

Before the ink dries? Creators misjudge idea thieves' preferences for early-stage ideas

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Abstract

In the knowledge-based economy, creative ideas are becoming increasingly valuable. However, creators often encounter the threat of idea theft, which can discourage them from sharing their ideas and receiving vital feedback. This article explores the psychology behind creators' attempts to strategically manage idea sharing. Across three studies, we find that creators mispredict the preferences of idea thieves, such that idea thieves prefer to steal ideas in earlier stages of development than creators expect. We find this difference is driven by creators' tendency to underestimate how much idea thieves attend to moral concerns while deciding when to steal an idea. Further, we show that these mispredictions are consequential because they influence the stage at which creators choose to share their ideas for feedback.

KEYWORDS

creativity, decision making, idea theft, moral concerns, moral judgments

1 | INTRODUCTION

Idea theft occurs when an actor pursues or takes credit for an idea that is perceived to be owned by another (Ellis, 2022). Cases of idea theft are prevalent—some highly-publicized (e.g., Facebook), and others involving smaller-scale reports, like individuals claiming to have had their ideas stolen at work. One survey found that nearly a third of

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employees claim to have had an idea stolen by a colleague, at least once (Forbes, 2016). Another survey found evidence for managers stealing ideas from their subordinates— more precisely, over 80 percent of participants claimed to have had an idea stolen by their boss (Ideanote, 2021). This phenomenon is highly problematic for organizations and individual creators alike. Previous research shows that idea theft behaviors can harm interpersonal dynamics (Ellis, 2022; Reilly, 2018; Wheeler-Smith & Moulton-Tetlock, 2024), and the ways in which creators choose to navigate the vulnerability of their ideas to theft may stifle creative behaviors like sharing ideas. For instance, creators may make predictions about when ideas are most vulnerable to being taken to inform how—and when—they approach others for feedback on their ideas. And, if their predictions are based on faulty assumptions about idea thieves' and what governs their idea theft decisions, those predictions may be inaccurate. This may, in turn, have implications for behaviors that support the creative process.

Indeed, the predictions individuals make about what drives idea theft behaviors may influence their creative behaviors. Previous scholars explain that while generating ideas is a required stage of the creative process, idea sharing behaviors also play a central role in the productive development of creative output (George, 2007; Hargadon & Sutton, 1997; Hennessey & Amabile, 2010). As research continues to challenge the narrative of the lone genius (Berg & Yu, 2021; Harrison & Rouse, 2015; Perry-Smith & Mannucci, 2017; Rouse, 2013) and it becomes clearer that the creative process is inherently social, questions surrounding the ownership, protection, and theft of ideas become increasingly salient (see Ellis & Reilly, 2024 for a review).

Business and legal communities grapple with how best to regulate the ownership, protection, and theft of revolutionary technologies (e.g., artificial intelligence), and scholars are engaged in cross-disciplinary conversations about the antecedents and consequences of the idea theft phenomenon (Ellis, 2022; Oliar & Sprigman, 2008; Reilly, 2018; Silver & Shaw, 2018; Wheeler-Smith & Tetlock, 2024). For instance, legal scholars posit that when idea theft occurs in contexts lacking intellectual property protection (e.g., standup comedy), communities establish norms to regulate ownership and theft (Oliar & Sprigman, 2008). Studies show that stealing ideas leads to negative interpersonal and reputational consequences for the idea thief (Reilly, 2018; Silver & Shaw, 2018)—more severe than for thieves committing illegal acts like stealing money (Ellis, 2022). More recently, research has investigated the victim's perspective, demonstrating the personal harm idea theft can inflict on creators and how this damages their relationships at work (Wheeler-Smith & Moulton-Tetlock, 2024). Given the extent to which interpersonal dynamics influence creativity (Perry-Smith & Mannucci, 2017), this may prove especially detrimental when creative output is a focal goal.

Since organizations often hold team check-ins and pitch meetings, sharing ideas is inevitable. However, this collaborative process is by no means perfect (Hargadon & Sutton, 1997), as it can introduce opportunities for idea theft behaviors. Idea theft can be particularly damaging because the ability to generate innovative ideas is often considered during performance evaluations (Tierney & Farmer, 2002); therefore, victims of theft may end up being penalized themselves. As such, when idea theft is rampant, creators may hesitate to share openly—instead, choosing to share ideas strategically and specifically when they perceive their ideas to be less vulnerable to theft. Put differently, creators may seek to avoid the risk of having their ideas stolen by closely monitoring where and when they share their ideas; however, this strategy has drawbacks, given that if a creator wishes to maximize the success of their ideas, sharing them and soliciting feedback is beneficial and necessary (Goncalo et al., 2019; Harrison & Rouse, 2015; Perry-Smith & Mannucci, 2017). In sum, a lack of open collaboration may appear necessary, but it may ultimately stifle creative potential.

In this article, we explore how creators balance the necessity of sharing ideas to advance their creative work with the knowledge that this openness makes them vulnerable to theft. To understand the psychology behind this dynamic, we focus on individuals' perceptions of whether their ideas are more likely to be stolen at earlier or later stages of development, and we test these expectations against the stated preferences of idea thieves. In other words, do creators accurately predict at what stage of the process idea thieves are most likely to steal their ideas? We explore possible factors shaping creators' judgments and test whether these judgments influence creators'

preferences for idea sharing. We leverage our findings to advance a nascent stream of research on the psychology of idea theft in organizations, and draw attention to opportunities for future scholarship.

1.1 | Are creators' predictions accurate? The role of outcome-based and moral concerns

When do idea thieves prefer to steal ideas—at earlier or later stages of development? Because creators do not have direct access to this information, they must infer it. Indeed, it is a fundamentally human objective to understand—through evidence or inference—what motivates others' behaviors (i.e., Reeder & Trafimow, 2005), even if predictions about the thoughts and motivations of others can be erroneous (Hsee & Zhang, 2004; Kurt & Inman, 2013; Levine & Cohen, 2018). We propose that creators make inferences about when an idea thief would most likely steal an idea by considering the thief's motivations. Specifically, we expect creators to focus on thieves' outcome-based motives—motives concerned with the expected value of the idea and the thief's desire to minimize their own efforts. This is because when people make inferences about moral transgressors (e.g., an idea thief) they tend to attribute selfish and immoral intentions (Lucas et al., 2016). Previous research on joke thieves explains that individuals perceive joke theft behaviors as motivated by laziness and the prioritizations of personal gain (Reilly, 2018). As such, creators may expect that idea thieves are motivated to steal later-stage ideas, waiting until the idea requires less effort to complete and the likelihood of success is clearer. Further, experimental studies have illustrated that idea theft behaviors carry the stigma of being seen as selfish and self-seeking (Ellis, 2022; Reilly, 2018). Taken together, prior research suggests that individuals who steal ideas are perceived to be motivated by external rewards, driven by greed and the desire to minimize their own labor, while benefiting from work done by others (i.e., outcome-based concerns). We propose that creators' focus on idea thieves' outcome-based motives will lead them to expect idea thieves to prefer to steal ideas at relatively later stages of development.

In addition, we advance the perspective that creators' predictions may overlook the complex motivations of idea thieves. Research suggests that while some instances of idea theft may stem from a desire for personal gain, less nefarious motivations may also exist. Industry narratives, for example, often portray “borrowing” ideas as acceptable, emphasizing execution over originality and suggesting ethical ways to draw inspiration from others. This discourse creates a more ethically nuanced landscape, suggesting that individuals can steal ideas in a manner that *feels* less unethical (Ellis & Reilly, 2024). While idea theft behaviors are not considered moral, by any accounts, idea thieves may still consider moral motives when deciding whether to steal earlier- versus later-stage ideas. That is, idea thieves may maintain their sense of morality by stealing ideas in earlier stages of development. For one, earlier-stage ideas are not afforded legal protections, so a thief may determine that this behavior accords with legal standards and thus is not unethical (Oliar & Sprigman, 2008). In this moral schema, the thief respects intellectual property rights, but unprotected ideas are fair game. While some later-stage ideas may not be afforded intellectual property rights either, gravitating toward earlier-stage ideas may offer additional self-granted clemency, that is, easier moral justification (Bandura, 1999). For example, stealing an idea in its earlier stage might be more easily construed as “drawing inspiration” rather than a blatantly unethical act. The thief may be motivated to minimize the harm caused by stealing the idea. They might reason that ideas at earlier stages have consumed fewer of the creator's resources than later-stage ideas, thus making their theft less harmful.

If creators expect idea thieves to be solely motivated by outcome-based concerns (that favor stealing later-stage ideas) and idea thieves are actually motivated by outcome-based *and* moral concerns (that favor stealing earlier-stage ideas), then creators' expectations of when idea thieves' are likely to steal may be systematically inaccurate. Here, we advance three key arguments. First, creators mispredict idea thieves' preferences, with thieves preferring to steal ideas at earlier stages of development than creators expect. Second, we propose this misprediction occurs because creators underestimate the degree to which moral concerns influence idea thieves' preferences. Third, creators overestimate the importance of outcome-based concerns on idea thieves' preferences.

Further, we posit that creators' misperceptions of idea thieves' motivational concerns account for their misprediction of idea thieves' theft preferences. We hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1. Creators mispredict idea thieves' preferences, such that idea thieves prefer to steal ideas at earlier stages of development than creators expect.

Hypothesis 2. Creators underestimate the degree to which moral concerns influence idea thieves' preferences for stealing earlier- or later-stage ideas.

Hypothesis 3. Creators overestimate the degree to which outcome-based concerns influence idea thieves' preference for stealing earlier- or later-stage ideas.

Hypothesis 4. Creators' underestimation of thieves' moral concerns accounts for creators' misprediction of idea theft preferences.

Hypothesis 5. Creators' overestimation of thieves' outcome-based concerns accounts for creators' misprediction of idea theft preferences.

1.2 | Influence on creator sharing behavior

Idea theft presents several challenges for creators. First, it threatens their creative output, and second, it may undermine their ability to make strategic decisions about when to share their ideas for feedback. Timely sharing is central to the idea development journey, which Perry-Smith and Mannucci (2017) describe as consisting of phases that begin with idea generation and end with idea implementation, each with distinct requirements for success. The second phase, idea elaboration, requires seeking external support and sharing ideas openly to further their development. Consistent with this work, the feedback literature finds that creative work generally benefits from feedback (Zhou, 2008). Given this, prevalent idea theft may thwart the creative process early in the idea's journey by influencing creators' sharing behaviors—especially if it leads to sharing ideas for feedback at suboptimal times.

Given that creators may be inclined to predict the stage at which their ideas are most vulnerable to theft, these predictions may, in turn, affect their idea-sharing behaviors. Here, we investigate this premise. Specifically, we ask: do creators' predictions of when—i.e., at what stage of completion—their idea is most likely to be stolen influence the stage of completion at which they share their ideas? Because individuals draw on external information to make behavioral decisions (Reeder & Trafimow, 2005), we predict that creators' idea theft predictions drive their sharing decisions. Specifically, we expect that when creators expect thieves to steal at later stages of development, this will drive their intention to share ideas at earlier stages of development (and vice versa). We hypothesize:

Hypothesis 6. Creators' predictions of when (earlier- vs. later-stages) their idea is likely to be stolen negatively correlates with when (earlier- vs. later-stages) creators intend to share their idea for feedback.

2 | METHODS

2.1 | Overview of studies

Across three studies, we investigate the relationship between when individuals (“creators”) *predict* ideas are most vulnerable to theft versus when others (“idea thieves”) *prefer* to steal them. Study 1 and Study 2 are experiments

that explore creators' predictions of when their ideas would be stolen relative to idea thieves' reported preferences. Across both studies, we tested the hypothesis that creators mispredict idea thieves' preferences, such that idea thieves prefer to steal ideas in earlier stages of development than creators expect (H1). Study 2 also tested two hypothesized mechanisms of this effect. First, that creators overestimate how much idea thieves' decisions are influenced by outcome-based concerns, and second, that they underestimate how much idea thieves' decisions are influenced by moral concerns (H2-5). Study 3 tested a downstream consequence of creator idea theft predictions: creators' idea theft predictions influence the stage at which they choose to share their ideas for feedback (H6). More specifically, we conducted a within-subjects study, testing the hypothesis that creators' predictions of when ideas are most vulnerable to theft negatively relate to the stage at which they intend to share their ideas (H6). All studies were pre-registered on [Aspredicted.org](https://aspredicted.org). For brevity, vignettes used in these studies are summarized in text; full versions can be found in Appendix 1.

3 | STUDY 1

3.1 | Method

In Study 1, we tested our first hypothesis—creators mispredict idea thieves' preferences, such that idea thieves prefer to steal ideas at earlier stages of development than creators expect.

3.2 | Participants

One hundred and sixty-one undergraduate students at a private northeastern US university participated in this study for course extra credit. All participants were included in our analyses, resulting in a final sample of $N = 161$ (44% Female; 43% Caucasian; M age = 19). A power analysis revealed 80% power (two-tailed, $\alpha = 0.05$) to detect an effect size of $d = 0.44$.

3.3 | Procedure and materials

Participants were randomly assigned to either the Creator or Idea Thief condition. In both conditions, participants read a scenario placing them in the role of an intern at an HR consulting firm. An HR intern role is particularly relevant to this participant pool, as over one-third of students enrolled in this course typically pursue HR consulting internships. Next, participants were informed their role required generating and developing creative HR policies, and that, according to previous HR interns, good ideas could lead to a full-time offer post-graduation. However, they were also told that, as with many creative organizations, idea theft can be a concern, and that while it is beneficial to share ideas for feedback and hear different perspectives, it also introduces the possibility that other interns or firm members could steal them. Participants in the Creator condition then read: "You are developing a new idea for a creative HR policy pitch. You are deciding at what stage of completeness to share your new idea with others: earlier stages, middle stages, or later stages of development." In the Idea Thief condition, participants read, "You have decided you are going to steal another intern's idea to use in your own HR policy pitch. You have listened to other interns share their various ideas at different stages of completeness: earlier stages, middle stages, and later stages of development." Finally, participants in the Creator condition were asked to indicate—on a 1-100-point scale—when their idea would most likely be stolen. In the Idea Thief condition, participants used the same completion scale to indicate when they would try to steal the idea from their fellow intern.

3.4 | Results

Offering support for our first hypothesis, an independent-samples *t*-test revealed a significant difference between the stage at which creators believed their ideas would be stolen and the reported preferences of the thief. In the Creator condition, participants believed their idea was more vulnerable to theft in later stages ($M = 45.66$, $SD = 25.99$), while participants in the Idea Thief condition intended to steal at an earlier stage ($M = 33.09$, $SD = 24.51$; $F(1, 159) = 1.676$, $CI [4.71, 20.44]$, $p = 0.002$, $d = 0.49$).

4 | STUDY 2

4.1 | Method

Study 2 builds on Study 1 in several ways. First, we tested Hypothesis 1 using a new measure of idea completeness. More specifically, we used a seven-point measure, providing anchored stages at each point to give participants a more concrete sense of the idea development process. Second, we tested Hypothesis 1 in a new domain—a personal trainer developing a creative exercise routine. Third, we increased the sample size in this study to $N = 599$. In addition, we tested our hypothesized mechanisms of creators' idea theft mispredictions. We examined whether creators underestimate their attention to moral concerns (H2) and overestimate idea thieves' attention to outcome-based concerns (H3). Additionally, we tested whether these erroneous estimations drive creators' mispredictions of idea thieves' preferences for early- versus later-stage ideas (H4 and H5). Finally, we addressed a potential concern in our study design: to this point, we have randomly assigned participants to take the perspective of idea thieves rather than capturing the preferences of individuals who self-identify as a person who would steal an idea. Therefore, in this study, we explicitly asked participants assigned to the Idea Thief condition if they would steal an idea in the way the vignette had described. We used this to test the robustness of our results.

4.2 | Participants

We recruited 599 participants from Prolific Academic to participate in this study for pay. Following our pre-registered exclusion criteria, eight participants were excluded for failing an engaged-subjects task, resulting in a final sample of $N = 591$ (48% Female; 76% Caucasian; M age = 41). A power analysis revealed 80% power (two-tailed, $\alpha = 0.05$) to detect an effect size of $d = 0.23$.

4.3 | Materials and procedure

First, participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions, Creator or Idea Thief. In the Idea Thief condition, participants read a vignette about an individual named Jack who was developing a creative new workout routine to advance his personal training career. In the Creator condition, participants read the same vignette except they took the perspective of an individual working to advance their own personal training career. In both conditions, participants read that idea thieves are often present in the workplace, and that ideas can be stolen at earlier, middle, or later stages of completion. Following the vignette, participants in the Creator condition indicated (on a seven-point scale; 1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*; $\alpha = 0.56$) the degree to which four outcome-based concerns (e.g., "Seek ways to reduce the effort required to develop the idea further;" and "Check for proof that the idea would work before taking it,") might influence the stage at which an idea thief would prefer to take an idea. Participants in the Thief condition indicated the degree to which each of these outcome-based concerns would

influence their own preferences. Participants also indicated the degree to which moral concerns influenced decision-making—creators predicted thieves' responses and thieves self-reported. Moral concerns were similarly measured using a 4-item scale ($\alpha = 0.85$), with items including “Actively seek how to reduce any negative impact my decision might have,” and “Consider the consequences of my actions on others.” Finally, participants in the Creator condition were asked to predict the stage at which an idea thief would steal their workout routine idea, while thieves were asked to indicate at which stage they would steal an idea.

Idea Completeness. We measured idea completeness using a seven-point scale, where 1 represented “When (you/Jack) first comes up with a creative concept for a workout routine,” and 7 represented “When (you/Jack) put(s) videos of himself explaining the workout routine on YouTube to grow his professional brand.” At the end of this phase of the study, participants in the Idea Thief condition indicated whether they could see themselves stealing an idea in this context.

4.4 | Results

To test our hypotheses (H1-H5), we conducted three independent-samples *t*-tests and two mediation analyses. First, replicating the effect found in Study 1, and further supporting our first hypothesis, participants in the creator condition believed their idea was more vulnerable to theft at later stages of development ($M = 4.14$, $SD = 1.60$) than the actual preferences of idea thieves ($M = 3.33$, $SD = 2.03$); $F(1, 589) = 36.413$, $CI\ 95\% [0.51, 1.10]$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.44$).

Second, we found support for Hypothesis 2—that creators underestimate the degree to which moral concerns influence idea thieves' preferences for early- versus later-stage ideas. Participants in the Creator condition indicated moral concerns had less influence over thieves' preferences ($M = 3.77$, $SD = 1.16$) than participants in the Idea Thief condition reported ($M = 5.85$, $SD = 0.98$); $F(1, 589) = 15.414$, $CI\ 95\% [-2.24, -1.89]$, $p < 0.001$, $d = -1.92$).

Third, we found support for Hypothesis 3—that creators overestimate the degree to which outcome-based concerns influence idea thieves' preferences for early- versus later-stage ideas. Participants in the Creator condition predicted outcome-based concerns had more influence over thieves' preferences ($M = 5.21$, $SD = 0.92$) than participants in the Idea Thief condition reported ($M = 4.93$, $SD = 1.01$); $F(1, 589) = 3.280$, $CI\ 95\% [0.12, 0.44]$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.28$).

Our first mediation analysis tested Hypothesis 4—that underestimating the degree to which moral concerns influence an idea thief's preferences mediates creators' predictions of whether ideas will be stolen at earlier or later stages of completion. We conducted a mediation analysis using PROCESS Model 4 with 10,000 bootstrapped samples (Hayes, 2017). The results show a significant indirect effect of the Creator and Idea Thief conditions on idea completeness ratings based on moral concerns ($b = 0.35$, $SE = 0.151$, $95\% CI = [0.06, 0.65]$), supporting Hypothesis 5.

We also tested Hypothesis 5—that overestimating thieves' reliance on outcome-based concerns drives creators' mispredictions—by conducting a mediation analysis using PROCESS Model 4 with 10,000 bootstrapped samples (Hayes, 2017). The results show a significant indirect effect of Creator and Idea Thief conditions on idea completeness ratings based on outcome-based concerns ($b = 0.07$, $SE = 0.036$, $95\% CI = [0.02, 0.14]$).

Robustness test excluding never-stealers. As a robustness test, we re-ran our analyses, excluding participants in the Idea Thief condition who indicated they would never steal an idea (53% said they would steal an idea; $n = 158$). The results offered further support for Hypothesis 1 ($p = 0.002$) and Hypothesis 2 ($p < 0.001$), such that creators (a) mispredicted thieves' preferences for ideas in their earlier stages and (b) underestimated the degree to which moral concerns influenced their decision. However, we did not find a significant effect for outcome-focused concerns ($p = 0.12$).

Exploratory follow-up analyses on outcome-based concerns. Although the outcome-based concerns analyses supported hypotheses 3 and 5, we noticed that the measure yielded a relatively low Cronbach's Alpha ($\alpha = 0.56$). Given this, as an exploratory analysis, we re-ran the analyses involving the outcome-based concerns measure on each of the four scale items that comprised the scale. We found that the significant results that supported hypotheses 3 and 5 were driven by the item related to the idea thief's perception of effort investment, but not the other three items. See Appendix 2 for full analyses, and we return to this point in the General Discussion.

5 | STUDY 3

5.1 | Method

To this point we have established that creators may mispredict when their ideas are most vulnerable to being stolen. We theorize this may have downstream implications for the creative process. The purpose of Study 3 is to explore suboptimal idea sharing as one potential consequence. As such, Study 3 tests our sixth hypothesis—Creators' predictions of when (earlier- vs. later-stages) their idea is likely to be stolen negatively correlates with when (earlier- vs. later-stages) creators intend to share their idea for feedback.

5.2 | Participants

Two hundred and five participants, recruited from Prolific Academic, participated in this study for pay. Following our pre-registration, three participants were excluded for failing an engaged-subjects task, resulting in a final sample of $N = 203$ (58% Female; 73% Caucasian; M age = 40). A power analysis revealed 80% power (two-tailed, $\alpha = 0.05$) to detect an effect size of $r = 0.19$.

5.3 | Procedure and materials

For this study, participants read a vignette assigning them the role of an account manager at a marketing firm. They were told their role in the firm is to design new ad campaigns for clients. Next, they were told that as part of the design campaign process, it is often beneficial to share ideas with others at the firm for constructive feedback and to hear different perspectives. At the same time, they were informed that, as in many creative organizations, idea theft can be a concern, and sharing ideas can increase their vulnerability to being stolen. After reading the vignette, participants were asked to imagine they had been working on an ad campaign and then indicate—on a 100-point scale representing the completeness of the idea—the point at which others were most likely to try to steal it. Next, participants were given an opportunity to reflect on how they came to that decision. Finally, after being told that they would need to share their idea for feedback before presenting it to the client, they were asked: "Given ideas can be shared in earlier, middle, or later stages of completeness, at which stage of completeness would you share your idea?" Participants responded via the same 100-point scale used to measure the completeness of the idea.

5.4 | Results

Participants, on average, believed their ideas were most vulnerable to theft at 44% complete ($M = 44.49$, $SD = 24.26$) and planned to share their ideas for feedback at 59% complete ($M = 58.99$, $SD = 27.19$). Offering

support for Hypothesis 6, there was a significant negative relationship between creators' predictions and their sharing intentions ($r = -0.24$, 95% CI $[-0.36, -0.10]$, $p < 0.001$). This suggests that predictions of vulnerability to theft influence intended sharing behaviors, such that the later creators predict their ideas will be stolen, the earlier they will share their ideas.

6 | SUMMARY

These studies sought to understand how creators perceive the vulnerability of their ideas to theft and how this perception influences their decisions to share ideas for feedback. Across three studies, we found that creators mispredict when their ideas are most vulnerable to theft, and these (mis)predictions relate to the stage at which they share their ideas. Specifically, we found that while creators expect ideas are most vulnerable to theft in their later stages of completion, idea thieves actually prefer to steal earlier-stage ideas. In addition, we found creators' beliefs surrounding what motivates an idea thief's decision to steal earlier or later affect the accuracy of their predictions. More precisely, we found that creators underestimate the degree to which morality concerns affect thieves' preferences, and this drives their (mis)prediction of ideas being more vulnerable to theft in their later stages.

We also found some support for outcome-based concerns as a mechanism of creators' erroneous predictions. Study 2 suggests that creators may overestimate the degree to which outcome-based concerns influence thieves' preferences for stealing earlier versus later-stage ideas. However, our supplementary and exploratory analyses found mixed evidence and suggested future research on this mechanism is warranted. First, our pre-registered supplemental analysis found that the outcome-based concerns hypotheses (H3 and H5) were not supported when we restricted our sample to only include self-identified thieves (53%, $n = 159$). Further, our exploratory supplemental analyses that analyzed the outcome-based concerns measure item-by-item found that the outcome-based concerns hypotheses were primarily supported by the item related to the idea thief's motive to minimize effort, but not the other items. That is, while we find some evidence for the outcome-based motives mechanism (particularly, in our pre-registered analysis), we urge further exploration of outcome-based concerns with respect to idea theft decisions.

Taken together, these results suggest that even individuals who openly admit their willingness to steal an idea have moral concerns in mind as they decide when to take it—at least, to a greater degree than creators predict. This misprediction helps to explain why creators believe—in error—that ideas are more vulnerable to theft in their later stages of completion.

7 | IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

These findings offer psychological insights for understanding how individuals think about and react to idea theft behaviors. This emerging topic has received increased attention from psychologists (Ellis, 2022; Silver & Shaw, 2018; Wheeler-Smith & Moulton-Tetlock, 2024), and the complexity of the phenomenon presents a rich opportunity for future empirical efforts.

Future research may continue to explore idea thieves' preferences for earlier versus later stage ideas, examining the role of creative-efficacy on their preference for earlier stage ideas. Indeed, if an idea thief does not feel efficacious in creative tasks, they may prefer ideas at later stages of development. Another area of future research may concern the relationship between creators' theft predictions and their sharing intentions. For instance, creators may intend to share at earlier stages in the abstract, it may be that their idea theft predictions influence with whom they share, not just whether or when.

Future research should also continue to investigate the asymmetry in how individuals perceive and respond to idea theft. For example, future research could examine how contextual characteristics and an individual's position—as creator or victim, accused or self-identified idea thief, or as a third-party observer affect their perceptions and responses to idea theft. Investigating this asymmetry is key for achieving a meaningful understanding of idea theft, which is governed by a social and moral structure that call to mind institutional frameworks like intellectual property theft (Ellis & Reilly, 2024). Ellis and Reilly (2024) explain that social and psychological idea ownership violations can be considered idea theft behaviors and carry significant, if not legal, consequences (i.e., Silver & Shaw, 2018; Wheeler-Smith & Moulton-Tetlock, 2024). Therefore, understanding the psychology behind idea ownership and theft, as well as how it fundamentally differs from the way individuals construe institutional forms of idea ownership, is essential.

Other directions for future research include exploring the boundaries between theft and inspiration. There may be a stage in an idea's development at which taking an idea is not viewed as theft. Indeed, some may forgo the term “theft” and instead describe the act as being influenced, inspired by, or simply adapting or borrowing someone else's idea. Additionally, creators may view idea theft as occurring at *any* stage in the process, whereas potential idea thieves and third-party observers may not agree. Building on the present research by exploring how outsiders or social groups determine whether idea theft has occurred based on the degree of completeness may prove illuminating.

Finally, numerous empirical studies have explored the phenomenon of unconscious idea theft (Brown & Murphy, 1989; Marsh & Landau, 1995; Perfect & Stark, 2008). This form of idea theft occurs due to source monitoring errors, wherein individuals miscategorize recalling an idea with actually having generated it. Future work should explore the extent to which intentionality is inferred based on the circumstances of idea theft, and how these inferences influence the interpretation of and consequences of stealing an idea. Moreover, research should examine whether third-party observers believe that unintentional idea theft occurs primarily at earlier stages of development, or whether idea thieves are actually most susceptible to source monitoring errors when an idea is in its nascent form.

8 | CONCLUSION

In conclusion, our findings shed light on complex dynamics surrounding idea protection and theft in creative environments. We underscore how the salience of idea theft can influence the way creators share their ideas, potentially to the detriment of themselves and their employers. In addition, we offer insights into how creators and idea thieves perceive the motivations behind idea theft, and highlight an important and timely area that warrants further academic attention.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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