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The future of the cultural workforce: Perspectives from early career arts professionals on the challenges and future of the cultural industries in the context of COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on the arts sector, disrupting livelihoods and professional networks and accentuating the instability that is common for creative workers. Gaps in support for grassroots organisations and freelance workers have highlighted structural inequalities within the industry, and the significant challenges for individual workers in the early stages of their career. Yet, the pandemic has also emphasised the importance of the arts as a community resource and its role in supporting wellbeing and togetherness. This qualitative study explored the experiences of the pandemic for early career arts workers, focusing on its impacts upon their livelihoods and how it has shaped their future career directions. Sixteen arts and cultural workers across a variety of sectors including theatre, film, circus, music, and literature participated in solo, semi-structured interviews during April–June 2021. Thematic analysis identified three overarching themes: (i) 'Pandemic precarity and creative practice', (ii) 'PostCOVID I: Inclusivity and diversifying audiences', and (iii) 'PostCOVID II: Adapting, developing, and disrupting cultural practices'. Overall, the experiences capture an early career workforce that, while committed and engaged with their creative practice, also seeks a more equitable, fairer, and diverse industry that protects artists and engages more flexibly with broader audiences.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a radical effect on the creative industries in the United Kingdom (UK), cancelling live performances, curtailing touring, and limiting collaboration (Brabin, 2020; Sargent et al., 2021; Tsioulakis & FitzGibbon, 2020). From March 23, 2020, the UK government announced the first UK lockdown, ordering people to stay at home. Repeated patterns of partial lifting and reimposing of restrictions continued throughout 2020–21 and for many arts venues, full capacity performances were only able to restart on July 19, 2021, nearly 70 weeks after their closure. As described by the UK's Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport Committee, the pandemic represented 'the biggest threat to the UK's cultural infrastructure, institutions and workforce in a generation' [4, p. 27]. Within this context, the converging challenges of COVID-19, Brexit, and the legacy of austerity have created an industry

that was 'already "low immunity" – a vulnerable body susceptible to almost any kind of economic shock' [5, p. 3].

The disruptions of COVID-19 accentuated the unstable working patterns that are characteristic of artistic careers, whose employment precarity and instability has been well documented (Cohen et al., 2015; Gill & Pratt, 2008; Morgan & Nelligan, 2018). For those in the cultural industries, their work profiles are formed of myriad creative and entrepreneurial activities, which are often defined by time-limited project work on short term contracts or on an *ad hoc* basis (Bartleet et al., 2019). While these so-called portfolio careers are common across the creative industries, this crucial part of the creative workforce has been described as 'invisible' to policy (Mould et al., 2014), with the important role of freelancers to creative economies only becoming clear in times of economic crisis (Comunian et al., 2017; Comunian & England, 2020). This meant that support packages designed by the UK

government for self-employed workers were beset with eligibility problems, with millions left unable to claim (Musicians' Union, 2020).

As highlighted by Comunian and England (Comunian & England, 2020), the lack of data on workforce participation in the cultural industries as a whole means that the pandemic's impact on this sector may never be fully understood, with long-term impacts likely to further accentuate problems of precarity, lack of diversity, and poor working conditions (Tsioulakis & FitzGibbon, 2020). Research has already highlighted how the pandemic has negatively affected the financial and mental wellbeing of creative professionals (Spiro et al., 2021). Those working in the arts were found to be vulnerable to increased loneliness and anxiety, as well as experiencing substantial losses in work and income (Cohen & Ginsborg, 2021; Spiro et al., 2021). Professional bodies have seen similar disruptions, with the Musicians' Union finding that one third of classical musicians have considered giving up their profession due to the pandemic (Musicians' Union, 2020).

Advocacy on the part of industry leaders, academics, and artists themselves has primarily highlighted the immediate impacts of the pandemic-enforced closures, emphasising economic disruption and the lack of funding to cultural businesses. However, concern regarding the medium to long-term effects of the pandemic is growing, with the structural impacts to the sector likely to last beyond 2022 (OECD, 2020). In an industry still struggling from the economic impacts of the 2008 financial crisis and the decade of austerity that followed (Banks, 2020; Comunian & England, 2020), the wider effects upon mental health and cultural diversity of the sector are unknown (Eikhof, 2020).

1.1. Working patterns, wellbeing, and values in the creative industries

Before the pandemic, the mental strains of freelance working life could be profound, with financial and employment insecurity contributing to heightened anxiety and psychological distress (Dobson, 2010; Vaag Jonas et al., 2016). Long and antisocial working hours have been noted as contributors to burnout in creative workers, with mental health problems a significant concern (Wilkes et al., 2020). However, workers' perceptions of the value of their practice counteract some of the risk, uncertainty, and low economic rewards of the industry (Caves, 2000; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2010). For those that pursue creative careers, their work is highly intertwined with self-identity and personal motivations (Dobson, 2010; Vaag Jonas et al., 2016; Wilkes et al., 2020; Caves, 2000; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2010; Oakland et al., 2012). Others have noted that self-employment can lead to greater job and life satisfaction (Andersson, 2008; Binder & Coad, 2016; Warr, 2018; Willis et al., 2019). High levels of wellbeing have been reported for performing artists (Ascenso et al., 2017; Bonneville- Roussy et al., 2011) and for many their practice is emotionally significant, viewed as a way of life, rather than just a source of income (Oakland et al., 2012).

The responses of artists to the pandemic, from expanding their online creative practices to spearheading fundraising campaigns for healthcare workers (Banks, 2020; Banks & O'Connor, 2021), highlight the centrality of their practice to their lives and wellbeing. The high output and recognition of these creative activities at a time of global crisis also accentuates the importance of the cultural sector to the social fabric of society (Jeannotte, 2021). Increased opportunities for greater engagement with some creative outlets during lockdown have also reflected changes in the perceived value of the arts for personal and social wellbeing (Cabedo-Mas et al., 2021). The growth of the so-called 'Netflix economy' (Harvey, 2020) emphasises the importance of micro-cultural practices as small but essential parts of everyday life, while the roles of the arts as a way to entertain, form connections, and regulate wellbeing during lockdown further demonstrate their importance for wellbeing in times of crisis (Cabedo -Mas et al., 2021; Granot et al., 2021; Hansen et al., 2021). As societies begin to tackle the mental health implications of long-term isolation and confinement, the arts have been highlighted as potentially important tools to alleviate mental health risks and build resilience (Gallo, Giampietro, Zunszain, & Tan, 2021).

1.2. COVID-19 impacts upon early career professionals

For early career professionals, who often experience unstable working patterns (Comunian et al., 2011) and for whom the transition into the arts profession can be challenging (Ascenso et al., 2017), the pandemic disruptions were particularly acute. In the early stages of the pandemic, unemployment effects were disproportionately felt by early career professionals (O' Brien et al., 2021). As Spiro and Perkins et al. (Spiro et al., 2021) found, younger workers were more affected by depression and loneliness than older professionals in the first UK lockdown. The ongoing disruption of the pandemic is also likely to have further long-term impacts for this group (Wreyford et al., 2021), as the first ten years of performance careers have been characterised as the process and challenge of 'establishing oneself in the profession and the search for employment' (Manturzewska, 1990). This challenge is arguably exacerbated by ongoing concern that arts graduates are not always prepared with the myriad entrepreneurial and business skills that are needed to succeed in the creative industries (Bennett, 2009; Munnelly, 2020). Even before the pandemic, trajectories for early career workers in the arts remained unequal; those who are female, disabled, working class, or from ethnic minorities are at greater risk of leaving or not pursuing creative careers due to economic precarity (Allen & Hollingworth, 2013; Carey et al., 2017; Martin & Frenette, 2017). It is likely that these patterns have been accelerated, accentuating the problems of diversity within the sector (Eikhof, 2020; Banks & O'Connor, 2021; O' Brien et al., 2021; Wreyford et al., 2021).

At the time of writing, mass vaccination campaigns have enabled social distancing restrictions to be lifted and live events to resume in the UK. However, there are still many unknowns considering the long-term impact of the pandemic on the arts, particularly with the emergence of new Variants of Concern. Questions have been raised about how 'invisible' creative freelancers have weathered the trauma of the pandemic, how those least established in their careers have been impacted, the amount of flight from the industry, and how the future of the cultural industries might look (Banks & O'Connor, 2021; O' Brien et al., 2021; Wreyford et al., 2021). In light of the wider social upheavals during the pandemic, some have called for cultural recovery to continue to be met with clear priorities for accessibility and inclusion (Wreyford et al., 2021). The pandemic has exposed the need for structural change in the industry, with more sustainable models of development and support within the sector required (Comunian & England, 2020; O' Brien et al., 2021; Wreyford et al., 2021). While these concerns have been raised across the industry, large scale surveys and focus groups with key stakeholders have been common methods used to highlight these issues (e.g. Sargent et al., 2021; DCMS, 2020; Spiro et al., 2021; O' Brien et al., 2021),). Less attention has been paid to the lived experiences of early career professionals during the pandemic and how intersecting financial, mental health, and social disruptions have impacted their own outlooks on their career.

To address the myriad challenges faced particularly by early career professionals, this study explored their perspectives on the current state of the cultural industries. As much of the research highlighted above has established, pandemic disruptions to finances and working patterns

have been profound. While these immediate effects are clear, this study goes further to understand in depth the impact of the pandemic disruptions on the values and career priorities of early career professionals; those who are the future of the cultural workforce. Examining the extraordinary disruptions since 2020 through the lived experiences of professionals in the early stages of their career can help to understand how the cultural industries can develop and recover beyond the pandemic. Critically, it can also shed light on how to support the values and practices of creative workers in the future. Therefore, the study was guided by one overarching research question: How do early career arts professionals perceive the importance, challenges, and future of the cultural industries in the context of COVID-19? In particular, it focused on the perspectives of professionals at one particular moment in time[2] – as the UK began to unlock and lift restrictions – on how relationships to their careers had changed as a result of the pandemic and their views and hopes for how the industry needed to change and build a sustainable recovery.

2. Methods

A qualitative methodological approach was adopted to understand the lived experiences of the participants. During solo, semi-structured interviews that lasted between 45 and 60 min, participants' views were sought on their experiences during the pandemic, its impact upon their professional and personal development, and their perceptions of the role of the arts during and beyond the pandemic. Within these areas, the interviews explored: the support provided to the creative industries during the past eighteen months; the impacts, opportunities, and changes that the pandemic may provide to the industry; how the pandemic had changed participants' relationship to their practice; the impact of the pandemic on perceptions of the arts; and future directions for the cultural industries. A flexible, semi-structured format was selected to enable focus on particular topics while also providing freedom to follow up on points of significance and interest mentioned by the participants. Interviews were conducted online using Zoom during April–June 2021. Ethical approval was granted by the Conservatoires UK Research Ethics Committee on March 26, 2021 and written informed consent was obtained before each interview. All interviews were recorded via Zoom with permission (with only the audio file being kept for transcription) and then fully transcribed. The research team were based at a leading UK music conservatoire and university, with varied backgrounds within research and artistic practice. This included early career researchers and those with both professional and academic experience in performance and literature.

3. Participants

Sixteen participants were recruited through social media and email. Recruitment was supported by professional networks and partner organisations including unions and support organisations for performers and artists such as Equity, the British Association for Performing Arts Medicine, and the Musicians' Union. To capture experiences across a range of the cultural industries, the recruited interviewees spanned

multiple creative fields including theatre, film, circus, music, and literature. Follow up emails were sent to individuals expressing interest and throughout the recruitment process, different sectors were targeted with reminder emails and tweets to encourage a range of participants. The sample size of 16 was based on recommendations for qualitative projects (Braun & Clarke, 2013) and theme saturation (Guest et al., 2006) of between 12 and 15 participants. Efforts were made to gain as representative a sample as possible, but as participant recruitment was based on a convenience sample this limited the participants to those who had remained in the industry during the pandemic as well as those who may have particularly strong motivations and expectations for their future career. To align our sample of early career artists with existing literature on the stages of artistic careers from a lifespan perspective (Manturzewska, 1990), inclusion criteria required individuals to be in the first ten years of their careers (as reported by the participants). This meant that the majority of the participants were under 30 ($n = 9$), however efforts were made to include a greater variety of age ranges to account for those who had made later career transitions ($n = 7$). All participants identified as freelancers, reporting that the majority of their creative work was freelance, and undertook a combination of teaching, creating/devising, and/or performing. Participant details are summarised in Table 1.

4. Analysis

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2014, 2021), identifying patterns of experience across the cohort whilst also retaining individual perspectives. This process is both reflexive and recursive, requiring a bottom-up inductive approach that enables movement back and forth as led by the data throughout the analysis (Anzul et al., 2003; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Once transcripts were read for familiarity, codes were generated and then collated into initial themes. These initial themes were then reviewed across participants and grouped into three wider themes relevant to the research question that reflected the participants' perceptions of the importance, challenges, and future of the cultural industries within the context of the pandemic. Across every stage, codes and themes were discussed and agreed by two authors.

5. Results

Three overarching themes and eleven sub-themes were identified during analysis, see Table 2. A full table of quotations per theme can be found in Appendix A.

Table 1
Summary of participant characteristics.

ID	Gender	Age range	Field/Background	Years of Experience
Participant 1	F	25–30	Music	7
Participant 2	F	25–30	Music	5.5
Participant 3	F	25–30	Theatre/Film	8
Participant 4	M	25–30	Music	4
Participant 5	M	30–35	Film	3
Participant 6	M	25–30	Theatre/Film	8
Participant 7	F	35+	Literature	10
Participant 8	F	35+	Literature	1
Participant 9	N–B	30–35	Theatre/Film	9
Participant 10	F	30–35	Theatre/Film	10
Participant 11	F	25–30	Literature	2
Participant 12	M	30–35	Circus	9
Participant 13	M	20–25	Theatre/Film	3
Participant 14	F	25–30	Theatre	2
Participant 15	F	25–30	Music	5
Participant 16	M	30–35	Circus	8

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[2] In the context of this study, the 'moment in time' refers to the period of lifting coronavirus restrictions between April–June 2021. After the first national lockdown on the 23 March 2020, and further two national lockdowns, on 17 May 2021, hospitality and entertainment venues including theatres and concert halls re-opened indoors. This was at limited capacity, subject to social-distancing restrictions. Despite a 4-week delay, final restrictions were lifted on 19 July 2021. This included the reopening of the final parts of the night-time economy, including nightclubs. Theatres and concert halls were now able to operate at full capacity, with no social distancing. For a comprehensive timeline of coronavirus restrictions, see https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/charts/uk-government-coronavirus-lockdowns.

Table 2
Summary of themes and sub-themes.

Overarching theme	Sub-themes
1. Pandemic precarity and creative practice	1.1 Immediate pandemic impacts and lost work 1.2 Perceptions of industry and governmental supports 1.3 Precarity of creative and freelance working cultures 1.4 Professional proactivity and adaptability 1.5 Reflecting on practice and wellbeing
2. PostCOVID I: Inclusivity and diversifying audiences	2.1 Perceived external assumptions and prejudices 2.2 Elitism, accessibility, and inequality 2.3 Widening audiences and participation
3. PostCOVID II: Adapting, developing, and disrupting cultural practices	3.1 Changing perceptions of cultural importance 3.2 Adaptive and hybrid creative models 3.3 Economic vs. cultural tensions

5.1. Pandemic precarity and creative practice

The participants acknowledged that freelance working patterns were both important for their creative and professional development, whilst also putting strain on their financial and emotional wellbeing. For many, pandemic disruptions accentuated the precarity of their professional lives, impacting upon their revenue streams and ability to train and develop their practice. In this theme, five sub-themes emerged that related directly to the impact of the pandemic on working patterns and creative practice including: the *immediate pandemic impacts* on participants' careers, wellbeing, and finance (sub-theme 1.1); the role of *industry and governmental supports* (sub-theme 1.2) in mitigating those impacts; the *precarity of creative and freelance working cultures* (sub-theme 1.3) and how the pandemic accentuated these factors; the importance of *professional proactivity and adaptability* (sub-theme 1.4) in surviving during lockdowns; and *reflecting on practice and wellbeing* (sub-theme 1.5) that changed during the course of the pandemic.

All participants had experienced disruption during the initial stages of the pandemic, with those most reliant on live performances most profoundly affected. The *immediate pandemic impacts and lost work* (sub-theme 1.1) were experienced as traumatic, both financially and professionally, and for some represented a return to previous experiences of financial hardship. As one musician reported:

> I basically had a little bit of a mini crisis … I was like, okay, all my concerts are gone … I played with a string quartet and lots of orchestras. And then suddenly, obviously, all of that was cancelled, we had competitions happening and courses and everything gone. And, of course, like so many of us, I went through a period of, I have no idea what I'm going to do. (P1, *Musician*)

This sense of panic and fragmentation at the loss of normal work patterns was reflected across the accounts, with work loss both sudden and badly communicated as the industry splintered around them. The financial impact of this resonated with their longstanding experiences of the financial hardships of building careers in the arts:

> I think there's a meme going around … which was something like, everyone's freaking out about being poor. And it's like, 'Don't worry,

we're old poor, they're just new poor', which I very much related to. So yeah, it was kind of just … old skills I had to flex' (P9, *Actor*).[3]

Insecurity and financial losses were interwoven with the stagnation of opportunities. This created concerns for the future, highlighting the unknowns of work that was never created and the longer-term impacts of those missing opportunities:

> When you're working creatively, because projects tend to be shorter term, one project drying up can be really damaging. And I think perhaps, you know, one thing that's kind of not been thought about as we come out of the pandemic is like, how you really make up for that lost work? Particularly like, early career artists, I think it has been really damaging, because you don't have a folio yet with which to sell yourself. (P11, *Writer*)

For the participants, the chaos of the early months of lockdown were characterised by improvisation and survival, adapting to the new situations by taking on work in separate fields or applying for different funding streams. However, many also reflected on their own resilience within these circumstances, due to both their previous experiences of financial difficulty and the adaptability required for freelance careers: 'the flip side is, I'm so used to generating my own work and my own income … having so many different things that I can do has helped me' (P15, *Musician*).

Participants also reflected on their *perceptions of industry and governmental supports* (sub-theme 1.2) and the impact of those in both accentuating and mitigating the pandemic's impacts. While there was sympathy to the immediacy of the situation at the outset, there was resentment at perceived problems in the overarching funding structures which were viewed as failing freelancers and grassroots organisations. Many fell through the cracks and felt isolated from support with little recognition: 'government support for freelancers, it's been absolutely atrocious. Well, my experience has been atrocious I think across the board, actually, freelancers have been treated terribly' (P5, *Film maker*). The perceptions among the participants reflect a sense of invisibility and disregard for the complexity of working patterns in the cultural industries. This created a tension between industry comradery and perceived government neglect: 'I think between artists, you know, there's a lot of support. But ultimately, like, someone … at the end of the day, someone has to foot the bill.' (P11, *Writer*). Frustrations that policy was poorly targeted also intertwined with the view that existing funding was failing to reach the most crucial and underfunded parts of the arts. As a writer expressed: 'We're angry, as you can tell. I think a lot of people are just … it just seems like one thing after another, the government just keep doing to just hammer the industry down' (P7, *Writer*).

The *precarity of creative and freelance working cultures* (sub-theme 1.3) was intertwined with the impact of the pandemic on the participants, both financially due to the instability of work that quickly dried up, and the complete departure and change of pace during lockdown in contrast to regular working life. The questioning of the perceived normalisation of the strains of freelancing cultures highlights a wider impact of the pandemic; it exposed the precarity and strains of freelance careers:

> My whole life was just a massive hustle. You know, I had like my own jazz quartet as well that I was singing with, and then if we wanted a gig, it would be a case of me contacting a venue, me advertising the gig, me getting the players together, paying them like so everything was kind of coming from me anyway … it's so competitive, there's so many more people wanting to do it than there are jobs that I was kind of like having enough of travelling around and being like a sort of troubadour. (P15, *Musician*)

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[3] The referenced meme from 'It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia' can be found here: https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1845985-its-always-sunny-in-philadelphia.

Both the transient nature of these freelance jobs and their antisocial hours meant that participants expressed a high level of fatigue with the gruelling pace of constantly looking for work, travelling, and performing. The imposed respite from the 'hustle' therefore sparked wider reflections on the state of their work and the industry:

> It's been a very hard seven years, you know … you're doing 80 hours a week kind of style, you know, this is not financially, emotionally, physically healthy … everyone I've been speaking to, in the last six months have been questioning like, what are the next steps? And how do we carry on in the future? But do we want to go back to where we were before? (P16, *Circus Director*).

While many recognised the advantages and necessity of freelancing in creative fields, the culture of overwork and instability with which they were associated became more evident, with the enforced pause during lockdown forcing a reconsideration of the viability of those practices.

To respond to the challenges that the pandemic presented, participants perceived that their *professional proactivity and adaptability* (sub-theme 1.4) had prepared them more effectively for adaptations during lockdown as the diversity of their roles was accentuated: 'Composers [are] quite often called like 'creators' now and like most composers are composer-performer you know, multi skilled, all these things that I think have made people who are early career a bit more … they have more avenues' (P15, *Musician*). In responding to these adaptations, the opportunities of moving online also fuelled new ways of reaching out:

> I think that it's given me a bit more of a kick to create my own things … the pandemic has forced me into thinking long term about marketing as a freelancer … creating my own things like workshops, and continuing YouTube videos and constantly getting more and more material up there to try and expand the people that see me and inquire about lessons and things. (P2, *Musician*)

The proactivity described here was also discussed in the ways that the participants began to reorientate the type of work that they were doing. The multitude of roles that were described amongst the participants indicated how such skills – while a necessity pre-pandemic to maintain income as a freelancer – were perceived as also allowing them to adapt more effectively to the circumstances of lockdown.

The changes in the time and modes of work also created opportunities for pause, for participants to reflect on their *practice and wellbeing* (sub-theme 1.5). These reflections were both positive and negative, as the participants considered the value that they took from their work, and also how their relationships to their practice corresponded with their current career trajectories:

> When the pandemic started, I was in a position where I was earning the most I had as a professional ever. I was very happy with what I was bringing in … then the pandemic hit. And when my work was taken away, I essentially was left with everything except for my work. And then I realised how actually my work was kind of like both my financial, physical stability, but also my mental wellbeing and my health. (P12, *Circus Performer*)

For others, it highlighted the importance of understanding their practice and its relationship to their wellbeing and how to better maintain quality of life in the future: 'I have the same goals, but the how has changed. I used to burn myself out all the time. Like, it was just a given really … And what I've learned is that, you know, you have to rest,' (P9, *Actor*). Artistic identities were also reconsidered, with the time during lockdown fuelling the development of their own individual practices: 'I've thought more about like, how I can be an artist and collaborator … as opposed to just being kind of a random musician who works for other people all the time. And I've, so I kind of become a bit more of an artist' (P15, *Musician*). These reflections also drew on considerations of the role of their practice within communities: 'I've started questioning exactly what I make and why I'm making it and also want to

make it more … making more impacting work, you know' (P16, *Circus Director*).

5.2. PostCOVID I: Inclusivity and diversifying audiences

As participants considered the wider impacts of the pandemic within the industry, they also reflected on the existing external assumptions that they felt had hampered COVID responses, as well as the critical turning point that the pandemic provided for addressing issues of inequality and diversity among both professionals and audiences. Within this theme, three sub-themes emerged; *perceived external assumptions and prejudices* (sub-theme 2.1) that hampered pandemic support and perceptions of the industry; the importance of addressing *elitism, accessibility, and inequality* (sub-theme 2.2) in order to nurture long-lasting relationships and engagement with the arts and provide pathways for entry; and the need for *widening audiences and participation* (sub-theme 2.3) to strengthen the cultural industries.

Participants highlighted how *perceived external assumptions and prejudices* (sub-theme 2.1) were felt in the responses to the industry from societal and governmental figures, with the perception that the value and the impact of the arts was consistently marginalised and under-resourced: 'there's always this kind of like continued stigmatisation … about the arts as maybe not, not a real career' (P14, *Actor*). The participants felt that these pervasive attitudes had a direct impact upon responses to the sector in the initial stages of the pandemic, including who recognised the impact of moments of crisis in the industry. As one participant noted, 'Like the retrain thing,[4] a lot of stuff that, whether it was fumbles or taken out of context or not, it represented this wider attitude of the government towards the arts that I think we have always feared and known as there, but it is difficult to convince people of it' (P3, *Actor*). The continuing emphasis on the financial viability of the cultural industries was an ongoing frustration for participants. As they reflected, this was both a product of the misunderstanding of the cultural industries, and at odds with its role with society, where the creative industries have been shown, pre-pandemic, to contribute £13 million to the economy every hour (DCMS, 2020).

There were also concerns amongst the participants that the impact of the pandemic would accentuate divisions within the industry, heightening barriers of *elitism, accessibility, and inequality* (sub-theme 2.2). Problems of financial instability were seen as a critical factor in accentuating inequality:

> If it's less financially viable … then yes, it's less desirable for certain socio-economic groups; working class, people of colour, are less likely to access performing arts … because it's not considered viable as a career … it wasn't considered viable as career, but it will be considered *even less viable* as a career. (P12, *Writer*)

Echoed by others, concerns towards the financial viability of the sector were combined with attitudes towards the arts. It was noted that barriers to access were also reflected in perceptions of the values, benefits, and who was able to experience more traditional cultural environments:

> I think, [it] mirrors this opinion that the arts is an 'extra thing'. It's not an integral part. But that's because working class people and people from other marginalised groups have been excluded from the arts forever. So why would they think that there is access here? … they've been taught that only the wealthy and the privileged can access this … people have learned in their bodies through years and years of experience that these barriers are there, and in lots of places they still are. (P3, *Actor*)

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[4] Advertising campaign released by the UK government in October 2020 to encourage people from different industries, including the arts, to seek training in cyber: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-54505841.

There were concerns among the participants that the impact of the pandemic would exacerbate these divisions. When considering engagement with the arts both during the pandemic and for the future, it was emphasised how audience members' interaction with these spaces was driven by previous experience, heavily informed by early education and exposure to creative practice.

The importance of responding to these challenges was emphasised in discussions concerning the importance of *widening audiences and participation* (sub-theme 2.3). As many noted, opportunities for broadening access were far greater through digital means: 'I had people attending that I don't think would have maybe ever left the house for one … Yeah, it was completely [different] from people I would see in the stalls … I feel like it was reaching a very different audience' (P12, *Circus Performer*). The importance of widening access through diversifying the spaces, models, and channels of where arts was consumed was also regarded as an important step in promoting accessibility:

> I have a frustration with people and artists, saying that they're trying to engage a new audience, and then just going in making it in theatre spaces. Because theatre spaces aren't accessible for everyone. … I think, you know, [you need to] to reach out into spaces, like outdoor environments that aren't fringe festivals, or arts festivals (P16, *Circus Director*).

The importance of reaching new communities in the context of the pandemic was seen by others to be a direct responsibility of cultural institutions:

> I think beyond that, how they [cultural institutions] can be serving their communities. Because it's these great historic buildings with these great spaces, lots of funding, often. It's their job to think not, you know, how can I be the best production manager? … but rather, I have a community in pain - what can I do to serve my community right now? (P3, *Actor*)

As emphasised across the participants, the importance of widening access and participation within the cultural workforce and audiences was a key priority in their own work. These priorities were further described as essential parts of the survival and continued relevance of the sector, as models of entertainment and culture moved to hybrid models of creation, performance, and dissemination.

5.3. PostCOVID II: Adapting, developing, and disrupting cultural practices

Across the participants, there was a collective perception that modes of cultural consumption were irrevocably changed by the adaptations that industries had made during lockdown. Despite anger at the perceived inadequacies of support and the collective trauma that the creative industries have suffered (see Theme 1), the current phase of lifting restrictions was regarded as a period of hope and change. In particular, a positive opportunity to disrupt persisting cultural models of elitism and ableism that were seen to have dominated the creative industries thus far and to develop more inclusive practices for access and participation. Within this theme, three sub-themes emerged concerning how cultural models may change as a result of the pandemic: the *changing perceptions of cultural importance* (sub-theme 3.1) as a result of lockdown; the importance of maintaining *adaptive and hybrid creative models* (sub-theme 3.2); and the *economic vs. cultural tensions* (sub-theme 3.3) that need to be addressed as part of this change.

The impact of lockdown closures on access to live culture was perceived to be a turning point in sparking *changing perceptions of cultural importance* (sub-theme 3.1) among the general population and policy makers. The lockdown was perceived to have provided opportunities to pursue new creative and cultural outlets which had stimulated a recognition of micro-cultural practices: 'We've got nothing else to do. What are you going to do? Engage in the arts; pick up a craft, watch a hell of a lot of telly online, listen to music, try and play some music, make silly Tik Tok videos' (P10, *Actor*). It was recognised that

these experiences had galvanised support more widely: 'we also now realise that actually to live and survive, like, it's really important to our community, to have culture, to have arts, to have music' (P16, *Circus Director*).

The importance of creative outlets for expression and resilience was further emphasised in relation to the pandemic, with the importance of building empathy through creative practices perceived as essential in helping recovery and understanding of lockdown experiences:

> I think, you know, what we just experienced together as a culture is something completely incommunicable by science right? There like trauma, that pain, the up-shift, uprooting over, like daily routines is the things that science can describe, but it can't really articulate. Whereas the arts or the way that you know, culture, the access [to] all of those feelings, and I think that's how, like, even medically we start to heal. (P11, *Writer*)

As others reflected, the turning to artistic practices during times of anxiety, loneliness, and grief has created greater recognition for the capacity of the arts to alleviate distress, and its role within a post-pandemic society:

> I think definitely the pandemic provides an opportunity that those who are involved with arts and wellbeing, arts and health, social prescribing … there is so much trauma that's happened … this should be a priority along with all the other kind of recoveries. The economic recovery should also involve, you know, the arts recovery, and we can funnel all those things into people's recovered health. (P7, *Writer*)

As this participant describes, the pandemic has provided an opportunity to highlight the importance of the arts to individual and societal wellbeing. Through their own experiences of creating and practicing during lockdown, the use of the arts as a tool for expression and regulation during extended periods of isolation led many to consider its wider benefits to society.

As part of the return of the cultural industries to live venues, the importance of retaining *adaptive and hybrid creative models* was emphasised (sub-theme 3.2). The technological developments in online forms of consumption and virtual experiences were regarded as an exciting creative frontier, where new collaborations and audiences could be reached regardless of geographical or physical boundaries. As some reflected, the move to virtual forms of consumption had significant benefits for audience engagement: 'What the experience of working on Zoom in the pandemic gave us was just this almost limitless potential of who we could, who we could work with and play with since lockdown began, last March … we've worked with families in New York, in Ohio, in Peru, Barcelona.' (P13, *Actor*). In adapting to digital spaces, many emphasised that, while digital cannot replace the experiences of live art, developing online shows can complement and enrich artistic outputs if done well:

> There's obviously some fantastic online stuff that's been made, but not very much. I think there needs to have been more and I think a lot of people may not - online is so weird, and it feels so cold, and so anti-theatre. But actually, it depends how you use it' (P3, *Actor*).

The importance of audience inclusion was central to creating more intimate relationships within digital spaces. Some found that digital spaces can provide audiences with greater engagement in the process of creation:

> The crowdfunding, also financially helping and supporting … so they would help contribute £5–10 towards the creation of a project, which was cool, because there never would have thought of like, even asking my audience 'Hey, do you want to support some things, support an idea?' but that was really successful. (P12, *Circus Performer*)

The process described here highlights the potential of hybrid creative

models to create richer and closer relationships with audiences. These also demonstrate alternative revenue streams which provide more independent ways of producing work which can then be performed to live audiences. As the participants discussed, understanding how these mediums can be used more effectively was essential to building resilience in the cultural industries going forward, and opening up new creative opportunities for the future.

When discussing the recovery of the cultural industries beyond the immediate impacts of the pandemic, the tensions between *economic vs. cultural* models (sub-theme 3.3) were further emphasised. Participants reflected that consistent and valid anxieties about profitability, which had only been accentuated by pandemic hardships, were starting to impact upon the quality and creative process of what was being made: '[you've got] the craft and the theme, you know, the creativity aspect, and then you've got the industry, the money-making aspects. And it's, and sometimes I think they're at loggerheads,' (P10, *Actor*). Some described how this had caused wider effects on the creative risks being taken:

> We need to make money to prove our worth. So, to achieve that, we'll just play it safe and, and, you know, cast people who are always in everything, or cast a big name, or do a very obvious thing. I'm not saying there's not a place for a commercial show. But if we reduce our ability to take risks, and to make new work, and to make work that is risky, and bold and daring, then I believe that the quality of the work will go down, and the work will be reduced.' (P13, *Actor*).

The frustrations of the driving economic demands were also perceived to hamper accessibility, with many noting that the emphasis on profitability stifled the creative responses of those attending and experiencing those events: 'I like to see more kind of, like, funding routes go towards, like, not like non-ticketed events, non-exclusive, like, times of days … That can also serve as places where people can kind of come and be creative as well' (P4, *Musician*). It was reflected across the cohort that these tensions between economic success and creative and cultural processes were accentuated in periods of economic hardship, and that the freedom to be creative was reliant on a certainty of funding and stability. Although many noted that there were multiple examples of this within the industry, the precarity and competitiveness of funding structures, and the tendency to rely on tried-and-tested models of profitability were of particular concern in building a creative and inclusive recovery.

6. Discussion

The experiences of the early career arts professionals that have been explored here highlight the diverse and manifold perceived impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic upon their careers, goals, and finances. The immediate financial outlays were clear, which created a sense of hopelessness and heightened insecurity, compounded by a sense of devaluation from both societal and governmental attitudes. Frustrations were particularly directed towards both government and industry that their pandemic support structures did not cater for the complexities of the working and income patterns in the cultural industries. This resonates with other COVID-specific research such as Cohen and Ginsborg (Cohen & Ginsborg, 2021) and Spiro and Perkins et al. (Spiro et al., 2021) that have found that financial concerns were at the forefront of artists' anxieties during the lockdown periods. However, for the early career participants, these concerns also intersected with mixed considerations of their relationships with their practice and the gruelling working patterns that they experienced pre-pandemic. The enforced pause led to new attitudes towards these factors, as well as inviting more consideration in regard to how to incorporate greater social responsibility, inclusivity, and community engagement into their artistic practices.

While our results confirm many of the overarching themes that have been found in regard to economic concerns and disruptions of the

pandemic (Spiro et al., 2021; Cohen & Ginsborg, 2021; O' Brien et al., 2021), they also provide greater insight into the motivations and values that drive the future of the cultural workforce. In particular, the results highlight the changing relationships that early career professionals have developed with their practice and how these are already being fed into decisions regarding projects and working patterns. Combined, the experiences capture new insights into an early career workforce that, while committed and engaged with their creative practice, also seek a more equitable, fairer, and diverse industry that protects artists and engages, more flexibly, with broader audiences. From these experiences, it is evident that the early career artists have clear priorities in regard to the social responsibility of their practice and the importance of developing and supporting hybrid performance capabilities while also creating sustainable and equitable models for arts funding that can support their own wellbeing alongside a healthy work/life balance.

6.1. Artistic values and citizenship beyond COVID-19

It is useful to consider these experiences within the wider context of career lifespan perspectives, and the previously researched working patterns of early career artists. As has been observed in multiple disciplines, the first emerging years in the arts industry are characterised by frequent adaptation; adjusting to the occupation of becoming a 'multi-professional', often in contrast to that for which their selective, vocational training has prepared them (Bennett, 2009; Munnelly, 2020; López- Íñiguez and Bennett, 2020). The participants in this study echo these processes of adaptation, reflection, and optimisation as they established their careers and artistic identities. They also reflect concerns about how these processes have been disrupted due to the pandemic, limiting opportunities for building portfolios, advancing professional networks, and gaining experience that are crucial during the early career period (Manturzewska, 1990). The experiences of this particular generation, the majority of whom would be defined as millennials, contrast in multiple ways to their older counterparts. As 'digital natives', they have grown up with more exposure to technology, but unlike their older colleagues, they are more likely to be in unstable housing, have larger student loans, and be in insecure work (Bessant et al., 2017; Prensky, 2001, pp. 1–6).

The specific differences in the experiences of artists at different stages of their careers can be observed in comparison to Cohen and Ginsborg's (Cohen & Ginsborg, 2021) study of mid to late career musicians' experiences during the pandemic, which found high levels of anxiety over loss of career, financial concerns, and musical identities. In contrast, the themes in this study reflect the early career participants' natural emphasis on the *future* of their careers, and their awareness of their role as socially responsible artists. While many of the financial concerns mirrored findings from across the industry, the artistic identities in this cohort were less unsettled. Instead, participants placed particular emphasis on becoming agents of social change through their artistic practice. While this has previously been associated with later career professionals (Manturzewska, 1990), the emergence in this cohort may suggest that pandemic experiences could have heightened these values as important elements of their artistic identities. The responses highlight a strong sense of 'artistic citizenship' (Elliott et al., 2016), with an emphasis on the transformative role of the arts for effecting change at local and global levels.

The importance of their own artistic citizenship for the participants was also reflected in their recognition of what the arts can do to help all in society. This includes recovery from the trauma of the pandemic years, as well as serving wider communities. In particular, woven through the accounts is what Tsioulakis and FitzGibbon (Tsioulakis & FitzGibbon, 2020) term 'creative generosity', with the participants emphasising how arts and culture can collectively help to alleviate the distress and isolation of the pandemic. Similarly, while the participants mirrored the concerns of Eikhof (Eikhof, 2020) that existing barriers and inequality had been accentuated as part of the pandemic disruptions,

there was also hope that the changing and hybridising modes of cultural consumption created opportunities to reach broader audiences. There was clear frustration in existing funding models and priorities that failed to look beyond static models, often situated within specific geographic and disciplinary boundaries, and with fixed definitions of what traditionally defines 'accessible practice'. Instead, the participants reflected upon how the pandemic had upturned those assumptions, with a greater emphasis on expanding the cultural reach of institutions and productions into people's homes and public spaces by utilizing digital and hybrid modes of delivery.

6.2. Working patterns and conditions

The participants' experiences highlight the importance of more sustainable funding models for the industry. As the findings emphasise, the impact of the pandemic on the revenue streams and working patterns of arts professionals was profound and supports the numerous calls to recognise the negative effects of the pandemic on creative artists' working lives (Brabin, 2020; Cohen & Ginsborg, 2021; Comunian & England, 2020; Spiro et al., 2021; Wreyford et al., 2021). These experiences further echo the concerns that the 'invisibility' of these workers to policymakers meant the impacts of the lockdown were accentuated as freelancers fell through the gaps of support schemes and COVID relief (Comunian & England, 2020; Sargent et al., 2021). Many perceived the lack of support provided to the industry as an extension of pre-pandemic attitudes, which had already created working cultures that relied on the exploitation of freelance artists and high levels of insecurity (Morgan & Nelligan, 2018). Yet, although there were concerns that exploitation has increased during the pandemic, as many artists are asked to work for free or at lower rates (Tsioulakis & FitzGibbon, 2020), the responses in this study also suggest changing attitudes of early career professionals to their own working practices. This includes becoming more emphatic in their own professional decisions, as well as addressing the mental and physical health concerns caused by overwork and burnout (Wilkes et al., 2020).

6.3. Policy implications

The accounts in this study provide an insight into what some early career cultural workers regard as the priorities for the industry going forward, and how to better support them in furthering these goals. The results of this research therefore offer directions for stakeholders, cultural institutions, and policy makers. Firstly, addressing the precarity and financial instability that is characteristic of early career working patterns. As seen in the participant accounts, the opportunities and space for reflection that the pandemic provided were highly valued in creating space to redefine boundaries between work-life balance and to reflect upon their own career goals. For those who were able to access the COVID-19 financial support programs, the stability of income that it provided gave greater opportunities to advance their practice and work on longer-term projects. This highlights the impact of more sustainable funding models that are not orientated around individual projects lasting mere weeks and that promote longer-term professional and creative development (Comunian & England, 2020). Policy measures that have been used in Europe including tax relief for arts workers in Ireland and the 'régime des salariés intermittents du spectacle' (scheme for intermittent workers in the performing arts) in France were both presented as examples by the participants as methods that can ameliorate the mental and financial strains of insecure and unstable working patterns. These also echo the creative industries federation recommendations for an 'Innovations Employment Scheme' to ease freelancer precarity (Creative UK Group, 2021). Indeed, programmes that can smooth some of the volatility that is created by the natural flux of creative work and provide longer term financial stability can both provide greater support and sense of value for emerging artists as well as have greater impact upon the diversity in the sector. In particular, they can be particularly effective in supporting a more diverse workforce to remain in the industry and in allowing artists to take creative risks within their artistry.

Second, while there were support networks for artists within particular industries that were utilised by the participants, there is still a need to better communicate and provide protections to prevent the exploitation and burnout of early career workers. This includes education at the tertiary level covering how to balance freelance working patterns, ensure fair renumeration, build a flexible portfolio, to recognise and advocate for the role of the arts in supporting wellbeing, and how to apply for and secure funding through designing fundable projects. Similarly, there is a need to raise public awareness of the economic value of the arts sector in the UK, highlighting the realities of working as a freelancer in the arts to understand the cost of producing art and to ensure that artists are fairly renumerated.

Third, funders, creative organisations, and educators should recognise and reflect the 'disruption' that the workforce of the future are advocating. As the hybrid and online models of performance developed during the pandemic have shown, recognising how the arts can reach out beyond the normative physical spaces of theatres and concert-halls, and engage through social media and streaming platforms with wider and non-traditional audiences can be highly impactful. This includes engagement in the arts that sustains wellbeing and health, often within community contexts. The early career participants in this study do not frame this as a happy by-product of the pandemic, but rather as an integral way in which the arts need to develop and recover post-COVID. There is an opportunity to challenge long-standing issues such as inequality of access to the arts, not only through enhanced technological dissemination that can reach more people but also through changing priorities, values, and expectations within the cultural industries, led by those who will be the future of the workforce.

6.4. Limitations

Notwithstanding these emergent implications, the results of this study should be interpreted in light of its limitations. Although a wide range of arts sectors were covered, the majority of the interviewees worked in disciplines that are heavily reliant on in-person performance, and therefore most impacted by lockdown closures. We have acknowledged above other potential bias in our sample, including that we did not speak to those who have left the creative industries. Further, the impact of the pandemic has not been experienced equally, and was likely different for those who were able to transition more easily to virtual forms of delivery. In addition, although from a lifespan perspective, early career is defined as the first ten years of a career, those at the extreme ends of this time period may have very different financial and family commitments that impact their experiences. While this research provided a snapshot of the participants' experiences after over a year of the pandemic, its ongoing and unpredictable nature in the UK means that the effects discussed above may change over time.

Finally, our research deliberately focused on the experiences and perceptions of artists. However, this means that our results and ensuing discussion miss the perspective of other stakeholders, such as funders or employers. Information on the UK's government-led pandemic response for the creative industries is available to view online[5], and we highlight that our findings only present a small group of artists' views on topics that are socially, economically, and politically complex.

7. Conclusion

Overall, the early career professionals interviewed echo the experiences of disruption, loss, and anxiety that have been found across the arts industry. However, among this trauma, the dynamics of the pandemic have also led to a re-connection with their artistic identities,

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[5] Culture Recovery Fund, see https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/CRFgrants.

developing more sustainable working patterns and a greater sense of social responsibility in their own practices. As the pandemic moves into a new phase, they emphasised the importance of future-proofing the arts industries and responding to the opportunities for new forms of recovery that place a greater focus on accessibility and diversity of cultural production. The changing relationships to culture that were observed in the wider public created a hope amongst the participants that engagement in the arts may change going forward, with wider awareness of its role for supporting wellbeing and creativity. Harnessing this interest and enacting these priorities within greater institutional and policy level change is now more vital than ever to support the future of the cultural workforce.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Caitlin Shaughnessy: Conceptualization, Investigation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft. **Rosie Perkins:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Validation, Writing – original draft, Funding acquisition. **Neta Spiro:** Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **George Waddell:** Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Aifric Campbell:** Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing. **Aaron Williamon:** Funding acquisition, Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A

Table A1 Full list of indicative quotations per theme

Theme	Sub theme	Quotation
1. Pandemic precarity and creative practice	1.1 Immediate pandemic impacts and lost work	'I basically had a little bit of a mini crisis … I was like, okay, all my concerts are gone … I played with a string quartet and lots of orchestras. And then suddenly, obviously, all of that was cancelled, we had competitions happening and courses and everything gone. And, of course, like so many of us, I went through a period of, I have no idea what I'm going to do' (P1, *Musician*)
		'A lot of people who had … great lovely contracts before this all happened, have been completely let down and have seen things announced via Twitter that impact their jobs as opposed to have a conversation with the production team' (P2, *Actor*)
		'There's no work, there's nothing going on. And so … it's finding anything keeping going like that. Now, I guess it's just jumping back into, you know, what other skills you have outside the arts … like, you know, go back to teaching, go and work in a cafe, go and work in a building site' (P16, *Circus Director*)
		'It did feel a bit like … you know, you have a picnic blanket, and you throw it up and everything is up in the air … [and] the whole world had to do that in order to kind of get through the pandemic' (P8, *Writer*)
		'I think there's a meme going around … which was something like, everyone's freaking out about being poor. And it's like, "Don't worry, we're old poor, they're just new poor", which I very much related to. So yeah, it was kind of just … old skills I had to flex' (P9, *Actor*)
		'It's obviously made me think a lot financially about my progression right now and how viable it is' (P4, *Musician*)
		'When you're working creatively, because projects tend to be shorter term, one project drying up can be really damaging. And I think perhaps, you know, one thing that's kind of not been thought about as we come out of the pandemic is like, how you really make up for that lost work? Particularly like, early career artists, I think it has been really damaging, because you don't have a folio yet with which to sell yourself' (P11, *Writer*)
		'The flip side is, I'm so used to generating my own work and my own income … having so many different things that I can do has helped me' (P15, *Musician*)
	1.2 Perceptions of industry and governmental supports	'I don't know, personally, where the money [funding] is going. From, how it seemed, from my perspective, is that a lot of great theatres that needed funding, didn't receive funding. And a lot of companies that essentially needed funding just for the management, and the structure to stay afloat, but all the actors and technicians were let go, and all the Front of House staff were let go, that seemed to happen quite a lot' (P3, *Actor*)
		'Government support for freelancers, it's been absolutely atrocious. Well, my experience has been atrocious I think across the board, actually, freelancers have been treated terribly' (P5, *Film Maker*)
		'A lot of like community growing has been done, though. Like I would say, stepping away from complaining about the big pots of money. Certainly, like, there's been a lot of like a small circle artists and communities, trying to promote the work of others. And that's been really nice to see' (P11, *Writer*)
		'I saw a lot of industry professionals rallying around that going great, if you need to cancel your Spotlight membership,[5] I'm going to put my casting calls on here' (P3, *Actor*)
		'We're angry, as you can tell. I think a lot of people are just … it just seems like one thing after another, the government just keep doing to just hammer the industry down' (P7, *Writer*)

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Theme	Sub theme	Quotation
	1.3 Precarity of creative and freelance working cultures	'It made me realise that I was kind of going in this autopilot mode of just taking all the concerts that came my way because I felt like I had to do it, and that's what a classical musician is supposed to do' (P1, *Musician*)
		'My whole life was just a massive hustle. You know, I had like my own jazz quartet as well that I was singing with, and then if we wanted a gig, it would be a case of me contacting a venue, me advertising the gig, me getting the players together, paying them like so everything was kind of coming from me anyway … it's so competitive, there's so many more people wanting to do it than there are jobs that I was kind of like having enough of travelling around and being like a sort of troubadour' (P15, *Musician*)
		'I work every weekend, I work every bank holiday, I work every moment that other people get off … I socialise at work. I don't often socialise outside of that, because the rest of my life is such a hustle to keep the work going' (P12, *Circus Performer*).
		'It's been a very hard seven years, you know … you're doing 80 h a week kind of style, you know, this is not financially, emotionally, physically healthy … everyone I've been speaking to, in the last six months have been questioning like, what are the next steps? And how do we carry on in the future? But do we want to go back to where we were before?' (P16, *Circus Director*)
	1.4 Professional proactivity and adaptability	'It's [a] completely competitive industry, you've got to have your fingers in all the different pies' (P6, *Actor*)
		'Composers [are] quite often called like 'creators' now and like most composers are composer-performer you know, multi skilled, all these things that I think have made people who are early career a bit more … they have more avenues' (P15, *Musician*)
		'I think that it's given me a bit more of a kick to create my own things … the pandemic has forced me into thinking long term about marketing as a freelancer … creating my own things like workshops, and continuing YouTube videos and constantly getting more and more material up there to try and expand the people that see me and inquire about lessons and things'(P2, *Musician*)
		'I think it's showed me that I need to have, my own means of generating some kind of profit, personally, as well' (P4, *Musician*)
	1.5 Reflecting on practice and wellbeing	'When the pandemic started, I was in a position where I was earning the most I had as a professional ever. I was very happy with what I was bringing in … then the pandemic hit. And when my work was taken away, I essentially was left with everything except for my work. And then I realised how actually my work was kind of like both my financial, physical stability, but also my mental wellbeing and my health' (P12, *Circus Performer*)
		'I have the same goals, but the how has changed. I used to burn myself out all the time. Like, it was just a given really … And what I've learned is that, you know, you have to rest' (P9, *Actor*)
		'That forced pause … ended up being just an opportunity to rethink all of it, and to read to try to think, you know … what makes me really happy' (P1, *Musician*)
		'I thought more about like, how I can be an artist and collaborator … as opposed to just being kind of a random musician who works for other people all the time. And I've, so I kind of become a bit more of an artist' (P15, *Musician*).
		'I've started questioning exactly what I make and why I'm making it and also want to make it more … making more impacting work, you know' (P16, *Circus Director*)
2. PostCOVID I: Inclusivity and diversifying audiences	2.1 Perceived external assumptions and prejudices	'There's always this kind of like continued stigmatisation … about the arts as maybe not, not a real career' (P14, *Actor*)
		'I think, in lots of ways, the response has just solidified those differences, if you're somebody who cares about the arts and, and personally benefits from the arts, …whether it's as somebody who loves the National Theatre and goes every week, of course, you're gonna rally. But I think for people who've secretly thought that actors, the arts more generally, is useless, it's just bolstered their opinion, even in the face of the factual opposite' (P3, *Actor*).
		'I think a lot of creative people feel quite stung by the language used in the attitudes from people in power from government figures, I think, and I can understand that, and I feel stung by that too. I think governments have never really been the biggest advocates of the art because it doesn't work in the language that politicians like because it's not easy to put a number on and it's not easy to see a direct effect from it' (P13, *Actor*)
		'Like the retrain thing, a lot of stuff that, whether it was fumbles or taken out of context or not, it represented this wider attitude of the government towards the arts that I think we have always feared and known as there, but it is difficult to convince people of it' (P3, *Actor*).
		'My family don't necessarily understand what I do, or the arts in general, even though they might, they might absorb and engage with the arts, they might not realise it's an artistic form' (P16, *Circus Director*)
	2.2 Elitism, accessibility, and inequality	'If it's less financially viable … then yes, it's less desirable for certain socio-economic groups; working class, people of colour, are less likely to access performing arts … because it's not considered viable as a career … it wasn't considered viable as career, but it will be considered *even less viable* as a career.' (P12, *Writer*)
		'I think, [it] mirrors this opinion that the arts is an 'extra thing'. It's not an integral part. But that's because working class people and people from other marginalised groups have been excluded from the arts forever. So why would they think that there is access here? Why would they think that there is opportunity for good because what they've been taught is that only the wealthy and the privileged can access this … people have learned in their bodies through years and years of experience that these barriers are there, and in lots of places they still are' (P3, *Actor*)
		'When people go out of their way to, to kind of physically have a presence in young people's lives. I think that is when stuff sticks' (P4, *Musician*).
		'I have very much working-class roots, didn't go to a private school, etc. And I didn't know any actors. I've got nobody in my family in the field … And I'm from where I came from nobody is an actress. It's stupid thing to do, because it's so unreliable' (P3, *Actor*)
	2.3 Widening audiences and participation	

(*continued*)

Theme	Sub theme	Quotation
		'There's a few advantages in terms of online and doing it online. For example, with people with dementia, it can be much more comfortable for them to be able to do it from their homes' (P1, *Musician*).
		'I had people attending that I don't think would have maybe ever left the house for one … Yeah, it was completely [different] from people I would see in the stalls … I feel like it was reaching a very different audience' (P12, *Circus Performer*)
		'It's made us realise how unfair it's been up to now for disabled people, you know, the absolute rubbish-ness of everybody, from employers to arts professionals, and being able to accommodate, you know, a large part of our community and suddenly, bang, you know, everyone suddenly been able to do it. So it wasn't that hard to do it in the first place' (P7, *Writer*)
		'I have a frustration with people and artists, saying that they're trying to engage a new audience, and then just going in making it in theatre spaces. Because theatre spaces aren't accessible for everyone. … I think, you know, [you need to] to reach out into spaces, like outdoor environments that aren't fringe festivals, or arts festivals' (P16, *Circus Director*).
		'I think beyond that, how they [cultural institutions] can be serving their communities. Because it's these great historic buildings with these great spaces, lots of funding, often. It's their job to think not, you know, how can I be the best production manager? How can I be the best director I can be? How can I go down history, but rather, I have a community in pain - what can I do to serve my community right now?' (P3, *Actor*)
3. PostCOVID II: Adapting, developing, and disrupting cultural practices	3.1 Changing perceptions of cultural importance	'I think people are very hungry for theatre, and cinema and books. Again, just because they've realised how those things can transport them and how much they mean to their life. So, I hope that at least coming out of the pandemic, as there's more hunger for these things' (P11, *Writer*)
		'I think society has realised in general that the arts are important at any level, not just professional or recreational, but also, you know, trying to better yourself just as a hobby' (P2, *Musician*).
		'We've got nothing else to do. What are you going to do? Engage in the arts; pick up a craft, watch a hell of a lot of telly online, listen to music, try and play some music, make silly Tik Tok videos' (P10, *Actor*).
		'We also now realise that actually to live and survive, like, it's really important to our community, to have culture, to have arts, to have music' (P16, *Circus Director*).
		'I think, you know, what we just experienced together as a culture is something completely incommunicable by science right? There like trauma, that pain, the up shift, uprooting over, like daily routines is the things that science can describe, but it can't really articulate. Whereas the arts or the way that you know, culture, the access [to] all of those feelings, and I think that's how, like, even medically we start to heal' (P11, *Writer*)
		'I think definitely the pandemic provides an opportunity that those who are involved with arts and wellbeing arts and health social prescribing … there is so much trauma that's happened … this should be a priority along with all the other kind of recoveries the economic recovery should also involve, you know, the arts recovery, and we can funnel all those things into people's recovered health' (P7, *Writer*)
	3.2 Adaptive and hybrid creative models	'What the experience of working on Zoom in the pandemic gave us was just this almost limitless potential of who we could, who we could work with and play with since lockdown began, last March … we've worked with families in New York, in Ohio, in Peru, Barcelona' (P13, *Actor*)
		'Most people that went to concerts before will go back at some point, because you can't beat it. You can't beat that feeling that atmosphere … Now you go into a church or something and you hear a whole choir, singing in harmony, whether it's perfect harmony, whether it's a little bit off pitch or whether something goes catastrophically wrong, that atmosphere and that electricity in the room, cannot be replicated anywhere else' (P2, *Musician*).
		'There's obviously some fantastic online stuff that's been made, but not very much. I think there needs to have been more and I think a lot of people may not online is so weird, and it feels so cold, and so anti-theatre. But actually, it depends how you use it' (P3, *Actor*)
		'Touring shows is not a healthy environment, doing a tour around Europe and around the UK. Is this sustainable? Is it good for the environment?.. we're using big trucks to take our set from one place to another place. And so stuff like digital arts and sustainable arts … I think there's a huge potential in digital platforms' (P16, *Circus Director*).
		'The crowdfunding, also financially helping and supporting … so they would help contribute £5–10 towards the creation of a project, which was cool, because there never would have thought of like, even asking my audience 'Hey, do you want to support some things, support an idea?' but that was really successful'(P12, *Circus Performer*)
	3.3 Economic vs. cultural tensions	'[You've got] the craft and the theme, you know, the creativity aspect, and then you've got the industry, the money-making aspects. And it's, and sometimes I think they're at loggerheads' (P10, *Actor*).
		'We need to make money to prove our worth. So, to achieve that, we'll just play it safe and, and, you know, cast people who are always in everything, or cast a big name, or do a very obvious thing. I'm not saying there's not a place for a commercial show. But if we reduce our ability to take risks, and to make new work, and to make work that is risky, and bold and daring, then I believe that the quality of the work will go down, and the work will be reduced' (P13, *Actor*).
		'This idea that we can just put a few names on stage, throw enough money at something and sell out the seats and the job's done is archaic, and doesn't work anymore. I'm not even sure it ever did. And it certainly works as a business model. But as soon as Art becomes purely a business model, it just dies' (P3, *Actor*)
		'I like to see more kind of, like, funding routes go towards, like, not like non-ticketed events, non-exclusive, like, times of days … That can also serve as places where people can kind of come and be creative as well' (P4, *Musician*)

[1]Spotlight is a membership-based casting platform for acting jobs, auditions, and casting calls for film, TV, and theatre in the UK.

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