

# CREATIVE JOLTS: RESPONSES TO EXISTENTIALLY THREATENING FEEDBACK ALONG THE JOURNEYS OF EARLY-STAGE ENTREPRENEURS

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## INTRODUCTION

What happens when a creator is faced with feedback that credibly throws into question the very point or viability of their focal idea or project? How do independent creators – entrepreneurs, authors, designers and others – respond to such existentially threatening feedback? What are the affective consequences and do we see substantial revisions and even disruptive shifts in long-term idea journeys as a result? These unaddressed puzzles constitute the focus of our research.

Existing organizational creativity recognizes the fundamental role of feedback in the creative process. Researchers have sought to unpack how interactions in which ideas are assessed and co-developed function as a key driver of creativity (Hargadon & Bechky, 2006; Harvey & Kou, 2013); investigated specific processes of feedback-seeking and feedback-giving (e.g., Shalley, Zhou, and Oldham, 2004; De Stobbeleir, Ashford, and Buyens, 2011); and brought attention to the dynamic relationship between feedback and the creative revision of ideas over time (Harrison & Rouse, 2015; Harrison & Dossinger, 2017). Recent contributions have repositioned the creative process as an idea journey (Perry-Smith & Mannucci, 2017) to be traced not only through analysing the behaviours of creators but also with systematic attention to interactions and prototype-objects.

Notwithstanding these advances, research has largely omitted instances of feedback that throw into question *the very point or viability* of a focal idea. Feedback of such fundamental and existential nature is distinctive from conventional notions of feedback where the focus is on (incrementally) improving the quality of an idea, product, performance, design, artwork or prototype. For independent creative workers, learning how to deal with existential feedback that calls into question the viability of their focal idea, project or prototype is in fact a universal requirement. While prior research suggests that critical or negative feedback tends to get viewed as so threatening that individuals typically ignore it or respond with defensiveness, denial and conformity (Ilgen et al., 1979; Ilgen et al., 1981; Podsakoff & Farh, 1989), our study finds that existential feedback is frequently *accepted* by creators and allowed to shape the direction of emerging ideas.

In contrast to prior research on creative revision, our study brings to the foreground the influential role that existential feedback can play along the idea journeys of autonomous creators. We show how feedback that triggers a strong affective reaction – entailing negative feelings of frustration, anger, depression and self-doubt – can serve as a powerful and generative driver of creative revision activity. The process model we develop makes important theoretical contributions to research on creative revision, feedback and affect, shining a light on one of the most disruptive

feedback episodes that autonomous creators undergo. From a practical perspective, our paper points to a new and potentially more favorable orientation to the role of existential feedback in creative, entrepreneurial contexts, when that feedback is also credible and informative.

### CREATIVE REVISION, AFFECT AND EXISTENTIAL FEEDBACK

We find that existential feedback provokes a charged, stress-laden affective response on the part of the creator. It calls for substantial creative revision to moderate or resolve the existential threat(s) highlighted (when such threats are credible and accepted by the recipient). Although this entanglement of feedback, affect, creativity and existential threats is a fundamental part of creative work, existing literature has examined these dimensions only in separation.

One existing stream of scholarship has investigated the effects of different affective states on creative cognition and performance. This stream has focused on idea generation as opposed to how affect might shape the way emerging ideas are evaluated *after* the ideation phase (e.g. Amabile et al., 2005). The literature broadly agrees that positive affect – and shifts from negative to positive affect – are conducive for idea generation and problem-solving as they promotes cognitive flexibility (Isen et al., 1987; Bledow et al. 2012). Regrettably, this literature has yet to interact substantially with research on feedback and creative revision, even though we know that feedback can induce significant affective reactions that are likely to influence the revision of emerging ideas.

Another pertinent literature stream sheds light on the dynamic relationship that exists between feedback, creative revision efforts and the creative product(s). This stands in contrast to an earlier literature preoccupied with feedback and its impact on creative workers or groups and their performance in a narrow sense (e.g., Fodor & Carver, 2000; Yuan & Zhou, 2008). Notably, Harrison & Rouse (2015) offer an interactionist account of the feedback-creative revision relationship through two longitudinal studies (of dance choreography and an R&D lab) that reveal sets of “moves” that feedback providers and creative workers employ. The authors transcend narrow conceptualizations of feedback, recognizing the role of the creator as not simply passively receiving feedback but engaging with it actively. They foreground the creative project itself and call attention to how changes as well as continuities in the *content* of a focal creative project or idea may be traced over time. In the same vein, Harvey & Ko (2013) adopt a granular sequence analytic approach to examining how four US healthcare groups switch between distinctive modes of creative interaction over time. The authors point to the *generativity* of evaluation-centered interactions, challenging prevalent assumptions in the creativity literature about the drivers and essential phases of creativity. Recently, Grimes (2018) has further extended the literature on feedback and creative revision by examining the interplay of feedback and identity-related constraints. Criticizing the predominantly informational orientation of existing research – i.e., its focus on access to information and efforts to improve the novelty and usefulness of ideas – the author contends that creative work is frequently a deeply personal endeavor and as such intimately tied to a person’s identity (Grimes 2018:1694). He demonstrates how differences in types of psychological ownership shape the revision of focal ideas through identity work, following the receipt of relevant feedback.

The above studies have expanded our understanding of the nuanced, dynamic relationship between feedback (or evaluation) and creative revision, moving the field beyond narrow characterizations of feedback in the creative process. However, this literature has yet to explore two sets of issues central to the present paper—the affective dimension of successive feedback interactions (including how feedback-related affect shapes revision work over time) as well as “existential” feedback interactions that question the very point or viability of a focal idea. Neither

of these dimensions can be subsumed under the informational (cognitive) approach or the identity-focused approach to feedback and creative revision.

An “existential threat” is understood to be a threat to survival (May et al., 1958), but it can also be conceptualized as the potential loss of something so important to a person that he/she cannot bear to fathom its loss—such as a creative idea or project one is seriously committed to. A feedback episode in the context of creative revision may translate into an existential threat when it (1) speaks directly to the most valued, highest-order goals of the creator and (2) credibly suggests that these goals will be frustrated through the demise of the focal idea. Social cognitive theory and Brennan’s (2001) Social-Cognitive Transition (SCT) model of adjustment (a psychosocial model built upon key concepts from the coping, social-cognitive, traumatic stress literatures as well as cognitive theories of emotion; e.g. Brewin et al., 1996) suggest how the relationship between existential threats and creative revision responses might be theorized. Coping, from a social cognitive perspective, is not simply a matter of solving external problems or reframing one’s emotions or interpretations—it entails the painful, time-consuming transformation and “repair” of disrupted mental maps.

We can derive the following preliminary insights from this in relation to creative jolt episodes. First, we can expect existential feedback to trigger a strongly affective response when it is interpreted as credible, since a psychological threat typically induces a stress reaction accompanied by various emotions. Second, as an event that ruptures a pre-existing “assumptive world”, receiving feedback that questions the very point or viability of an emerging idea will also engender cognitive and behavioral responses. The former would consist of making life-saving revisions to the focal creative idea *along with restoring a coherent assumptive world around one’s endeavor*. The implication is that only fundamental revisions—to the core features or framings of the focal idea as well as to the deeper cognitive assumptions of its proponent—will suffice if a creator is to overcome an existential crisis triggered by feedback that so completely shatters pre-existing cognitive structures. For creators who choose to continue their endeavor, the consequences can thus be assumed to be *necessarily generative*, entailing discernible, even radical, creative shifts in their idea journey.

## METHODS

To empirically examine creative jolt episodes experienced by early-stage entrepreneurs, we adopt an inductive multiple-case design (Eisenhardt, 1989) and trace each creator’s journey for an average of eight months in considerable depth. Overall, we seek to develop and theorize the concept of *creative jolts* and how idea journeys are re-shaped as a result. Our main unit of analysis is the creative jolt episode. We examine how such episodes are triggered, the stages of progression and the various underlying mechanisms. In total, we conducted 85 semi-structured interviews during the period of December 2016 to December 2017 with twelve different entrepreneurs, conducting at least six interviews with each one of them. This was further supported by brief phone interviews in between regular face to face semi-structured interviews, lasting ten to twenty minutes each. On average, we conducted one to two of such phone interviews per entrepreneur per month.

## FINDINGS

Our longitudinal data reveals that the idea journeys of early-stage entrepreneurs can be radically influenced by creative jolt episodes. Broadly viewed, these are extended episodes of emotional and existential turmoil, triggered by intensely critical feedback from credible sources

that demand an extensive rethinking of the focal idea, leading to major changes in the focal idea (in this case, the entrepreneurial venture). We identify four stages through which creative jolt episodes progress—trigger feedback, emotional turmoil, existential crisis, and resolution. We further find that the four stages progress along two distinct pathways, which we label (i) the *re-creation pathway*, in which feedback directed at the venture triggers a process through which the entrepreneur fundamentally reinvents the business model, and (ii) the *restoration pathway*, in which feedback focused on the entrepreneur triggers a process of returning to the venture's core idea and the entrepreneur's core values. The pathways differ substantially in terms of how each stage of the jolt episode is enacted. In the following sections, we define creative jolt episodes and explain the four stages. This is followed by a description of the two pathways observed.

## Creative Jolt Episodes

Creative jolt episodes are periods that unfolded over weeks or months in which feedback that challenged the very existence of the entrepreneurial venture prompted emotional and existential turmoil. Typically, the feedback occurred primarily through a single deep interaction with a trusted mentor or advisor or a respected figure in the entrepreneur's community. Yet, the turmoil that followed carried on for an extended period of time. Through the process of resolving the turmoil, the entrepreneurs in our study fundamentally redefined the trajectories of their ventures.

The creative jolt episodes were characterized by three features. First, creative jolts were experienced by the entrepreneurs as periods of *heightened affect*. Jolts aroused deep emotional responses in entrepreneurs by, for example, causing anger or highlighting fear of failure. Creative jolts could also inspire feelings of relief—for example, one entrepreneur in our study described having a “sense of freedom. Like a weight lifted off my shoulders”—or excitement, as the entrepreneur develops new ways of seeing the venture. A second feature of creative jolt episodes was that they involved *interacting with feedback*. Feedback acted as an underlying motor that drove the episode forward. The feedback initiated the jolt and caused turmoil and upheaval as the entrepreneur grappled with whether they would accept the feedback and how to understand it. The feedback further helped the entrepreneur to achieve resolution by becoming a springboard for further idea generation. This involved searching out advice from additional external parties, usually in an attempt to disconfirm the original feedback. Interestingly, however, the entrepreneurs in our study came to accept the feedback, despite the fundamental challenges it posed to their idea and their work. A final feature of creative jolt episodes was cognitive *reassessment*. Reassessment was a more rationally driven search for solutions and new ideas or a reconsideration of the venture's original mission.

## Stages of Creative Jolt Episodes

Creative jolt episodes progressed through four stages. We briefly introduce the four stages before turning to the way that they unfolded along two different pathways. We describe the first stage as the *trigger feedback*. Creative jolt episodes were typically initiated by critical and challenging feedback from a high-status individual, such as an established entrepreneur or a mentor, about the entrepreneurial idea or the entrepreneur. Feedback about the entrepreneurial idea tended to challenge the viability of the venture by highlighting problems with the business model, questioning future growth potential or disagreeing with the core values, stated aims and purported

goals of the venture. For instance, one of the entrepreneurs in our sample described a meeting he had with his mentor:

“I came to London and I wanted to raise some money, that’s why I came to speak to Marcus, because Marcus is an investor, and Marcus is the guy, he’s just the guy for me. He’s, kind of, like, my dad in this world, I trust him completely and he’s great, so came and talked to him. I was just, like, ‘this is where we are, we’ve got a few thousand users, nobody is doing the behaviour we want to do, but we only have three months’ worth of money ... we need money or we’re going to die, what do we do?’ And, after listening, he says to me, ‘You have nothing’ which is, like, he’s the most straight talking person I know, he says, ‘You have nothing,’ I was like, ‘What do you mean? We have users.’ He was, like, ‘You have nothing, what do you have? I don’t understand, what do you have? What is someone going to invest in?’ [John, founder of GymForUs]

The next stage is *emotional turmoil*. There was a highly affective and emotionally tumultuous stage, right after the feedback was received, wherein entrepreneurs were taken over by fear of failure, helplessness, disenchantment or loss of meaning and purpose. For instance, one of the entrepreneurs described how the feedback made him realise that his idea about creating social impact was completely impractical, and could have harmful unintended consequences. He mentioned feeling discouraged and “at a particularly low moment, so I was thinking, ‘yes, we could just give it up’”. He emotionally described how he felt after receiving the feedback from a former University Professor he had held in high esteem. During the interview, the entrepreneur found it difficult to verbally express his thoughts, he paused and sighed several times as he talked about the feedback:

“This woman I sort of knew personally and really respect, and sort of knew her for years since I was studying. And getting that email was a bit of a blow, to be honest. That really like [pause] it questions my whole reason for even starting it [the business venture]. Cause it was [pause] yeah. And it’s still [pause] and so... To answer your question... I know ... [sighs in a frustrated way] ... yeah [pause]. To answer your question in relation to her, it yeah, often plays on my mind”. [Liam, founder of Holiday Helper]

The third stage was an *existential crisis*. In this stage, the entrepreneurs acknowledged and came face to face with the high likelihood of the current idea being impractical, potentially unsuccessful or not fulfilling the bigger personal and social goals they were aspiring for. This acknowledgement leads to an existential crisis with respect to the venture and the way forward. For instance, one of the entrepreneurs described how she questioned every aspect of her idea:

“It’s almost like, I don’t know if anybody’s ever asked you to marry them but it’s those sort of big moments or when you find out you’re pregnant or, it’s like, not that I’ve done all these things, but it’s like these big moments in your life when you have, I don’t know, it sounds a bit grandiose but that’s what it feels like, it feels like a ‘Oh, God, well that’s, that changes everything,’ you know?”

Finally, the *resolution* stage represents the closure of the creative jolt process, wherein the entrepreneur is either able to develop a new value proposition or identify means through which the original mission of the venture can be fulfilled. In this stage entrepreneurs typically reached some type of conclusion regarding their ventures. This could be a change in the nature of the focal idea – a new business model, value proposition, or plan for collaborating with external partners – or it could be a way to refocus or even rescale the business. As one of the entrepreneurs mentioned:

“We’ve taken a different direction with it now. I feel right good about it... And I’ve decided to do this [change to the venture] over about the period of the next 18 months, to get some cofounders on board to try and take a bit of a step back at the moment, which is, yes, I think it’s definitely the best decision. I was getting to the stage where I was going to launch, but that’s not going to happen at the moment.....Yes, it’s just, you’ve got to do it [the venture] responsibly... so in order to do that, we need a good team on board; we need some, yes, people that will get behind the idea through all sorts of different backgrounds and industries.” [Liam, founder of Holiday Helper]

## DISCUSSION

Our research identifies a novel phenomenon—the creative jolt episode—that shapes the journey of emerging ideas and ventures in disruptive, profound ways. We suggest that, while relatively rare, unpacking such existentially threatening episodes can beneficially add to the extant literature on the feedback-creative revision relationship. Existing research (e.g., Harvey & Kou, 2013; Harrison & Rouse, 2015; Grimes, 2017) focuses on feedback directed at developing idea’s *quality*, framing feedback exchanges in a predominantly positive way, i.e., as an opportunity for improvement. Our work reveals a different type of feedback episode that questions *the very point and/or survival of an idea*. While such existential feedback can be constructive (e.g., seeking to stop someone from wasting their time, or offering specific revision advice), they may also be aimed at killing the relevant idea. This distinction is vital because it (a) opens up the possibility of much more dramatic shifts in the idea journey (as substantiated in our findings) and (b) highlights the strong possibility of extraordinary affective consequences, and we do not know very much as of yet about how strong affect influences how creators evaluate their own ideas and make revisions at the elaboration stage. Creative jolt episodes appear to disrupt creators’ pre-existing “assumptive worlds” – i.e., the wider cognitive structures around their focal idea – which then need to be comprehensively “repaired” through an affect-triggered, multi-staged revision process.

## REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM AUTHORS