This describes the organized set of attitudes and expectations that individuals

internalize from the community. The self in this understanding is an ongoing social accomplishment, continuously produced and reproduced through interaction with others. The foundational premise that identity is socially constituted, serves as the theoretical perspective that guides this research.

To establish the theoretical foundation for answering the research question, we draw upon studies that conceptualize identity as the answer to the question “Who am I?”, in relation to some social category (or object). The social categories like roles, groups or material objects, become part of identity only when people use them to answer this question (Vignoles et al. 2011 as cited in Carter & Grover, 2015).

Drawing on symbolic interactionism calls for a moment of reflexivity regarding another, closely related, theoretical understanding within symbolic interactionism. Some of the literature we draw upon, notably Stryker and Burke (2000), is grounded in the structural reading of symbolic interactionism. This variant places a greater emphasis on understanding social positions and role expectations as external forces and structures that shape identity from the outside (Serpe et al., 2020). We incorporate these contributions where relevant, while refraining from adopting this understanding to our study. We anchor this thesis in the traditional symbolic interactionist tradition, which understands identity as a negotiated order continuously produced through social negotiations rather than partially determined by fixed structures (Prasad, 2018, p.22).

2.2.2 The Professional Identity Concept

PI is a specific form of identity, which refers to the meanings that individuals ascribe to themselves in the context of their professional activities (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016; Barker Caza & Creary, 2016). PI is an individual's answer to the question “Who am I?”, in a professional context (Vignoles et al. 2011 as cited in Carter & Grover, 2015, p.938). The conceptualization rests on two broad perspectives on the nature of identity as constituted by society: the individual level and the collective level (Stryker & Burke, 2000). PI comprises both a role identity- and social identity (Barker Caza & Creary, 2016), two dimensions that are distinct from each other as they reside on the individual and the collective level respectively (Carter & Grover, 2015; Stryker & Burke, 2000). In practice however, they are experientially intertwined and complementary within the professional context (Stryker & Burke, 2000). We

begin with establishing how the two theoretical traditions of individual- and collective level identities shape the role- and social identities that together form one's PI.

At the individual level, the role identity, rooted in identity theory (Stryker & Burke, 2000, p.287), refers to the self-meanings that emerge from taking a position within a social structure (e.g. a manager, a teacher, an engineer). An individual's role identity, for instance as a manager, a teacher or an engineer, is constituted through the specific tasks someone performs and the behavioral expectations, skills, and knowledge associated with these roles. It captures the "doing" dimension of practical life, serving as a guidance system for individuals that helps them develop a sense of purpose and contribution (Barker Caza & Creary, 2016, pp.7–9). An engineer's role identity for instance, is not simply a job title but built through the daily act of designing. The role identity thus relates to the individuals' internalized expectations concerning what it means to be competent in performing that role as an engineer (Burke & Stets 2009 as cited in Carter & Grover, 2015, p.933).

At the collective level, Social Identity Theory, as articulated by Tajfel and Turner (1979) and further developed by Ashfort and Mael (1989), suggests that people naturally classify themselves in part through the groups they belong to, drawing self-esteem and a sense of distinctiveness from such membership. In professional contexts, social identity captures the "belonging" dimension to one's professional community; the sense of self that comes from identifying with a professional community through their shared values, norms and standards (Barker Caza & Creary, 2016, pp.8–9). It is important to understand that these professional communities are not confined to organizational boundaries – meaning their shared values, norms and standards are established beyond organizational contexts (Barker Caza & Creary, 2016). To illustrate, an engineer understands themselves through the membership of the engineering community within their organization but also understands themselves through the membership of the broader engineering community (e.g. when attending conferences).

Together, the role- and social identities form one's PI. The creative professional is a specific PI, as it might not be defined by one's role title, yet it is in practice a role that individuals adopt within their organization. To illustrate the role- and social identity dynamics clearly, a creative professional understands themselves as a creative professional through the internalized expectations concerning what it means to be competent in performing that role (role identity). Simultaneously, as they identify with this role, they also understand themselves as a creative

professional through membership with the creative professional community, by identifying with its shared values, norms and standards (social identity).

The concept of PI is considered a vital cognitive mechanism that affects workers' behaviors and attitudes in work settings and beyond (Barker Caza & Creary, 2016). When the internalized expectations of what it means to be competent in performing a professional role align with the shared norms, values and standards of the professional community, the PI is in alignment and self-esteem is protected or enhanced (Barker Caza & Creary, 2016, p.8). In this example, the role- and social identities reinforce one another, but when they do not, internal conflict arises through the tension between the opposing norms and values of the two identities (Stryker & Burke, 2000, p.290). When the understanding of what it means to perform in one's role shifts, the role identity is disrupted. The social identity however remains anchored in pre-existing community norms and values. This sets the two identities in tension rather than alignment (Barker Caza & Creary, 2016, p.8; Stryker & Burke, 2000, p.290).

Understanding the concepts of role- and social identities as foundational components within the concept of PI, is vital to our studies. Knowing that a misalignment between role- and social identities disrupts PI and causes a tension within, serves as the first conceptual understanding to address our research question. To research how creative professionals understand their PI in technology organizations that promote human-LLM co-creative processes, we must analyze how these creative professionals understand their role- and social identities respectively, and in relation to one another.

2.2.3 Professional Identity Construction Dynamics

Now that we understand that one's PI is composed of a role- and social identity, and how these identities operate individually and in relation to one another, this sub-section elaborates on the dynamics that influence the construction of PI.

PI is continuously and actively constructed (Barker Caza & Creary, 2016; Pratt et al., 2006; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Rather than a fixed endpoint, PI is always in process, and open to revision, as the conditions in which professionals work continue to shift (Brown, 2015, p.33). PI construction thus refers to the ongoing process through which individuals form, maintain, and revise the meanings they attach to themselves as a professional (Barker Caza & Creary,

2016, p.11). Pratt (2012, as cited in Barker Caza & Creary, 2016, p.11) argues that individuals take an active role in the construction of their PI, by “acting, doing and interacting” in the social context, making it highly relational. Ashfort and Schinhoff (2016) highlight social validation is essential to the identity construction process, meaning individuals seek validation and recognition by others to feel secure.

PI construction is also found to be organizationally situated. Organizations actively shape the conditions under which professional identities are built through a process that Alvesson and Willmott (2002, p.625) call identity regulation. They define it as the “more or less intentional effects of social practices upon processes of identity construction and reconstruction”, for which organizations adopt discursive practices. Discourse in various contexts has different definition, we understand it here as: the systems of language and meaning through which social reality and individual subjectivity are constructed (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000). It functions in a way that “managerially inspired” framings of work and the organization, invite an individual for self-positioning, identification with and commitment to the organization. Rather than controlling behavior directly, identity regulation thus works by employing discursive practices managing the “insides” (Deetz, 1995, as cited in Alvesson & Willmott, 2002, p.620) of a worker, shaping their sense of who they are and should be (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002, p.620). In this study, we refrain from exploring how the discursive practices are carried out, however draw upon the concept when relevant to address how it shaped the PI understanding of the creative professionals.

The aim of the organization, as argued by Alvesson and Willmott (2002), is to produce the “appropriate individual”, which is an employee whose self-understanding is aligned with managerial objectives. Naturally, however, these acts of identity regulation are not seamless and exist in tension with the professionals' own identity claims. Some employees respond to organizational regulation not with passive absorption but with negotiation and resistance (Ezzamel, 2000, as cited in Alvesson & Willmott, 2002, p.622). Interestingly, and relevant to the context of our research, some authors suggest that organizations perform identity regulation by stimulating the adoption of ITs in work practices. In this case, the ITs are considered a determinant of role identities, impacting the nature of the roles individuals perform (Carter & Grover, 2015).

In sum, this section establishes PI as a vital cognitive mechanism that affects workers' behaviors and attitudes in work settings and beyond. It conceptualized the concept of PI; an

individual's answer to the question “who am I?” in a professional context (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016; Barker Caza & Creary, 2016). PI, as we see it, is a dynamic, socially constituted construct, comprising role- and social identities. We have explored what differentiates the role identity (the “doing” dimension) and the social identity (the “belonging” dimension), and highlight how alignment, or misalignment, between both identities can reinforce and diminish one’s understanding of themselves as a professional. On top of this, we have explored dynamics that influence the construction of PI, highlighting that PI construction is ongoing, relational and organizationally situated. In the context of our study, these insights together serve as a theoretical starting point for examining how the introduction of human-LLM co-creativity shapes the conditions under which creative professionals construct and understand their professional identities. It guides our study in understanding that organizations can act as identity regulators, when stimulating the adoption of LLMs in creative work processes and can therefore disrupt alignment between role expectations and professional community norms, posing stress on the PI of creative professionals.

The following section builds on this foundation, by examining how ITs can become part of one’s professional identity, and what makes LLMs specifically influential.

2.3 Exploring ITs in Relation to Professional Identity

The role- and social identities within PI alone, do not explain how ITs themselves can become part of how one understands their PI. Having examined the concept of PI and the dynamics that influence its construction, this section provides a nuance to PI by acknowledging Carter and Grover’s (2015) introduction of IT Identity to the concept of PI. It builds on the understanding that organizations can be considered identity regulators when promoting the adoption of ITs in creative processes, by exploring how ITs can become part of one’s PI exactly and why LLMs are different.

2.3.1 ITs and Professional Identity – Introducing the IT Identity

In today’s society, information technologies (ITs) have become deeply embedded in people’s personal and professional life, helping them to create and maintain the social structures in which they exist (Carter & Grover, 2015, p.933). In many of these social structures, it seems almost inconceivable to engage in everyday activities without IT. As the boundaries between ITs and

social structures fade, Carter and Grover (2015) argue that new constructs representing this interconnectedness are required to improve understandings of human behaviors. They introduce the “IT identity”, defined as *“the extent to which an individual views use of an IT as integral to his or her sense of self”* (Carter & Grover, 2015, p.938).

Carter and Grover (2015) conceptualize IT identities as a form of material identities – identities tied to material objects. In the conceptualization of PI, these material identities operate next, and in relation to, the role- and social identities previously established. Like role identities, the IT identity is constructed by individual thinking and behaviors, rather than group processes and intergroup relations. IT identities are formed as people are fundamentally driven by the need for self-expansion; they seek to enhance their ability to produce a desired result by increasing social and physical resources that facilitate achievement (Aron et al., 2003, as cited in Carter & Grover, 2015, p.940). Carter and Grover (2015, p.941) argue, that ITs with wider applications across a broader range of social contexts are more likely to foster self-identification, thus a strong IT identity.

People start constructing IT identities only when they are able to control and establish mastery of the IT they are interacting with. Carter and Grover (2015, pp.933–934) provide the following example: “someone who views Adobe Photoshop® as integral to the self, verifies the identity when images that result from interacting with the software’s feature set match the level of personal creativity s/he claims as an individual.”. Individuals extend their PI with IT identities, when they incorporate the capabilities offered by these ITs, to which they subsequently become emotionally attached in their understanding of themselves as a professional. Though not in a professional context, a good example to illustrate this emotional attachment is the relationship between young people and their mobile phones. In this relationship, it was found that as mobile phone use became infused in daily activities, young people’s feelings of empowerment, autonomy and self-authenticity, were inextricably tied to their relationship with these mobile devices. They expanded their boundaries of personal resources to include mobile phones, extending their understanding of themselves by including the capabilities of their mobile phones. This in turn meant that the absence of such IT capabilities was experienced as a loss of personal abilities, thus a shrinkage of self (Carter & Grover, 2015).

Carter and Grover’s (2015) main contribution resides in the understanding that ITs can become integral to one’s understanding of themselves. In the context of PI, IT Identity theory suggests some ITs are not anymore considered tools that allow individuals to enact their PI, the ITs shape

one's understanding of themselves as a professional. The professional moves from seeing the IT as "a tool I use", to "the IT becomes part of who I am / how I function". Acknowledging the fast developments of ITs in society, Carter and Grover's (2015) suggest building on their established IT identity concept, to accommodate for these advancements. Our study takes up that suggestion in the specific context of human-LLM co-creativity, further explored hereafter.

2.3.2 Exploring LLMs as IT Identity

In the IT Identity concept, as developed by Carter and Grover's (2015), it is argued that individuals expand their professional identities by incorporating the capabilities presented by the IT, to which they subsequently become emotionally attached. LLMs, however, are different from the ITs developed back in 2015, when Carter and Grover introduced the concept of IT identities. LLMs as IT identity as hereafter referred to as LLM Identity.

LLMs are the first computing machines that can understand and generate human-like text with high accuracy, stimulating a human-like conversation (Mohammed & Kora, 2025). In 2022, the introduction of ChatGPT (an LLM developed by the company OpenAI) shocked the world, and it was rapidly adopted globally, changing various sectors and fields. What is revolutionary about these LLMs and what sets them apart from previous technologies, are their conversational and generative features. It provides broader and easier access to the capabilities of an AI system, than thus far was possible (Ritala et al., 2023).

In the context of our research, the understanding that LLMs are different from previous technologies provides a critical analytical perspective to consider when analyzing how creative professionals understand their PI in light of the human-LLM co-creativity tension. The IT identity concept as currently developed highlights expansion opportunities primarily. Whilst LLMs are marketed as a helpful creative assistant, they can simultaneously affect one's creative performance (Chen & Chan, 2024). On an individual level, over-reliance on LLMs may lead to cognitive atrophy, which occurs when individuals delegate cognitive tasks to the LLM, and reduce engagement in reflexive thinking (Gerlich, 2025). Engaging in human-LLM co-creative processes thus is not just an expansion of one's creative capabilities but rather requires creative individuals to balance between collaborating with the tool and preserving their creative capabilities as a person.

Furthermore, some scholars conceptualize LLMs as productive discursive systems that can influence how one speaks and reasons. Unlike previous technologies, LLMs exercise power at the level of discourse (Kouros, 2026). They are found to shape how problems are framed, explanations are structured, and what is understood as legitimate articulation which in turn can shape how they understand their PI. Whilst we acknowledge the discursive nature of LLMs, we refrain from exploring how the LLMs carry out power at the level of discourse in this study. We focus on how interacting with the LLMs shape the self-understanding of the creative professionals.

Understanding that LLMs are not like other technologies due to conversational and generative nature, this section adds a contribution we must consider for addressing our research question. In practical terms, we also aim to understand whether creative professionals expand their PI by incorporating the capabilities offered by the LLM, if they have become emotionally attached to the LLM, and how this influences their understanding of themselves as a professional. To explore how this is done in practice by the creative professionals, we move on by understanding what individuals *do* when experiencing disruptions to their PI.

2.4 Responding to Identity Disruption

In order to address how creative professionals understand their PI in technology organizations that promote human-LLM co-creativity, we must understand how professionals respond to identity disruptions in practice. This section introduces the concept of identity work, highlights the concept of liminality and provisional selves, and establishes discursive identity work as the orientation for this study.

2.4.1 Identity Work – What is It and What Enforces It?

As we know, individuals hold multiple identities and maintaining coherence among them is an active accomplishment. This also counts for the role-, social and material identities that shape one's PI. The concept that captures this agency that individuals exercise in the construction of these identities is identity work. Identity work is defined by Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003, p.1165) as “forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness”. Considering what identity work concerns, the aim is to resolve certain tensions or threats to the individual, caused by identities

in conflict (Caza et al., 2018). The concept of identity work thus serves as the practical orientation for conducting the study.

Recognizing that individuals have multiple identities, Caza et al. (2018, p.896) argue that these different types of identities can influence how identity work is performed. On the collective level of PI, thus social identity, individuals perform identity work by positioning themselves relative to their professional communities, by either attaching themselves to the community or distancing themselves from the community. They do this by changing how they define the professional communities. On the individual level, thus role and material identities, people perform identity work by changing the self to align with the role/material, changing the role/material expectations itself or by changing self or others' perceptions of the role/material.

As established in a previous section, identities are continuously under construction. Identity work however, intensifies when PI comes under threat, as it poses strains or tensions on one's PI, leading to feelings of confusion, contradiction and self-doubt (Brown, 2015). Petriglieri (2011, p.644) offers a definition of identity threats: "experiences appraised as indicating potential harm to the value, meanings, or enactment of an identity". What matters in this definition is the word appraised; an identity threat is not an objective event but a subjective experience. The same change in working conditions might be threatening to one professional and irrelevant to another, depending on how central the affected practice is to their self-understanding and where the threatened identity sits in their personal hierarchy of salience (Petriglieri, 2011).

2.4.2 Liminality and Provisional Selves

Relevant to understanding how creative professionals understand their professional identity in light of the human-LLM co-creativity imposed tension, is the concept of liminality. Originally developed by Van Gennep (1909, as cited in Turner et al., 1969, pp.94–95) describes the threshold phase of ritual transition – in which an individual has left the old structure but not yet arrived at the new one – liminality has been translated into organizational and identity terms by Beech (2011). He argues that liminal states are conditions in which identity reconstruction becomes both most necessary and most difficult: the familiar reference points that anchor identity (established roles, recognized competencies, clear norms) are destabilized, and individuals must engage in intense identity work without stable foundations to build on. At the

psychological level, it “disrupts one’s internal sense of self or place within a social system” (Noble and Walker, 1997, as cited in Beech, 2011), leaving individuals with a feeling of being “betwixt and between”. This can, if the liminal state carries on over time, trigger anxiety, lead to low self-esteem, and vulnerability for the individual (Beech, 2011, pp.294, 297–299).

Ibarra (2005, p.24) adds that the in-between period can simultaneously function as a holding environment in which normal identity rules are temporarily suspended, making experimentation with possible selves possible. Within such conditions, Ibarra (1999, pp.765, 772–781) shows that professionals respond by constructing and testing provisional selves – temporary identity configurations that bridge the gap between a disrupted current identity and a not-yet-formed new one. It is an experimentation method to learn to adapt to new roles. Through observing role models, experimenting with different self-presentations, and evaluating these against internal and external feedback, professionals actively assemble their identity through practice.

2.4.3 Modes of Identity Work – Discursive Identity Work

As we know, individuals are active agents in the construction of their identity, performing identity work. In general, these exercises of identity work can be grouped into four different modes of where they occur: cognitive (in thoughts), physical (in symbols), behavioral (in actions) and discursive (in talk) (Caza et al., 2018, p.891). Whilst we acknowledge all modes of identity work, and know that a singular instance of identity work can involve multiple modes (Caza et al., 2018), in the scope of this study we focus on discursive identity work, also referred to as identity talk.

Discursive identity work, or identity talk, relates to the use of narratives, dialogues, stories and conversations as a channel for identity work (Caza et al., 2018, p.891). It comprises what is verbalized, and how this is verbalized – tone of voice, word choice, language skills, specific jargon, and expressions are all considered to play a role in shaping professional identities (Caza et al., 2018).

In a symbolic interactionist reading, identity talk is a social performance through which identity is produced, contested and provisionally stabilized in interaction (Prasad, 2018). The understanding that identity work is discursively referenced through, serves as an analytical

platform for this study. Interviews themselves then becomes a platform to perform discursive identity work, which we further elaborate on in the methodology.

In sum, this section explores how individuals respond to PI disruptions – which we now understand as identity work. Understanding how identity work is performed, and through which modes it is referenced, is vital for collecting our data, and addressing our research question. We have highlighted the concept of liminality, a state in which individuals engage in intense identity work, through for example adopting provisional selves, and have established discursive identity work as the orientation for this study.

2.5 Synthesizing the Literature

In sum, this literature review delineates the concepts relevant for addressing our research question: “How do creative professionals understand their professional identity in technology organizations that promote human-LLM co-creative processes?”.

Through this literature review, we understand the creative professional as someone who considers being creative as a large part of their everyday work (Inie et al., 2023), and understands this as integral to their understanding of self as a professional (Stryker & Burke, 2000). We have established SI as our theoretical perspective on identity theory, and understand professional identity as the answer to the question “who am I?”, in a professional context (Vignoles et al. 2011 as cited in Carter & Grover, 2015, p.938).

By drawing on studies that also adopt SI as a theoretical perspective, we understand PI as socially constructed, and shaped by role-, social- and material (IT) identities. One’s PI is continuously under construction due to changing work conditions, and professionals themselves take an active role in the construction of their identities by “acting, doing and interacting” in the social context. Organizations can perform acts of identity regulation through discourse, defined as more or less intentional effects of social practices upon processes of identity construction and reconstruction (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002, p.625). They aim to produce the “appropriate professional”, an employee whose self-understanding aligns with managerial objectives (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002).

The role identity concerns the “doing” dimension of PI, and relates to the individuals’ internalized expectations concerning what it means to be competent in performing that role (Barker Caza & Creary, 2016, pp.7–9). The social identity, the “belonging” dimension of PI, relates to the sense of self that comes from identifying with a professional community through their shared values, norms and standards (Barker Caza & Creary, 2016, pp.8–9). The material identity is an identity tied to material objects, like ITs. Taking the example of IT, we introduce the IT identity as material identity within PI, defined as the extent to which an individual views use of an IT as integral to his or her sense of self (Carter & Grover, 2015, p.938). In acknowledging the IT identity and its proposed consideration in the concept of PI, we recognize the impact that pervasive computing resources can have on the understanding of oneself as a professional. From this understanding, we move on by exploring how LLMs are not like previous technologies, highlighting their conversational and generative nature, and ability to exercise power at the level of discourse. Whilst LLMs potentially can improve one’s creative performance, they can simultaneously negatively impact one’s creative abilities (Chen & Chan, 2024; Gerlich, 2025; Kouros, 2026).

We finalize the literature by exploring how people respond to identity tensions, and introduce the concept of identity work – defined by Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003, p.1165) as “forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness”. When identities are disrupted, and individuals have left the old structure but not yet arrived at the new one, they find themselves in a state of liminality (Beech, 2011). In this liminal state, individuals engage in intense identity work, and are found to respond by constructing and testing provisional selves – temporary identity configurations that bridge the gap between a disrupted current identity and a not-yet-formed new one (Ibarra, 1999, pp.765, 772–781). The concept of identity work serves as the practical orientation that steers our study. It is performed in different modes, and in the scope of our research, we focus on discursive identity work, also referred to as identity talk – the use of narratives, dialogues, stories and conversations as a channel for identity work (Caza et al., 2018).

To address our research question, we must understand how creative professionals understand their role-, social-, and potential LLM identity. Exploring the three identities respectively, and in relation to one another, allows us to gain a comprehensive view of how creative professionals understand their PI.

3 Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodological choices of our study. We first present our pilot study that served as an analytical starting point as well as a catalyst for subsequent design decisions. Then, we elaborate on the philosophical grounding and overarching research approach that shaped this research, including our applied research tradition and process of data collection. The remaining sections cover our approach to the data analysis, shedding light on how we extracted identity work from our empirical data. We conclude this chapter by addressing ethical considerations and reflections of this study.

3.1 Pilot Study

Prior to the main study, we conducted two semi-structured pilot interviews, one with a department head, the other with a team member at TechCo. The purpose was to gain an initial orientation to the phenomenon we are interested in: human-LLM co-creativity and how it impacts creative professionals. These pilot interviews were conducted separately and are not included in this study's sample.

Analyzed through a symbolic interactionist lens, the pilot interviews surfaced three preliminary findings regarding the creative professionals: “Normalizing co-creativity as a professional requirement” suggests that there is normalization of LLM use by management and it may have an effect on the creative professional. “Expanding into the creative hybrid” describes the process of redefining one's own identity and boundaries, which now includes LLMs. The creative professional is able to leverage human-LLM co-creativity for creative performance. Contrary to that, “becoming the creative imposter” describes the duality of dealing with LLMs. First, the cognitive dependency and offloading abilities that emerge through human-LLM co-creativity, pose a threat and trigger a fragmentation of their identity. Individuals perform but face severe uncertainty. Secondly, the concealment of LLM use produces a dubious identity, torn between organizational requirements and acceptance of the creative community.

The pilot study offered an insight into how creative professionals understand their PI light of the human-LLM co-creativity tension. It signified the importance of this study, and the necessity to continue this research by collecting more data to nuance our findings in answering the predefined research question.

Though our main findings in the proceedings of the thesis refined or replaced some of the pilot's studies' findings entirely, it did create two hunches in the sense Sætre and Van den Ven (2021) describe it, leading us to adjust the focus and consequently the research design for this study. "The normalization of co-creativity as a professional requirement" led us to examine the active organizational influence on identities more closely. The "expanding into the creative hybrid" suggested that the use of LLMs and creative work appear to be compatible, yet the "creative imposter" struggles with this. What exactly triggers these difficulties and how they are addressed is now also part of this study, reflected in our research question and literature review. Consequently, this had an impact on our methodological decisions as well, to which we turn in the following sections.

3.2 Research Design

Our study is grounded in a social constructivist ontology, which is a form of subjectivism, that assumes social reality is not given but continuously produced through interaction and shared meanings (Saunders et al., 2023, p.137). Accordingly, we adopt an interpretivist epistemology, assuming that knowledge about the social world is generated through individuals' interpretations, experiences and meaning (Prasad, 2018; Saunders et al., 2023). These philosophical commitments shape both *what* we study – the PI in light of the tension in human-LLM co-creative processes – and *how* we study it: through participants' own accounts of who they are and how they understand themselves to be.

Appropriate to a subjectivist approach, in which context, interpretation and action are understood as mutually constitutive (Silverman, 1970, as cited in Schaefer, 2023) we employ a qualitative research design suited for investigating how individuals construct meaning in contexts of ambiguity and change (Prasad, 2018; Saunders et al., 2023). This is appropriate for our interest in how creative professionals answer the "Who Am I?" in their professional context, and our research question calls precisely for this kind of interpretive depth. An objectivist approach on the contrary would model creativity and identity as ordered phenomena with causal relationships between inputs, processes, and outputs – for instance, treating LLM adoption as triggering variable and identity change as measurable outcome, which would not grant us access what we aim to study (Schaefer, 2023, pp.21–22)

The study follows an abductive approach, characterized by iterative movements between empirical observations and theoretical concepts rather than beginning with a fixed hypothesis or approaching the field without theoretical orientation (Saunders et al., 2023). In practice, abduction shaped the design of this study from the outset. The pilot study for instance surfaced observations that were not fully accounted for by our initial theoretical framework, prompting us to expand the literature review before entering the main data collection. The literature review as it stands is therefore a product of iterative engagement with the empirical material.

3.3 Symbolic Interactionism as Research Tradition

SI is a distinctly interpretivist research tradition that centers “the self” as its analytical concerns, studying how people construct meaning in social situations (Prasad, 2018, p.19). Its three foundational premises established by Blumer (1969, as cited in Prasad, 2018, p.21), are that individuals act towards things on the basis of the meanings those things hold for them; these meanings arise through social interaction; and meanings are continuously modified through interpretation.

For this study, SI is an appropriate research tradition for three reasons. First, it positions identity not as a stable attribute but as continuously produced through social interaction. This self-understanding is shaped by the internalized expectations of one's social community, what Mead calls the "Generalized Other" (Mead, 1977, as cited in Prasad, 2018, p.20). This provides the conceptual basis for examining how professional community norms about creativity and LLM use shape how creative professionals understand themselves. Second, SI directs attention to how individuals make sense of the situations they encounter (Prasad, 2018, p.20). This allows us to examine how creative professionals make sense of the LLM promotion in the organizational context, and how that interpretation shapes how they understand themselves as a professional. Third, Fine (1992, as cited in Prasad, 2018, p.25) argues that self-identities are produced in and through language, allowing us to position discursive identity work – the ways participants construct and revise their professional identity through language – as the central analytical object of our study.

In line with SI, interviews in this tradition are meaning-centered: they ask less about "what" is taking place and more about "how" interviewees make sense of specific situations (Prasad, 2018, p.26). This shapes both our interview design and our analytical approach, elaborated in

the data collection and analysis section. Following Alvesson (2003, as cited in Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018, pp.40–41), we read interview statements not as neutral reports but as acts of identity work – instances where participants construct and present a self-image. This reading is consistent with our SI framework and positions the single interview as analytically sufficient for capturing identity work in action.

Having established the research tradition and how it supports answering our research question, we now turn to the empirical context in which the study is situated.

3.4 Case Context

The study is situated within a single global Swedish ICT company, hereafter referred to as TechCo. TechCo develops network-based technology solutions and employs around 6,000 people globally. All participants from this study work at the company’s headquarter in Sweden, which employs over 3,000 employees across various functions.

Creativity and innovation are central to TechCo’s organizational culture, as the company describes itself as a learning organization driven by curiosity, creativity, and innovation. Given the competitiveness of the market they operate in, innovation is considered a must to survive, and creativity is a valued professional quality. The organization offers structured learning opportunities, including dedicated time for self-directed development where employees pursue courses in various areas such as AI and machine learning. Within this context, TechCo promotes the integration of LLMs and AI tools into its work processes company-wide. The company offers training in AI use for optimal leverage of the technology and has developed its own internal AI agents. LLM use is not mandated for every task, but it is institutionally encouraged, as we learned in our pilot study. Employees are broadly assumed to be engaging with these tools as part of their professional daily practice, underscoring the adoption as key to strategic objectives of efficiency and productivity.

TechCo is a suitable research site precisely because this organizational promotion of LLMs creates conditions under which professional identity is put under tension. The following sections describe participant selection and data collection within this setting.

Note: Organizational details in this section are drawn from publicly available company materials, which are not referenced directly in order to preserve the anonymity of the case organization.

3.5 Sampling and Data Collection

The following sections describe our approach to sampling and data collection in practice.

3.5.1 Sampling

Participants for this research are selected using a purposive sampling strategy (Saunders et al., 2023), guided by three criteria: they must engage in creative work, consider being creative as integral to their understanding of themselves as a professional, and be confronted by LLMs in their organization. Focusing on a single organization ensures that all participants are subject to the same organizational conditions regarding LLM promotion, most notably the same institutional mandate, tooling, and cultural norms around the adoption. The sample spans multiple departments, including video production, software development, product development and others.

Access to the main sample proceeds through a self-selection mechanism. Through our contact person in the organization, we shared an excerpt of the study with an invitation for creative professionals to participate. Employees who identified with being a creative professional reached out to our person of contact to express interest in participating. This self-selection is significant: rather than being designated as “creative” by someone else, participants actively identified themselves as a creative professional.

Following each interview, we also asked participants to recommend another colleague they consider a creative professional who might be suitable for our study, combining purposive with snowball sampling (Saunders et al., 2023). To sustain the self-selection mechanism, the selection criteria were again shared with these recommended participants, ensuring the self-identification as a creative professional by these participants.

3.5.2 Data Collection

Our data is collected through semi-structured interviews, which allow flexibility to elicit rich, meaningful insights while maintaining a consistent thematic orientation across interviews

(Saunders et al., 2023). The questions are designed to draw out identity talk about how our participants position themselves in relation to the promotion of LLMs. We were able to do so through several tactics.

First, we aimed at building rapport, where “participants feel relaxed, open, and willing to answer questions” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.335) by keeping a conversational nature to the interview, highlighting the voluntary nature of it and listening actively.

Secondly, our sequencing of questions was deliberate. We organized them into topic-based sections: (1) Introduction and the participant’s understanding of creativity; (2) the introduction of LLMs to the workplace; and (3) human-LLM co-creativity in practice. This allowed us to start with “gentle” questions as Braun and Clarke (2006) recommend and funnel from general to rather specific topics (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, as cited in Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.84). Introducing the LLMs later allowed our participants to first speak about creativity without presupposing the disruptive nature of it.

Thirdly, the type of questions we asked aimed to encourage our participants to provide detailed answers. We used open-ended questions (“Can you tell us about your last creative project?”) to invite lengthy narrative-driven responses (Braun & Clarke, 2006), also aiming at before/after stories (“How do you approach creative projects differently today with the introduction of LLMs?”). Emotional questions like “How do you feel about that?” and cognitive questions “What do you think about others using LLMs for creative projects?” as well as follow-up questions then encouraged the participants to share even more about their situation, thoughts and feelings (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Kvale, 2007). Next to asking questions, we also made use of strategic silence, aiming at persuading the participant to move beyond their “rehearsed” answer to more explicit self-narratives (Bengtsson & Fynbo, 2018, pp.21–22).

The interviews lasted on average around 60 minutes and were conducted via video call. They were audio-recorded and transcribed with the participant’s consent, agreeing to the use of the data within this study. Guest et al. (2006) suggest saturation – “the point at which no new information or themes are observed in the data” (p.1) – often be reached within the first twelve interviews. In our study, we experienced such saturation. The main themes emerged after approximately eight interviews, after which the proceeding four did not generate substantially new concepts. All interviews were conducted in English, which is neither the native language of the participants nor that of the research team.

The following table (Table 1) shows an overview of the interview participants, relevant for the analysis of the empirical data. The participants work across different yet related departments in TechCo: video production, software development, product development. Pseudonyms are made for the interview participants, to sustain anonymity and privacy.

Table 1 Overview of Interviews

Number	Pseudonyms	Date	Duration
1	Titus	19.03.2026	00:52:33
2	David	20.03.2026	1:11:11
3	Ralph	23.03.2026	00:58:36
4	Isaac	09.04.2026	01:04:57
5	Nils	09.04.2026	00:56:43
6	Tom	15.04.2026	00:54:02
7	Pascal	17.04.2026	00:57:17
8	Walter	20.04.2026	00:32:06
9	Gerrit	30.04.2026	00:56:39
10	Gabriel	05.05.2026	00:45:17
11	Jonas	08.05.2026	00:43:37
12	Theo	13.05.2026	00:52:12

The following section describes how the collected data from the interviews is analyzed.

3.6 Data Analysis

Each interview was transcribed using the respective function in Microsoft Word, after which we engaged in a multi-staged analysis process. The analysis followed the sorting, reducing and arguing model outlined by Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018). This framework provides a structured yet flexible approach to qualitative data analysis that is well suited to abductive research: it honors the messiness of empirical material while guiding the analysts toward analytical claims. Within this framework, we applied the SI tradition's specific analytical sensibility, being attentive to discursive identity work, to understand how participants construct and negotiate their PI through language.

3.6.1 Sorting

Following Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018), the first step involved spending time with the materials, reading and re-reading the transcripts of the audio-recorded interviews to develop familiarity with the data. Given that both of us were present for the majority of the interviews, we each brought direct knowledge of the material into the coding process. We began by coding independently, then compared our codes and treated points of divergence as analytically productive, resolving them through discussion until consensus was reached. A second round of joint coding confirmed emerging patterns which ensured consistency across the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Color-coded categorization supported visual sorting, easing the process of dealing with rich data sets.

Drawing on symbolic interactionism, and in line with Gubrium and Holstein (1997, as cited in Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018) we sorted for both the *what* and the *how* of participant's accounts. The *what* refers to the content, what themes and topics the participants address. Sorting for the *how* refers to the language, the rhetorical style and tone they used to answer the questions in the interview, for instance justifications, self-corrections or hesitations. This distinction is what makes identity work analytically visible for us, as it directs attention to language that is doing something rather than merely saying something (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018).

Operationally, a passage was flagged as identity-relevant when for instance identity talk surfaced through unprompted justification of a choice no question required them to defend, hesitation or self-correction mid-statement, read as live negotiation rather than imprecision,

expressing emotions indicating that something was personally at stake (Petriglieri, 2011), or contradictions between earlier and later statements in the same interview, which revealed the instability that identity work is designed to manage.

During sorting, we developed codes that captured both dimensions: descriptive codes summarizing the content of statements, and process codes identifying the identity work being performed. These are initially developed close to the data and iteratively refined as patterns emerge across interviews.

3.6.2 Reducing

The second step involves selecting the most analytically productive material from the sorted data (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). We are guided in this by our research question, and by sensitizing concepts from our literature review. These concepts function as analytical lenses that help us recognize theoretically significant patterns in the data. The pilot study processes served as initial anchors, yet we remained open to expansion or revision throughout the proceeding of the thesis. Through iterative engagement, we moved from the initial codes to reducing to broader processes and themes that we wanted to pursue. As stated earlier, these themes emerged within the first eight interviews and were found through independent initial coding. Consistent with abductive logic, reduction also prompted further engagement with literature. Patterns in the data pointed us toward theoretical concepts that were not part of the original framework, requiring us to revisit and expand the literature review before the arguing step.

To illustrate, Table 2 shows an excerpt of the reduced dataset. It shows how initial codes, developed close to the data capturing the content of a statement, were then refined into broader analytical codes and then overarching themes. Both examples leveraged here subsumed under the broader theme “Identity regulation”, capturing different aspects of it. The first shows the participants' reaction to the promotion, while the second captures the underlying dynamic of identity regulation through managerial ratification.

Table 2 Excerpt of Reduced Material to Themes

Theme	Code	Initial Code	Quote
Identity Regulation	Perception of the promotion	Finds the promotion assertive	“We're promoted to using it more. (...) we're forced to increase speed.”
Identity Regulation	Organizational reframing	Guilt resolved by management, normalization	“I think it's just the reality and it's getting used to it. It's also the confirmation by my manager. She's like, yeah, but that's okay, right? That's the tool we have. Like it's even offered by the company. We have our own internal LLM. So it's not like they're cheating, it's more efficient. So it took, yeah, I guess it took a couple of months for me to not feeling guilty about that.”

The reduction was complete when we arrived at a manageable set of themes/processes that together address our research question.

3.6.3 Arguing

The final step, arguing, involved synthesizing the themes into a narrative and developing analytical arguments. We structured the analysis around excerpt-commentary units (Emerson, 1995, as cited in Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018), following the pattern of analytical point, orientation, empirical excerpt, and analytical comment. This format ensures that claims remain anchored in empirical material while being developed toward theoretical contribution. Here, we went beyond what the participants merely said to move to understanding how the participant positions themselves. In line with abductive logic, the arguing step involved a continuous back-and-forth between findings and literature, asking what the data reveals that prior theory does not fully account for, and using that tension to sharpen our analytical claims.

3.7 Ethical considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with standard ethical principles for qualitative research. All participants were informed beforehand of the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw without consequence. Informed consent was obtained prior to each interview and the recording. Data is anonymized; participants are assigned pseudonyms and identifying details regarding specific projects or teams are removed. Audio recordings are stored securely and accessed only by those directly involved in the research. Given that participants discuss their professional identities in a context shaped by organizational expectations around LLM adoption, we were particularly attentive to ensuring that accounts cannot be traced back to individuals within the organization.

3.8 Reflexivity

Reflexivity requires continuous questioning of how our own backgrounds, assumptions, and positions as researchers influence the research process (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018).

We approach this study as two master's students without prior employment in the case organization. While this outsider position offers analytical distance, as we are not personally invested in the organizational narratives about LLM adoption, we also lack the insider familiarity that might allow us to notice even subtler dynamics. Our access is facilitated through a contact person within the organization, which creates a degree of trust but may also shape which participants we reach and how openly they speak.

We are also attentive to the fact that the interview situation itself is an identity-producing context. Within SI, this is an analytical resource: participants' self-presentations in the interview are themselves instances of the identity construction process we study. However, we remain mindful that the research setting may prompt more reflective and coherent identity accounts than would emerge in everyday interactions. According to our contact person, online interviews are standard practice at the company, and they advised us against in-person interviews due to logistical complications. However, this format may have affected the depth of rapport.

All interviews were conducted in English, the professional but not native language of ourselves and the participants. Participants may have reached for available vocabulary rather than precise expression, and our own question framing was similarly constrained. We acknowledge English as a shared second language as a condition shaping what could be expressed and how it is interpreted (Saunders et al., 2023).

We acknowledge that our claims made in this study are subject to the same philosophical commitments that ground our thesis. If social reality is continuously produced through interaction and shared meanings (Prasad, 2018), then our analysis is no exception. It is in itself an interpretive act, shaped by the frameworks we considered appealing, the choices we made during the coding, and the meaning we attributed to the participants' accounts. These are not neutral and reflect merely our own interpretation of the context (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018, p.104). We consider this as a condition of interpretivist research that should be acknowledged honestly (Saunders et al., 2023).

Finally, we note our use of AI tools in the research process. We used AI-assisted tools such as Grammarly and DeepL Write for language enhancement and ensuring grammatical rigor. We used LLMs such as Claude, ChatGPT and NotebookLM to support sketching out earlier drafts and brainstorming, or to get feedback on our own written texts. In all cases, analytical interpretations, and argumentation remained our own. We maintained a critical stance towards AI-generated outputs by verifying against credible literature as well as discussing it as a thesis team.

4 Empirical Findings and Analysis

This chapter presents our empirical findings and analysis in response to the research question: *How do Creative Professionals understand their Professional Identity in Technology Organizations that promote Human-LLM co-creative processes?*

The analysis proceeds in two parts. The first examines how creative professionals understand their role- and social identities following the organizations' promotion of human-LLM co-creativity, and how they navigate these understandings. The second builds on this by examining how continuous engagement with LLMs shapes PI, and what kind of IT the LLM proves to be.

4.1 Navigating the Human-LLM Co-Creativity Tension

This section examines how creative professionals understand the norms, standards and expectations of their role- and social identities in the context of organizational LLM promotion, and how they navigate the tension that arises where these norms, standards and expectations conflict.

4.1.1 When Human-LLM Co-Creativity Becomes an Expectation

This sub-section analyses how the creative professionals understand the norms, standards, and expectations of their role identity in the context of organizational LLM promotions.

TechCo actively promotes the use of LLMs in creative processes through different means of communication, as well as providing training and offering learning opportunities. Our findings suggest that TechCo's promotion of LLMs and its communications around it, reshapes how some creative professionals understand what competent performance in their role looks like. As Tom and Ralph share, they perceive the promotions performed by management as rather assertive:

"We're promoted to using it more. (...) we're forced to increase speed." – Tom

"Like the management is very, very keen, like in every presentation they give or newsletter they're like, use this stuff now. And I guess they try to really promote it." – Ralph

The phrasing of “very, very keen” and “forced” is worth noting. They perceive that the promotion of LLM adoption, through for instance the presentations and newsletters, seems rather assertive and strong in its orientation. Both sense through the communication of TechCo, that LLM adoption into their work and increasing speed, is starting to become more of an expectation, rather than a mere suggestion.

This promotion to use LLMs is found to raise concerns by some creative professionals. Some express worries about becoming passive, and losing mental vibrancy, acknowledging the threat it poses to their PI. Titus articulates his concern:

“So you might come in (...) a position where you perhaps lose control. (...) Since we have moved so much substance, your brain might not be able to make a good narrative in the long run by yourself. (...) That makes you a little bit passive and a little bit in the backseat.”

– Titus

He anticipates what happens when using LLMs the way the organization promotes. The language of losing control and becoming passive signals a disruption in the self-understanding Titus has constructed around his role as a creative professional. He understands the LLMs as something that impacts his agency. Pascal puts it in more personal terms when speaking about the threat of the LLM replacing him:

“I’m careful to replace myself using the LLM because I don’t want to mentally grow less vibrant.” – Pascal

Though the phrasing is brief, it is telling. Pascal understands his mental vibrancy as central to who he is. The threat of losing it by giving the LLM space in his creative processes puts his identity understanding at stake.

For those who experience LLM adoption as threatening cognitive abilities, TechCo is found to be reframing what it means to use LLMs, in ways that align individual self-understandings with organizational objectives. Ralph describes such acts of mitigation when sharing an emotional normalization process; a guilt-to-normalcy trajectory.

He first describes discomfort when he began using LLMs in work he had previously done himself:

“I used LLMs a lot to analyze the interviews and find patterns and stuff like that. And that felt like cheating. Normally I would be the one that goes over the transcripts and finds the patterns. And now suddenly it was so much quicker and it felt like it wasn't fair or something like that. So why would you pay me for that?” – Ralph

He continues by sharing his feelings about this:

“It felt wrong because you're not paying me to prompt. That's what I felt. You're paying me to (...) use my brain to analyze, right? I would say that was the feeling I had.” – Ralph

In these quotes, Ralph does not respond to the LLMs themselves, but to what the use of LLMs says about him as a professional. The LLM symbolizes a substitute for the very practices through which he constructs his professional worth. The sense of cheating signals a conflict between what he is doing and what he understands his professional value to be. The notion of “why would you pay me for that?” is thus an identity question. It reveals how his understanding of himself as a creative professional is tied to specific practices like actively using his brain to analyze interviews and identifying patterns himself. The disruption of these practices, that are central to how Ralph understands his role, suggests to be a direct consequence of the organizational promotion of LLMs. It is TechCo's LLM promotion that puts the act of doing under pressure.

Later, Ralph continues by showing how this identity disruption was eventually resolved through social ratification by management, reaching a state of normalcy:

“I think it's just the reality and it's getting used to it. It's also the confirmation from my manager. She's like, yeah, but that's okay, right? That's the tool we have. Like it's even offered by the company. We have our own internal LLM. So it's not like you're cheating, it's more efficient. I guess it took a couple of months for me to not feel guilty about that.” – Ralph

Ralph's disrupted self-understanding, the feeling of guilt, is resolved through managerial confirmation, rather than internal renegotiation. With management saying, “it's not like you're

cheating, it's more efficient", they reframe the symbolic meaning of what it means to use LLMs. It is an efficient means to perform according to TechCo's efficiency and productivity objectives. A symbolic reframing that took Ralph a couple of months to adopt, but what he now internalizes. This seems to help him to repair his disrupted self-understanding.

Except for one interviewee, all our participants have started using LLMs in their creative processes, as they understand this increases their efficiency, a managerial objective. The exception is Jonas; he shares his view:

"I haven't really felt the need yet to use it (...) I will not say that in half a year I won't do it"
— Jonas

For Jonas, the promotion of LLMs does not seem to trigger a need for him to use it. Adopting LLMs in his understanding is not an expectation for him to perform in his role, as he claims he has not "felt the need yet". It demonstrates how the perception of the promotion of LLMs is a subjective experience; for some it has become a new expectation to perform in their role, and for others it remains just a suggestion.

For participants who adopt LLMs in their creative processes, to adhere to the expectation of management, AI literacy (which includes LLM literacy) becomes a needed skill. Isaac describes what happens without it:

"Initially, (...) a lot of people weren't so keen on using the LLM. And they said it's useless, it's pointless. And the reason there was that the literacy, AI literacy and the ability to use the system wasn't high enough." — Isaac

Isaac looks back at what LLM adoption looked like for some. The first interaction with LLMs rather led to dismissal, as people found it to be "useless", and "weren't keen" to use it. He sees this as the result of low AI literacy, implicitly stating what it takes to properly make use of the technology in a way it serves the managerial efficiency objectives. Tom's experience is an example of this:

"And we haven't reached that point yet where we made something and then presented it back to the teams." — Tom

He concludes his current understanding:

“So in a sense, I don't want to be a part of it, but in a sense, I feel obliged to continue to use it... But it's like a bittersweet relationship with LLMs right now.” – Tom

Tom has not yet found a way to meet the organizational expectation of using LLMs for improved role performance. He therefore is caught between organizational expectations, and his understanding of himself as a creative professional. He expresses to feel the obligation “to continue to use it” – a pressure perceived from management that positions LLM use as part of what it means to perform well in his role: LLM use has become a standard against which he measures himself, and currently he seems to find himself falling short.

In summary, we see that TechCo’s management actively promotes human-LLM co-creative processes, normalizing LLM use as an expectation for high efficiency. For some creative professionals, this has shifted what it means to perform in their role. Adopting these expectations and including the LLMs into the creative role, is found to have an influence on the alignment with their creative community. We explore this further in the following section.

4.1.2 Membership in the Creative Community

This sub-section explores how creative professionals understand the norms, standards and expectations of their social community, and what it means to be seen as creative within it.

Within our data set, we can see two different understandings of the norms, standards and expectations that form the creative professional community. As established earlier, Jonas has not adopted LLMs into his practices. When asked whether colleagues who use LLMs become more or less creative, Jonas shares the following:

“I.. I think it could be both. They are, but if you just use it, I think you could easily get a bit lazy and start using it for simple tasks that you could actually spend some time to think about by yourself. So what's the answer on that? I think it's wrong to say that they are less creative, but the gut feeling is less creative.. but it's not.” – Jonas

Jonas’ hesitation in the beginning is telling, the question seems to have landed somewhere uncomfortable for him to speak about. He reaches for a neutral “it could be both” position, then

breaks from it and then pulls it again. His gut feeling reveals a conception of creativity that has no place for LLMs. Creative work for him is to “think about by yourself”, and by claiming this he judges those that use LLMs. Ascribing potential laziness to those that use LLMs even suggests a character judgement he performs. Laziness implies a failure of effort, which is required for creative work in his understanding. He makes this explicit through a personal example:

“I mean, I'm a photographer myself. And now it's pretty mainstream to generate pictures and images, by just prompting. And I think then if someone “oh I made this picture” – okay, you wrote something, that's good and the technique behind it is interesting. But the actual picture is completely waste. I mean it's a waste of power because (...) you haven't taken a photo. If you haven't, then you've just used a tool.” – Jonas

Jonas claims to be a photographer unprompted and performs a self-categorization that stands on the opposite of those using “tools”. He places himself among those who make things, not those who generate them. In SI terms, he positions himself against those that do use LLMs. He confirms himself with what he has internalized of what the creative community values and reinforces the norms: creativity requires the human act of doing and effort, and to him LLMs have no place in it.

Walter, someone who has fully implemented LLMs into his creative processes, shares an oppositional perspective and poses an outlier in our data set:

“I think we have reached a level where we see how it enhances your abilities. And people will... I think most people will use it more like I do. Because people are always scared of things when it's new and find out all of the reasons why not using it. But when the first cars and people were afraid of using cars, people are afraid of new things all the time.” – Walter

Opposed to Jonas, he believes using LLMs in creative processes will become the new normal for most people, as he shares “I think most people will use it like I do”. The car analogy is adding to this: by framing resistance as universal, predictable fear, Walter presents that adopting LLMs should be normalized as part of being a creative professional. It is worth noting that this comparison was unprompted, as he was not asked to compare himself to others. He is not just someone that uses LLMs in creative processes, he believes to do it in a way others in TechCo

will follow. Viewing that LLM incorporation will become part of what the creative community values, suggests he is currently distancing himself from the community that Jonas describes.

This sub-section presented two cases on each end of the scale. These outer ends are important to have established, as we found that the other interviewees of our data set position themselves between them. How they are positioned in the in-between, is explored hereafter.

4.1.3 Conducting the Orchestra of Opposing Professional Identity Expectations

The previous subsections highlight two opposing expectations on the role- and social identities respectively: the organization gradually expects LLM integration for efficiency and productivity, while the “old” creative community values creativity rooted in the human act of doing and effort. These opposing demands are pulling in opposite directions, and our findings suggest the majority of the creative professionals find themselves to be caught between.

Their response, to which we turn in this sub-section, is an attempt to satisfy and manage both simultaneously which we identify as “Conducting the orchestra of competing PI expectations”. Several participants speak to it independently through their choice of metaphors when describing their use of LLMs. Ralph describes the following:

“There is an AI now that can generate UI for us. What does that leave the UI designers in our team? I think (...) it still requires a lot of input and there is all the human discussion around it with all the stakeholders that never know what they want. (...) It's not necessarily the skill itself but it's the human, the human spider in the web if you may call it like that.” – Ralph

Titus reaches the same practice from a different angle when responding to the risk of over-reliance:

“But you can counter that with engaging more models (...) that are specifically asked to do this kind of very critical thinking. And then you can have a creative model that you orchestrate from your talk. (...) You can make yourself unbiased by engaging other models. That is like Avicii, you know, you orchestrate rather than play the guitar yourself.” – Titus

Theo makes the same structural logic in most vivid terms:

“It makes me feel like an architect, software architect, you're kind of a manager. You have a set of employees, those agents, and you can come up at the beginning of the day, “I have this kind of nice idea. Employees, Oompa Loompas, please, can you see if my idea works? I want it by the end of the day”. And they start digging away and they come, “Oh yeah, now we have done this, as you said, it looks like this”. “Oh no, no, no, that won't work. Please mine this and this and this”. And they go back to work anyway. So you're kind of a manager and you come up at the beginning of the day with this idea. (...)” – Theo

In SI terms, through the language they use, they all understand themselves as being in an orchestrating position. The Spider in the web, Avicii, the manager of Oompa Loompas are three distinct symbolic constructions that perform the same identity work: they position the self as the directing, meaning-making agent and the LLM as subordinate. This is a narrative move that allows a claim to meet the organizational expectations and community membership simultaneously.

Our findings suggest this resides in three underlying lines of reasoning that make the orchestration acts possible. The lines of reasoning individually explain how orchestration satisfies both role- and social demands, whilst withstanding the threat.

The first line of reasoning is framing the LLM as a controllable, static tool. Across the interviews, this is strikingly consistent. Pascal and David state it most directly:

“I just see it as a tool. In the same way that a carpenter builds a house and uses a hammer, it doesn't mean it's the hammer that made the house.” – Pascal

“To me, it's just a way of treating a tool. It's like anything else. That could be thinking in ways of choosing a tool in Photoshop even... it's not a negative or positive way of treating it. (...) To me, it's like: If I have a nail, should I use a hammer or a stone?.” – David

In SI terms, naming and categorizing something is never neutral, it is an act of meaning making. By labelling the LLM a hammer, Pascal and David place creativity exclusively with them, responding to the threat the LLM poses to their creative abilities. This categorization is repeated

across participants, with a consistency that suggests the symbolic meaning creative professionals ascribe to the LLM – a non-threatening object. The LLM cannot take creativity away from the person using it, these tools do not act without external input. The hammer label functions as a symbolic boundary: by framing the LLM as passive and controllable, it protects their position as the creative.

As a second line of reasoning, the participants understand competence with the tools, as meeting the expectation for increased efficiency and productivity. As we learned in the previous section, AI literacy becomes a required skill to efficiently use the LLMs and improve overall performance. David describes how engaging with them helps him:

“(...) With those tools you have a much shorter way (...) from brain to final products. You can actually, by learning how to prompt well and handle the tools, actually present something that looks really great. But at the same time has a short production time.” – David

The time from the idea to a deliverable shrinks. By learning how to prompt and handle the tool, thus increasing LLM literacy, David is able to perform up to the new efficiency expectations. He is directing the tool toward a productive end that allows him to increase speed, and he delivers what the organization requires from him. Speaking about “from brain to products” is striking: he locates creativity in him and frames the LLM as the means through which his ideas are realized. This addresses the creative community’s expectation that legitimate creative work stems from human input and effort.

The third line of reasoning establishes effort as a right to claim authorship. The participants share a common underlying logic, which is that the human effort invested at a specific point in the process establishes the right to claim creative authorship – the human act of doing. Our participants apply this logic in different ways. David’s logic locates authorship in the effort he puts into the prompting process:

“If I prompt bad (...), if I use one sentence or a couple of words, then I can have a feeling that the AI is doing the work for me, sure. (...) So if I’m lazy, I get a lazy answer (...) it’s not linked to my original thoughts. But if I write a full, fully-fledged base for the prompt to work with, it’s definitely closer. I don’t feel like it’s not my idea.” – David

The word lazy is worth pausing on, as laziness describes a failure of effort – responding to the exact judgement Jonas made earlier. To David, sufficient effort in prompting is not lazy and equals legitimate authorship. Anything below the threshold, the work belongs to the LLM, and not the human. Ralph applies a related, but distinct logic:

“So even if you take something that's already there, maybe from an LLM as well, and then do your own thing on it, I think you're creative enough for me.” – Ralph

For him, the key to authorship is putting effort into transforming the output of the LLM. Transformation is the act through which the work becomes his.

Across these logics, the underlying assumption is the same: creative authorship is earned through human effort at some point in the process, calibrated against what the creative professional community recognizes as the human act of doing. The creative professionals actively perform and defend themselves as being the author to sustain their membership in the creative professional community – even when the LLM has done significant work. The tension between role and social expectations is not resolved but managed enough to maintain a coherent professional self-understanding.

Walter marks the boundary of this pattern. He has no authorship strategy at all:

“The result is the value. Not who actually connected the dots.” – Walter

This is consistent with what the previous section revealed about him. He has moved away from the professional community that is rooted around the human act of doing and effort, having constructed an understanding of himself in which the community's standards have shifted: Only the output determines legitimacy, the “old” norms of human effort and authorship no longer hold.

Together, these lines of reasoning are what makes the act of orchestration work. By framing the LLM as a controllable tool, staying on top of how to use it well for efficiency purposes and claiming authorship through the active effort they invest in creating with it, creative professionals carve out a position where they claim to remain in control. The LLM does some of the work, but they direct it, own the output, and through that aim to maintain their standing as creative professionals. This is what conducting the orchestra means in practice.

The findings explored in this section are responses to the organizations' promotion of LLMs, and how that has shaped role- and social identity understandings. What has not yet been examined is the role of the LLMs themselves in this dynamic. The following section turns to this.

4.2 Gradual Entanglement: LLMs as Second Nature

The majority of the creative professionals have started to engage with LLMs. What remains to be understood is how engagement with the LLMs themselves reshapes how creative professionals understand their PI. An understanding that yielded interesting findings.

4.2.1 From First Encounter to Second Nature

To understand how engaging with LLMs shapes the creative professionals in practice, we start by exploring how they experienced their first encounter with these LLMs. David and Titus both express mind-opening experiences:

“I was amazed. I was like, Wow! (...) And also at that moment it just opened up my brain and said, I can do anything!” – David

David's phrase “opened up my brain” is symbolically loaded. He narrates this first encounter as a moment of identity expansion, which is a disruption in his prior self-understanding that opened new possibilities for how he could position himself as a creative professional. Similarly, Titus also expresses an encounter with the LLMs that reshaped his understanding of what is possible:

“Like my first Spotify moment (...) is this real? It's a miracle feeling. I've seen this kind of tech innovation before, but (...) I think this is the biggest I've seen. And I think we can also include computers and electricity in that. This is huge.” – Titus

The notion of “is this real?” symbolizes a moment of disruption in his current belief systems. As he shares to have experienced it to be a “miracle feeling”, he indicates a meaning-making moment around the technology, acknowledging it to be a transformative experience. Titus' comparison to computers and electricity is analytically powerful as computers and electricity

are not mere improvements of society, they fundamentally restructured it. Using this comparison demonstrates the extent to which the LLMs have disrupted his understanding of himself, and what is possible.

Moving on from these initial mind-opening experiences that allowed for an expansion of their abilities, we found continuous engagements with the tool to produce lasting shifts in how creative professionals operate. David shares:

“I think it [creativity] has changed in that sense that you are more versatile... my creativity has changed in terms that I think sometimes I catch myself like thinking in prompts” – David

As David shares to be “thinking in prompts”, he expresses how the engagement with the LLMs modified how he cognitively functions as a creative professional. His prompt-thinking indicates a destabilization of the boundary between him and the LLM. Rather than his creativity flowing from himself onto the LLM, and expanding his creativity, he now seems to become cognitively entangled with the LLM. The phrasing “I catch myself” is analytically vital. It indicates that this transformation is subconscious, showcasing how continuously engaging with LLMs has a growing impact on his understanding of himself as a creative professional. Ralph builds on this, and shares the following:

“And then it changed because of the continuous uses after that, I would say whatever I'm doing, like it just became a second nature.” – Ralph

Ralph’s terminology “second nature” is specifically telling, as it highlights the extent to which using the LLMs is integral to how he operates as a creative professional. What was once a conscious, yet uncomfortable choice, as we learned from his guilt-to-normalcy trajectory, has now become automatic. Like David’s “I catch myself”, he no longer actively decides to use the LLM, it has become part of how he functions.

Gerrit confirms this and even goes a step further:

“It becomes part of your personality. You want an answer really fast. You want to get the fastest answer and the most correct answer without the effort. Before, you could read a little bit, at least make the effort, (...) feed your brain this information unconsciously. But now it's like: this is the answer. You don't really think as much as before. So, I like it in a way, but in some way I think we are becoming very dependent on it in general, not only at work actually.”

– Gerrit

Gerrit explicitly contrasts how he processed information before and after. "You don't really think much as before" signals that continuous engagement with the LLM has reshaped how he cognitively operates as a professional, the LLM has shaped him. Notably, Gerrit does not celebrate this shift. His "I like it in a way, but in some way, I think we are becoming very dependent on it" signals an awareness that continuous engagement produces a dependency that extends, as he notes, beyond work.

What is analytically relevant across David, Ralph, and Gerrit, is that over time, the boundary between PI and LLM in their self-understanding seems to become increasingly ambiguous. The LLM is positioned as part of how they function as creative professionals. Ralph elaborates on how this happens:

“What I started learning over time, (...) is that the more context you give it, the better it becomes, right? So these days when I'm prompting, I'm writing whole little books.” – Ralph

Ralph confirms that the LLM nowadays does not have the same symbolic meaning to him as when he first started engaging with it. The more context you give it, the better it becomes. The relationship appears to strengthen over time through building history. Walter also shares the importance of this context and the value it holds when speaking about losing access to the LLMs:

“The context would be really bad to lose. Because that's something you build over time. (...) it's part of me.” – Walter

“It’s part of me” is the analytically significant phrase. For Walter, losing the LLMs means losing history. What has been built over time has become part of how he functions and understands himself. Losing it could mean becoming less than what he currently is, arguably a shrinkage of himself.

What emerges across our participants seems to be a gradual process. As David's "thinking in prompts", Ralph's "second nature", and Gerrit's "part of your personality" suggest, repeated use of the LLM appears to gradually reshape how creative professionals understand themselves in their profession over time, and often without them fully registering it.

4.2.2 “It’s Just a Tool” – Until It Isn’t

Building onto the above, our findings provided interesting insights with regards to how creative professionals make sense of what the LLMs actually are to them. As the following accounts show, the answer is not straightforward and reveals more than the participants themselves seem to realize.

When speaking about what the LLM does for their creativity, David, Ralph, and Pascal each maintain a clear boundary between how they understand the LLMs in relation to themselves:

“So with that being said.. to sort of summarize the whole creative process, it expands your skills. It really does, if you have a creative sort of soul, you can expand it.” – David

“But I think for me personally, it's, you can call it an accelerator, like of that creativity, because (...), it's not that different from how I used to work” – Ralph

“I mean... I mean, I think I see it as... It makes me more creative. It doesn't make me less creative. It makes me more creative. It makes me a better artist.(...) I can put pictures to my thoughts. It helps me to visualize my thoughts. And it becomes like... It's a tool to visualize my thoughts and it helps me to come further in my creativity.” – Pascal

What is analytically relevant is that they all seem to protect who they are through their choice of words. Whilst speaking of creative expansion, all three position themselves as agents and the LLMs as something that serves their creativity. David’s “if you have a creative soul” claims

creativity is a human quality that LLMs only serve. Ralph expresses that it is “an accelerator”, suggesting creativity resides in him, and LLMs only speed this up. Pascal expresses “it helps me to come further in my creativity”, indicating LLMs visualize what is already in his mind. By doing this, the LLMs do not seem to threaten their creativity, as they symbolically position themselves above the LLMs. David, Ralph and Pascal remain the “same creative professional”, but more capable.

Whilst the creative professionals claim the LLMs as merely a tool, they also use strikingly different terminologies to explain how they perceive the LLMs. The language that emerges is consistently relational and humanizing.

Isaac describes the LLMs as an available sparring partner:

“Having it on my phone gives me the ability to interact with it at 11 o'clock at night when I have this question or this idea that I want to have a sparring partner with.” – Isaac

This framing is revealing: A sparring partner is not just another tool in the toolbox. It describes someone who thinks alongside you, challenges you, and accompanies you. Ralph uses a similar humanizing language and involves it in the creative process:

“You have this buddy, you have somebody you talked with that kind of gives ideas and insights.” – Ralph

He refers to the LLM as a “buddy” and uses the term “someone” rather than “something” when speaking about the LLMs. Notably, the terminology also suggests a friendly and positive relationship with the LLMs. Titus goes a step further and ascribes a seniority status to the resource:

“We do have a lot of, you know, strategic challenges when it comes to introducing all of this new tech in our company.(...) How can we move the company ahead? And that complexity is sometimes overwhelming. So you can utilize AI in that as a very, very senior conversational partner.” – Titus

He describes it as the resource he turns to when organizational complexity becomes overwhelming, using it as senior conversational partner in these moments. This terminology is linguistically one of the strongest relationship types in our data. He does not see it as a resource

to be drawn upon, but a person whose judgment is trusted and whose input is sought in complex, strategically relevant considerations. Walter most clearly expresses this classification of closeness and familiarity.

“(...) It's like you've been working with a colleague. Your colleague would know who you are and what you're after and actually knows before you ask what you want. It's very convenient.

If you get a new colleague, then you have to learn them again about it.” – Walter

What this reveals is that the LLMs seem to feel human and the relationship even has distinct value. A colleague who knows you before you ask, is arguably a special bond that is not interchangeable with just any other colleague. The relationship itself has value and losing it means starting over. A significant difference from seeing it as a hammer.

The coexistence of tool-framing and relational-framing reveals a fundamental tension in how creative professionals construct the LLMs symbolically. A tool is static and controllable, it does not know you nor does it have history with you. Losing it would merely be an inconvenience. In contrast, a relational partner is dynamic and meaningful: it responds to you, accumulates shared context, and its absence is felt like a loss. The human-LLM collaboration is relational in its experience – the more context they give the LLMs, the more it responds to them specifically, building a relationship that, as Walter notes, is something that is accumulated over time.

In conclusion, our findings in this section show how engaging with the LLMs reshapes not only how creative professionals understand themselves, but also the very nature of the LLMs themselves – moving from merely a tool they use, to something they are in some form of a relationship with. This reshaping is suggested to be a consequence of the engagement itself – partially initiated by the organization – and sustained through continuous engagement. What is analytically vital in this process is that the relationship grows over time: the more context creative professionals give the LLMs, the more they respond to them specifically. As David's "thinking in prompts" and Gerrit's "you don't really think much as before" suggest, this is bidirectional. The creative professional shapes the LLMs, and the LLMs shape how the creative professional operates.

Overall, the findings in this section established the organizational promotion of human-LLM co-creativity to lead to diverse role- and social identity understandings amongst creative

professionals. Where some do not perceive a threat to their PI, others find themselves in a tension between opposing role- and social identity expectations. Analyzing LLMs in relation to PI, we found the LLMs to shape the PI of creative professionals, through ongoing engagement. The following chapter grounds these findings in theory and addresses the research question that guided these empirical findings.

5 Discussion

In this discussion, we place our findings in literature and address our research question that guided this study. To provide a comprehensible discussion, we revisit what this study initiated.

Current research focuses primarily on the challenges of: whether LLMs can be creative (Runco, 2025), how LLMs can benefit creative professionals (Kortenbach et al., 2026), the creative quality of human-LLM co-creative output (Heimstad et al., 2025; Magni et al., 2024) and the professional identity threat that is imposed on the creative professionals (Shonhe & Min, 2025b). The question therefore is no longer whether LLMs disrupt PI – the literature has answered that. What remains underexplored is *how* creative professionals understand their PI in the disruptive human-LLM partnership. By bringing a symbolic interactionist perspective to the human-LLM co-creativity studies, this research set out to address the following research question: *How do creative professionals understand their professional identity in technology organizations that promote human-LLM co-creative processes?*

As literature informs us, PI refers to the meanings that individuals ascribe to themselves in the context of their professional activities (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016; Barker Caza & Creary, 2016). It is an individual's answer to the question “Who am I?”, in a professional context (Vignoles et al. 2011 as cited in Carter & Grover, 2015, p.938). To address how creative professionals understand their PI in light of the human-LLM co-creativity tension, we explored how they understand their role-, social- and LLM identity respectively and in relation to one another. Additionally, we examined how the LLMs shape the PI of creative professionals.

5.1 Human-LLM co-creativity – Gradually Becoming an Expectation

Organizations actively shape the conditions under which professional identities are built, through a process what Alvesson and Willmott (2002, p.625) call identity regulation – defined as “the more or less intentional effects of social practices upon processes of identity construction and reconstruction”, which is achieved through discursive practices. The aim of identity regulation, in their framing, is to produce the “appropriate individual”, which is an

employee whose self-understanding aligns with managerial objectives (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002).

Our analysis establishes TechCo's management as an active promoter of human-LLM collaborations, engaging in identity regulations to stimulate adoption, aimed at producing the "appropriate creative professional". Our data suggests that whilst some individuals perceive the promotion as merely a suggestion, the majority perceives it significantly more assertive. In their experience, the organization moves from merely suggesting LLMs as useful resources, to redefining their use as an emerging expectation for competent professional performance – adopting LLMs perform at high efficiency. To regulate this identity reform, the organization engages in discursive practices that reshape the symbolic meaning of the LLMs. Where some experience the LLMs as cheating, a threat to creative vibrancy, management reframes their symbolic meaning to an available resource that enhances efficiency.

Ralph's guilt-to-normalcy trajectory illustrates how this operates in practice. The organizational promotion produces an identity disruption, which management resolves not by directing behavior but by reframing the symbolic meaning of LLM use from "it's cheating" to "it's efficient". His disrupted self-understanding is restored through managerial ratification. This is precisely how identity regulation through discursive practices operates: TechCo shapes the participants' sense of who they should be, the appropriate individual, aligned with organizational objectives through communication.

In alignment with Alvesson and Willmott's (2002) finding that identity regulation is never seamless – and professionals may respond with resistance, negotiation or selective appropriation – our data indicates differing accounts of conflict with the organizationally performed identity regulations. Further explored in the following section.

5.2 Differing Professional Identity Understandings across Creative Professionals

PI is always in process, and open to revision, as the conditions in which professionals work continuously shift. Pratt (2012, as cited in Barker Caza & Creary, 2016, p.11) argues that individuals take an active role in the construction of their PI, by “acting, doing and interacting” in the social context. These active acts of identity construction, we understand as identity work – defined by Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003, p.1165) as “forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness”. Considering what identity work concerns, the most common outcome is the resolution of certain tensions or threats to the individual, caused by identities in conflict (Caza et al., 2018). Recognizing that individuals have multiple identities, Caza et al. (2018) argue that these different types of identities can influence how identity work is performed.

Our findings suggest three distinct forms of identity work in response to the human-LLM co-creative PI tension. Some individuals reject the use of LLMs, some find themselves in-between opposing role- and social identity normative systems; adopting a provisional self, and others distance themselves from the creative community – becoming creative hybrids.

5.2.1 Rejecting the LLMs

In line with Pertriglieri’s (2011) understanding of identity threats as subjective experiences, one individual was found to not perceive TechCo organizational promotions for adopting the LLMs as an expectation, but rather as a mere suggestion.

This individual did not recognize the organization's pressure to adopt LLMs for creative efficiency, thus maintaining their understanding of what it means to perform in their role. By rejecting the identity regulations performed by the organization (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002), his role identity remains unchanged, and therefore he does not perceive a tension between his role and social identity. As we learned from Caza et. al (2018), this act of rejecting the identity regulations, in itself is an act of identity work aimed at maintaining the identity. As literature suggests, when the expectations of role- and social identities align, the PI is coherent and self-esteem is protected or enhanced (Barker Caza & Creary, 2016, p.8). There is no tension to manage or resolve, as the norms they internalize with regards to the role- identity, stand in line with that of the social identity.

Simultaneously, this person was found to reject the idea of introducing LLMs into the creative sector overall, claiming that using LLMs makes someone less creative, as creativity resides around the human act of doing and effort. By claiming that LLM use makes someone less creative, and that creativity resides in the human act of doing and effort, they perform identity work at the level of social identity. As Caza et al. (2018) argues, they attach themselves more firmly to the creative professional community rooted in the human act of doing and effort. In Sveningsson and Alvesson's (2003) terms, this is identity work in its strengthening form, as their self-understanding as a creative professional becomes more coherent and more distinctive through the contrast, they draw with those who use LLMs. The boundary drawn between those that use and do not use LLMs reproduces and sharpens the community norms against which the majority of participants find themselves in tension.

5.2.2 Conducting the Orchestra of Opposing Expectations

For the majority of creative professionals however, leveraging LLMs to increase efficiency in producing creative output has become an internalized expectation concerning what it means to be competent in performing their role as a creative professional within TechCo. When the internalized understanding of what it means to perform in one's role shifts, the role identity is disrupted. The social identity however remains anchored in pre-existing community norms and values. The shift in role expectations, sets the two identities in tension rather than alignment (Barker Caza & Creary, 2016, p.8; Stryker & Burke, 2000, p.290). As these individuals have started to gradually adopt the LLMs into their creative processes, this adoption has introduced tension with their alignment to the creative professional community that is rooted in the human act of doing and effort. These creative professionals are held between two normative systems that pull in opposite directions: TechCo's Management vs. The Creative Community. They find themselves in the in-between.

In response to this tension, we found creative professionals performing identity work aimed at maintaining alignment between both identities (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003) – an act we see as “conducting the orchestra of competing expectations”. The conducting of the orchestra position encompasses lines of reasoning that explain how it satisfies both role- and social identity norms, standards and expectations, whilst withstanding the cognitive atrophy threat posed by LLMs. By framing the LLMs as a controllable tool, similar to a hammer, they resist the threat that the LLM poses to their creative abilities, positioning themselves as in control.

Feeding into this framing of control, AI literacy becomes a required skill to leverage the LLMs in ways that sustain creativity and satisfy efficiency expectations. Moreover, human effort invested at any point in the process establishes the right to claim creative authorship, thereby sustaining membership in the creative community that values human effort and the act of doing.

The position of conducting the orchestra as we understand it, is an experimentation method to learn to adapt to new role expectations. As described by Beech (2011), these creative professionals find themselves in a state of liminality: they have moved on from their old PI, yet have not settled into a new PI. Their familiar reference points that anchor their professional identity (e.g. clear role- and social identity norms) are de-stabilized, and they engage in intense identity work in response. In alignment with Ibarra's (1999) terms, we understand the "conducting the orchestra" position to be considered as them testing a provisional self – a temporary identity configuration that bridges the gap between a disrupted current identity and a not-yet-formed new one. By adopting the LLMs, they disrupt their role identity, however, have not yet developed a full new PI, as they remain settled into the norms and values of the creative community that is rooted in the human act of doing and effort.

Though Ibarra (2005) adds that the in-between period can simultaneously function as a holding environment in which normal identity rules are temporarily suspended, making experimentation with possible selves possible (p. 24), this can, if the liminal state carries on over time, trigger anxiety, lead to low self-esteem, and vulnerability for these creative professionals (Beech, 2011, pp.294, 297–299). By adopting the provisional self as conducting the orchestra of opposing expectations, these individuals are taking an active role in the construction of their PI, by acting, doing and interacting in their social context (Barker Caza & Creary, 2016). By experimenting with different self-presentations, and evaluating these against internal and external feedback, these professionals actively assemble their identity through practice. This provisional self might settle into a new identity over time, or they move away from this provisional self, something we cannot, however, forecast.

5.2.3 Becoming the Creative Hybrid

Interestingly, one creative professional in our sample was found to have solved the human-LLM co-creativity PI tension by distancing themselves from the creative community that values the human act of doing and effort. Distancing oneself from the professional community, as we

understand from Caza et al. (2018), is an act of identity work performed at the level of one's social identity. It is a response to a tension with the professional community, aimed at solving this tension. Such distancing becomes evident when individuals change how they define the professional community, which is what this person was found to have done (Caza et al., 2018).

They were found to have fully adopted the LLMs into their creative practices, increasingly becoming intertwined with the resource – becoming a creative hybrid so to say. The tension this poses with their professional community is solved by redefining the norms they internalize concerning what it means to be a member of the professional community. Opposing the norms of the human act of doing and effort, they define that creative value lies in the results yielded from human-LLM co-creativity – it does not matter who connects the dots. This position is strengthened further, by stating to believe people (the creative professionals) will move towards using it more like they do.

In sum, this section illustrates how TechCo's management discursively regulates PI through its active promotion of human-LLM co-creativity. They are reframing LLM use into, as by some perceived, a requirement for competent professional performance. Creative professionals respond to it in three distinct ways of identity work. First, one creative professional does not perceive the use as expectation, rejects LLM use entirely, maintaining alignment between their role- and social identities, and strengthening the position within the professional community. Secondly, which counts for the majority, they find themselves caught in a liminal state, in which they experiment with a provisional self that orchestrates the opposing role- and social identity expectations. Lastly, one creative professional resolved the human-LLM co-creative role- and social identity tension, by becoming a creative hybrid. They resolve the tension by distancing themselves from the professional community's norms altogether, redefining creative value in a way it accommodates LLM use. Together, these findings reveal that there is no singular way in which creative professionals understand their PI in light of the human-LLM co-creativity tension. How they respond is shaped by how centrally the affected practices sit in their self-understanding and how they position themselves, relative to the organizational and creative community expectations.

5.3 LLMs are Different: Moving Toward a Relational LLM Identity

As we learned, the majority of creative professionals have started to engage with LLMs. The creative vibrancy threat posed by LLMs is mitigated through both the symbolic reframing by management, and the act of orchestration that sustains control and authorship. In practice, however, the threat is only managed but not resolved. What remains to be understood is how engagement with the LLMs themselves reshape how creative professionals understand their PI.

As Carter and Grover (2015, p.938) highlight, ITs can become integral to one's understanding of themselves as a professional, and introduce the IT Identity – defined as the extent to which an individual views use of an IT as integral to his or her sense of self. Such IT identities are formed when individuals expand their PI boundaries to include the capabilities presented by the IT, to which they subsequently become emotionally attached. Absence of such IT capabilities, is in turn experienced as a loss of personal abilities, thus shrinkage of self (Carter & Grover, 2015).

We found that this is indeed the case for the creative professionals that started to integrate LLMs into their creative processes. Leveraging LLMs to increase efficiency in producing creative output, for them, has become an internalized expectation concerning what it means to be competent in performing their role as a creative professional within TechCo. The LLMs provide capabilities that can elevate creative efficiency, and individuals perceive these capabilities to be foundational to their PI – it expands their “creative soul” as one claimed. As others claimed it to be “second nature” and “it becomes part of your personality”, the LLMs are no longer something these creative professionals use; rather it has started to reorganize how they understand themselves. They expanded their boundaries of personal resources to include LLMs, extending their understanding of themselves by including the efficiency capabilities of the LLMs. Their creative competence has become inextricably tied to their relationship with the LLMs – competent creative performance equals high efficiency equals using LLMs. The absence of the LLMs is in turn experienced as a significant loss and shrinkage of their creative professional identity. Engaging with the LLMs thus aids in the internalization of the organization's promotion to leveraging LLMs to increase efficiency in producing creative output – engaging with the LLMs themselves helps in the identity regulating process.

However, we found it does not stop there. Our findings suggest a nuance to the literature on IT identity, one that is currently not covered: the continuous engagement in Human-LLM co-creativity leads individuals to gradually become more cognitively entangled with the LLMs, a process that is found to be ongoing, due to their generative and conversational nature, as well as their ability to build on history. A phenomenon explored below.

As another creative professional indicated “I sometimes catch myself thinking in prompts”, he describes the same phenomenon as described before yet adds an analytically interesting layer of subconsciousness to the process. Subconsciously, this person is cognitively reorganized by the engagement with the LLMs. Engaging with the LLMs bidirectionally shapes both how creative professionals understand the LLMs themselves, and how creative professionals understand themselves in relation to the LLMs.

It raises the question of how this subconscious cognitive reorganization really occurred. As we stated in literature, the LLMs are different from technologies established before. The current IT Identity theory, as developed by Carter and Grover (2015), assumes the object boundaries of technologies remain the same across interactions. An understanding that does not hold with LLMs. By engaging with LLMs, the creative professionals provide more context to the LLMs, which leads it to perform what they state as “better”. The accumulated context is understood as shared history, something that would be detrimental to lose as it is non-replaceable, as our findings have proven. What is by creative professionals referred to as a “hammer” or “screwdriver”, is now also referred to as a “very senior conversational partner”, a “buddy”, a “long-term colleague”. It is therefore not the same object as when the creative professionals first engaged with it, and it has moved beyond the material boundaries upon which the current IT Identity resides (Carter & Grover, 2015).

Seeing the conversational and generative nature of LLMs, is it not surprising that individuals reshape how they understand LLMs, and themselves in relation to them, through engaging with it. As we understand from SI, the self is an ongoing social accomplishment, continuously produced and reproduced through interaction with others (Prasad, 2018). In this understanding, the social environment indication might not hold space for the LLMs, however the notion of “interacting with others” could. As the creative professionals start building relationships with the LLMs, and assign it human-like understandings, they interact with “others” when interacting with the LLM (Prasad, 2018). Though we know that LLMs do not act without input,

some scholars conceptualize LLMs as productive discursive systems that can influence how one speaks and reasons (Kouros, 2026). As identity talk, or discursive identity work, relates to the use of narratives, dialogues, stories and conversations as a channel for identity work (Caza et al., 2018, p.891), the ongoing dialogue creative professionals have with the LLMs through prompting and building context, is precisely this. We can assume that engaging with the LLMs over time, thus engaging in discourse with the LLMs gradually reshapes how creative professionals understand themselves.

The above provides a foundation for the argument to build on the IT identity concept as developed by Carter and Grover (2015), moving the LLM Identity from a material identity to a relational Identity. It encompasses a form of IT Identity within which a creative professional's understanding of their PI is not only expanded by technology, but is formed through an ongoing, mutually transforming relationship with a dynamic system.

5.4 Synthesis

In sum, our research question: *How do creative professionals understand their professional identity in technology organizations that promote human-LLM co-creative processes?*, does not yield a singular answer. Instead, the findings suggest a divergent PI understanding amongst the creative professionals, shaped by how creative professionals negotiate with the normative systems acting upon them – the organization, the creative professional community, and the LLMs.

At the organizational level, TechCo's management actively promotes human-LLM co-creative processes and engages in acts of identity regulation to stimulate their adoption. They gradually frame human-LLM co-creativity from a suggestion to an expectation of competent role performance. Yet, as Alvesson and Willmott (2002) inform us, such identity regulations are never seamless. Creative professionals are found to not passively absorb the human-LLM co-creativity promotions and respond in distinct forms of identity work to maintain their professional identity in alignment.

The first group of creative professionals is found to reject LLM adoption completely. Their role identity remains unchanged, and their social identity is anchored in the professional

community's creativity values of the human act of doing and effort. For these creative professionals, their role- and social identities, thus their PI, is in alignment and self-esteem is protected (Barker Caza & Creary, 2016, p.8). The second, and majority, group of creative professionals finds themselves in the in-between – a state of liminality, as Beech (2011) informs us. Leveraging LLMs to increase efficiency in producing creative output, for them, has become an internalized expectation concerning what it means to be competent in performing their role as a creative professional within TechCo – an internalization regulated by not only management, but also through engagement with the LLMs. Their role identity has shifted, yet their social identity remains unchanged, rooted in pre-existing community norms of the human act of doing and effort. Caught between opposing role- and social identity norms, standards and expectations, they adopt a provisional self; conducting the orchestra of competing expectations, supported by lines of reasoning that are aimed to satisfy both the role- and social identity expectations. Their PI is neither broken, nor resolved, but rather in ongoing, active negotiation. The third group of creative professionals has moved beyond the tension and solved it by distancing themselves from the professional community's norms previously mentioned. They have fully embraced the LLMs, and redefined what membership for them means. Human-LLM co-creativity does not compromise membership but rather serves as the new basis of creative value.

For the creative professionals that started engaging in human-LLM co-creative processes, our findings suggest an underlying, more fundamentally changing process: the entanglement of their creative PI with the LLMs. For the creative professionals that are engaging in human-LLM co-creative processes, the technology is no longer merely a tool they use. In line with the IT Identity concept developed by Carter and Grover (2015) they expanded their boundaries of personal resources to include LLMs, extending their understanding of themselves by including the efficiency capabilities of the LLMs. Their creative competence has become inextricably tied to their relationship with the LLM, and absence of the LLM is in turn experienced as a significant loss and shrinkage of their creative professional identity. Yet, unlike how the IT Identity concept of Carter and Grover (2015) suggests, we found it does not stop there.

What begins as any IT identity, in the understanding of Carter and Grover's (2015) conceptualization, gradually evolves into a more dynamic relationship, unlike previous ITs. What was first referred to as a tool, is now understood as a human-like relationship, which creative professionals continuously develop through interacting with the LLMs, and become

more attached to by building history. Seeing the conversational and generative nature of the LLMs, and the fact that individuals have started to assign them human-like status, we found the creative professionals to subconsciously become more and more entangled with the LLM. What this tells us is that the PI of creative professionals is not simply threatened or preserved by the introduction of the LLMs – it is actively shaped through interacting with them. For some, the LLMs have become discursive partners that shape identity work.

Rather than claiming LLMs as amplifiers of human creativity, a “second mind” that does not replace them, like Kortenbach et al. (2026), suggests, our findings reveal a more nuanced understanding. LLMs are not a simple organization decision on efficiency, and they do not simply pose an opportunity or a threat to the creative professional and their self-understanding. Their introduction in the creative sector destabilizes the understood norms, values and expectations that guide the creative professionals, and engaging in human-LLM co-creativity destabilizes the boundaries between the creative professionals and the LLMs, as they become more cognitively entangled with the LLMs over time. In line with what Shonhe et al. (2025b) suggest, we find the LLMs pose an ongoing threat to the PI of the creative professionals, something against which creative professionals continuously perform identity work to resolve. This can have lasting implications for them, yet what these lasting implications are, we suggest future researchers to further explore.

Taken together, our findings provide a comprehensive understanding with regards to how creative professionals understand themselves currently, yet we must acknowledge the fast-changing nature of these understandings in light of the dynamic and active nature of the LLMs. As the engagements with the LLMs are subconsciously changing how creative professionals operate, we wonder how this unfolds over time. How will the majority of the creative professionals that find themselves in adopting a provisional self, move beyond the liminal state? And how does the engagement with the LLMs continue to shape the self-understanding of creative professionals? Perhaps Walter was right after all, and people will follow his lead as he suggested – becoming the creative hybrids and moving beyond the values of the human act of doing and effort.

6 Conclusion

The following chapter concludes this research, by summarizing the research purpose and findings, highlighting key takeaways, establishing its contributions and implications, and reflecting on its limitations and opportunities for future research.

6.1 Research Purpose and Findings

This study set out to explore how creative professionals understand their professional identity in technology organizations that promote human-LLM co-creative processes. Grounded in a symbolic interactionist perspective, and conducted within a single Swedish ICT company, we studied how creative professionals understand their role- and social identities, together comprising professional identity, respectively and in relation to one another, and how engaging with LLMs shapes creative PI understandings – something we understand as LLM Identity.

Our findings do not yield a singular answer that addresses the research question. Creative professionals respond differently to the promotion of human-LLM co-creative processes, following three distinct empirically grounded understandings of PI amongst creative professionals. The first group is found to reject the LLMs, ensuring the role identity remains unchanged. As they do not adopt LLMs in their role identity, they strengthen their social identity – their membership in the creative community that values the human act of doing and effort. Their role- and social identities are in alignment, and their PI remains stable. The second group, the majority, finds themselves in a liminal state: their internalized expectations of what it means to perform in their role, has moved to incorporate LLM-driven efficiency, and their creative competencies have started to become inextricably linked to the capabilities presented by the LLMs. Their social identity, however, their understanding of what membership in the creative professional community entails, remains anchored in the human act of doing, and effort. In response to this tension, they adopt a provisional self – conducting the orchestra of opposing expectations – that aims at solving the tension by satisfying both role- and social identity expectations. This provisional self is not a settled identity, and their PI is in ongoing, active negotiation. The third group has moved beyond the human-LLM co-creative PI tension, by redefining what membership to the creative community constitutes. They move away from the values of the human act of doing, and effort, and redefine what they understand the creative

community values – creative output through efficient LLM use, over the human act of doing and effort.

For the creative professionals that engage in human-LLM co-creative processes, we found that they do not only expand their PI boundaries and include the capabilities presented by the LLMs, to which they subsequently become emotionally attached. Our findings revealed that individuals who engage in human-LLM co-creative processes, become gradually entangled with LLMs over time. What starts as a regular IT identity is found to develop into something more dynamic. As creative professionals feed the LLMs input, they build history and context over time, and cease to view the LLMs as a tool, giving them human-like statuses and building friendly relationships. Due to their conversational and generative nature, and as creative professionals give it human-like statuses, their PI is not merely expanded by incorporating the LLMs, rather it is continuously, but subconsciously shaped through interacting with them.

6.2 Key Takeaways

In summary, our thesis provides the following central insights:

- The organization is found as an active promoter for human-LLM co-creative processes, conducting discursive acts of identity regulation, to facilitate adoption and establishing the appropriate creative professional – someone who adopts human-LLM co-creative processes for high efficiency reasons, and views this as part of what it means to perform in the role as a creative professional. Besides the organizations' management, the LLMs themselves also act as a productive discursive system, influencing how creative professionals relate to the resource, regulating their identities.
- Creative professionals respond differently to the promotion of human-LLM co-creative processes, following three distinct empirically grounded understandings of PI amongst creative professionals. One group rejects the LLMs entirely, the second adopts a provisional self as an attempt to satisfy opposing role- and social identity expectations, and the last becomes a creative hybrid – distancing themselves from pre-existing community norms.

- The group that adopts a provisional self is the largest group. The majority of the creative professionals find themselves in a liminal state, and experiences to be in the “in-between” of role- and social identity norms, standards and expectations. They are managing rather than solving this tension.
- LLMs are unlike previous technologies. Due to their generative and conversational nature, and the ability to build history with it over time, the LLMs are more relational in character and in experience. They do not stay the same objects over time and move from a mere tool to a human-like interpretation.
- Creative PI is not only expanded by the LLMs but shaped through engaging with it. Engaging with the LLMs, gradually, yet subconsciously, reshapes how creative professionals operate and think – a bidirectional phenomenon; the creative professional shapes the LLMs, and the LLMs in turn shape the creative professionals.

6.3 Contributions and Implications

This study advances the understanding of creative professional identity in light of the hype of human-LLM co-creativity. By adopting SI as a theoretical perspective, it allowed for examining how creative professionals understand their PI in organizations that promote human-LLM co-creativity. By drawing on live experiences of creative professionals, positioned in technology organizations that promote human-LLM co-creative processes, this research reveals the complexities of the introduction of LLMs to the creative professionals, outlining the organization, the creative professional community as well as the LLMs, as normative systems that shape the PI of the creative professionals.

Our first theoretical contribution is the extension of the current knowledge on creative professional identity understandings in light of the introduction of human-LLM co-creativity. It moves beyond the existing theoretical focus of documenting human-LLM co-creative opportunities, threats and tensions (Heimstad et al., 2025; Kortenbach et al., 2026; Magni et al., 2024; Shonhe & Min, 2025b), to understanding identity work as it happens in practice. Through the adopted SI lens, the study informs us that creative professionals do not respond uniformly to the organizational promotion of human-LLM co-creativity. Instead, we found three distinct

forms of negotiation: rejection, testing with a provisional self (conducting the orchestra of opposing role- and social identity expectations) and social identity distancing (becoming the creative hybrid). Notably, the second group, the ones testing with a provisional self, is the majority group. A position that is considered as a state of liminality, a state that could yield psychological damage if not resolved over time.

Secondly, our research contributes to the current understandings of LLMs in relation to creative professional identities. By acknowledging contemporary understanding of ITs as material identities within one's PI, as conceptualized by Carter and Grover (2015), it reveals creative professionals have expanded their PI by incorporating the creative abilities presented by the LLMs, to which they have subsequently become emotionally attached. To them, competent creative performance equals high efficiency equals using LLMs, and absence of the LLMs is in turn experienced as a significant loss in or shrinkage of their creative professional identity. This understanding accounts for the conceptualization of LLMs as IT identities, as presented by Carter and Grover, however we see it does not stop here. Due to the conversational and generative nature of the LLMs, LLMs are not a stable object, and creative professionals are found to establish human-like relationships with the LLMs. Over time, through engaging with it, they gradually become more entangled with the LLM, as the LLMs operate as a discursive system that subconsciously reorganizes how they cognitively operate.

Our findings hold multiple broader implications for organizations, creative professionals, as well as academics. For organizations that promote Human-LLM co-creative processes, our study shows that introducing LLMs to creative professionals and stimulating their adoption is not a simple efficiency and creativity amplifying decision. It triggers complex identity work in response to a professional identity tension that the majority of the creative professionals find themselves positioned within. For creative professionals, our findings highlight the necessity to remain attentive towards the subconscious entanglement with the LLMs. As our research reveals, the cognitive reorganization that happens through the ongoing engagement with the LLMs is often not entirely registered. For academic contexts, this study sets the stage for multiple future research directions, further elaborated on in the following subsection.

6.4 Limitations and Future Research

This study has shown that creative professionals react differently to the promotion of human-LLM co-creative processes at TechCo. Additionally, the continuous engagement with the LLMs seem to have lasting effects on how creative professionals understand themselves. Future research could expand on this in more depth. Before exploring these further, we first reflect on several limitations that impacted this research and must be addressed.

First, the scope of this research is limited to a single company in Sweden, within a single sector – an ICT firm in the technology sector. Accordingly, all findings are grounded within the context of TechCo’s organizational context, which may affect the transferability to other sectors or cultural and organizational contexts.

Second, the sample was constructed through a combination of snowball and self-selection sampling. Snowball sampling carries an inherent risk of homogeneity, as initial contacts tend to identify further participants similar to themselves (Saunders et al., 2023, p.324). Self-selection introduces a further bias/risk: those who agreed to participate may hold particularly strong views on our topic, whether enthusiastic or critical, which may not reflect the full range of positions within the organization (Saunders et al., 2023, p.324).

Third, all twelve participants in this study identify as male. Given that women represent for approximately 29% of the total workforce at TechCo and around only 19% of tech roles in Sweden (Tech Sverige, n.d., as cited in Dawson, 2023), an all-male sample is not statistically surprising in the positions we interviewed, but a meaningful constraint. The gendered dimension of human-LLM co-creation may be experienced differently across gender and poses a meaningful direction for future research but falls outside of this research scope.

Finally, this study took place within a relatively short timeframe of approximately eight weeks, which limits the depth of it to a snapshot in time. It inevitably restricts the potential scope of this research. A longitudinal study would allow for a more thorough data collection and other, potentially richer insights.

To build on our findings, or provide more nuanced insights, future research could shed light on several aspects the scope of our study either did not allow for or emerged from our discussion.

First, a longitudinal study would allow for examining how the here identified dynamics unfold over time. Our study offers a snapshot of how creative professionals currently understand their PI. It cannot tell us whether the position of orchestrating stabilizes, whether the liminal state causes psychological shifts, whether the dependency to the LLMs deepens, or the relationship with the LLMs intensifies further over time. A longitudinal study would be particularly valuable to capture these developments and to trace the provisional self, aiming at understanding whether and how creative professionals eventually arrive at a settled PI in the context of human-LLM co-creativity.

Second, we suggest future research to examine the discourse that takes place between the creative professional and the LLMs more closely. Our study identifies that the engagement of creative professionals with LLMs shapes the self-understanding of creative professionals over time, due to its generative and conversational nature, and ability to exercise power at the level of discourse. Yet what remains underexplored is how the LLMs operate as discursive systems influencing the self-understandings of the creative professionals. A study focused on how creative professionals engage with the LLMs in practice, could offer a more granular account of the impact of the LLMs on the PI of the creative professionals.

Third, our study is grounded in symbolic interactionism, which centers the individual meaning-making. This lens was productive for our purposes, but it does not accommodate for broader structural forces, such as the organization or labor market dynamics. Future research drawing on critical theory could situate the individual identity work we document within those larger structures, offering a more complete picture of the conditions under which creative professionals understand themselves.

Studies in these directions would contribute to a deeper and more complete understanding of how creative professionals understand their professional identity in the era of human-LLM co-creativity, and how this unfolds over time.

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