



Since January 2020 Elsevier has created a COVID-19 resource centre with free information in English and Mandarin on the novel coronavirus COVID-19. The COVID-19 resource centre is hosted on Elsevier Connect, the company's public news and information website.

Elsevier hereby grants permission to make all its COVID-19-related research that is available on the COVID-19 resource centre - including this research content - immediately available in PubMed Central and other publicly funded repositories, such as the WHO COVID database with rights for unrestricted research re-use and analyses in any form or by any means with acknowledgement of the original source. These permissions are granted for free by Elsevier for as long as the COVID-19 resource centre remains active.



ELSEVIER

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](https://www.sciencedirect.com)

Journal of Creativity

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/yjoc

Adapting, surviving, discovering: Creative practitioners in the COVID-19 crisis

Valeria Duarte^{a,*}, David Gauntlett^a

School of Creative Industries, The Creative School, Toronto Metropolitan University, Toronto, ON, Canada

ARTICLE INFO

Key words:
 COVID-19
 creativity
 adaptation
 creative sector
 gig work
 freelance

ABSTRACT

This study investigates how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the work and creative practice of individuals who identify as artists, producers or makers. Through qualitative, open-ended interviews, this research demonstrates that, regardless of the many obstacles creators had to face, the pandemic translated into an opportunity to advance new knowledge about themselves, their values and motivations, and identify how they would like to manage their creative practice in the future. The paper ends with three key findings. First, the challenges of this time prompted participants to generate new perceptions of their creative identity. Second, they often found a valuable connection to nature and ‘the great outdoors’ amid the pandemic. Third, the most pressing challenges they had to face were related to their mental health and financial stability.

The global outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020 compelled societies around the world to reevaluate many everyday practices. As the first mass global outbreak in recent times, the pandemic – and the associated measures to contain the virus such as lockdowns and social distancing – has had a genuinely unprecedented impact on human behaviour, including work dynamics. Operations across multiple industries such as tourism, retail, and entertainment were halted, forcing organizations to redesign themselves, opt for home-based teleworking or move, if possible, to a virtual setting (Statistics Canada, 2020). Reports in the news media regarding the creative industries and arts sector mostly focused on the survival of arts organizations (e.g., Kenyon, 2020), and on the work that professional artists with long careers within the industry were producing during lockdown (Bradshaw, 2020; Zomorodi, 2020). The challenges for creative individuals who work independently – and the numerous ways in which they responded to the crisis – were more often overlooked.

Aiming to bridge this gap, this study is focused on how the pandemic affected the work of people who identify as artists, producers or makers – those who engage in a program of self-initiated creative work for professional or non-professional purposes – often freelance. The goal was to advance new understandings about the nuances of managing the demands of a creative life while facing unexpected and challenging circumstances such as lockdowns, social distancing, strict travel regulations or emotional distress.

This qualitative study adds to the emerging body of knowledge about the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic by raising new questions and highlighting points of interest for further research. The paper begins with an overview of theoretical approaches regarding how people adapt, finding ways to deal with a changing environment. Then, it continues with a discussion about the findings of 12 qualitative open-ended interviews conducted with creators and professional artists, who shared their experiences and reflected on the particularities of being a creator during the pandemic. The findings of this research suggested that participants found new perceptions about their creative identity; they developed new relationships with the natural world; and that some of the most pressing negative effects of the pandemic for them were psychological distress and financial security.

The present article is one of the first outcomes of the project Reframing Creativity, a multiyear research study run by the authors at the Creativity Everything lab at Toronto Metropolitan University (recently renamed) in Ontario, Canada. The project aims to investigate how professional artists and creators were affected by COVID-19, and to develop insights regarding how independent artists, producers or makers can be better prepared and supported in similar future crises.

Adaptability and creative flexibility

The capacity to adapt is the feature that has made it possible for humans to live and thrive in radically different environments across the globe, while bearing the burden of wars, unpredictable markets, chang-

* Corresponding author: Valeria Duarte, The Creative School, Toronto Metropolitan University, 80 Gould St, Toronto, ON, Canada. M5B 2M7
 E-mail addresses: valeria.duarte@ryerson.ca (V. Duarte), david.gauntlett@ryerson.ca (D. Gauntlett).

^a This work was supported by an Insight Grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and additional funding from Toronto Metropolitan University.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.yjoc.2022.100027>

Received 25 January 2022; Received in revised form 3 June 2022; Accepted 25 June 2022

2713-3745/© 2022 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd on behalf of Academy of Creativity. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>)

ing trends or new technologies. Even though adaptation can mean moving from one environment to another that is more suitable, or even forcing the environment to change in response to one's efforts, it is principally related to the adjustment of the self to environmental conditions, that is, adaptation as fitting in, modifying one's behaviour in order to keep going in unknown terrain.

According to Cohen (2012), this active interplay between person, culture and environment is crucial in the study of creativity, since the production of new outcomes and ideas is partly a response to the freedoms and constraints that a creator faces in a specific moment. In other words, the creative practice cannot be isolated from the socio-cultural systems in which the creator operates, or the challenges that any external situation may generate (Rudowicz, 2003).

Independent artists and creators have always navigated historical events both by adapting their practice to new environments and circumstances, and using their practice as a way to reflect the social context, launch social critique, and make sense of their reality (Zinn, 2013). The human capacity to create while simultaneously experiencing adversity – such as lockdowns, captivity, or isolation – has been long noted. Findings from studies of concentration camps (Orenstein, 2016; Tomić et al., 2019; Weiner, 2014), the penitentiary system (Brewster, 2014; Schrift, 2006), immigration centers (Hughes, 2016), and slavery (Newton, 1977) have posited that creativity can emerge from severely straitened circumstances. Of course, the encouraging glimpse of creativity doesn't change the fact that these conditions are often horrific.

Hod Orkibi (2021), in a recent article about COVID-19, creativity and well-being, defined this personal ability to generate new and effective cognitive-behavioural-emotional responses to stressful situations as *Creative Adaptability*, and observed that: "This internal transformation requires sensitivity to one's self, openness, and willingness to modify the present experience, effortful and active adaptation of perceptions, and tolerance of uncertainty or ambiguity" (2021, p. 3).

Creative work, then, has been a constant of our history thanks to the individuals that by refusing to give up their practice, and guided by a drive to *make* which seems greater than most adversity, have found new ways to create and express themselves regardless of their circumstances. Since creativity can be said to represent a form of soul-making (Weiner, 2014), it follows that the escape of creation aims to restore sense to the world.

Methodology and the present research

Given the threat of future pandemics (Ross et al., 2015; Settele et al., 2020) and the latent possibility of other novel social-political and economic crises, we designed a qualitative study to examine the work of creators, producers and makers in these circumstances, and identify possible topics of interest for future research. Drawing from a semi-structured questionnaire, we conducted interviews with 12 individuals who identified as makers or creators and professional artists. All questions were open-ended. See Appendix for the list of questions.

The interviewees were deliberately sought among artists who had been working professionally for at least three years before the pandemic. With the goal of providing a broader perspective, individuals from a variety of backgrounds and creative practices were recruited. This selection allowed us to analyze the experiences of creators whose practices would normally include being with different people in the same room, or with a live audience, who were obviously forced to change their work dynamics due to social distancing, and also those who were already working in a partly 'remote' way. All participants were given the option to include their names, or not, in published outcomes. Most creators (10 out of 12) chose to be identified by name, since they were sharing their own artistic experiences and felt it was better to be named than to have their insights published anonymously. See Appendix for the list of participants.

The project does not pretend to have identified a strict or representative cross-section of all working creators; rather, we aimed to conduct rich interviews with a diverse *range* of creators who would be able to speak about different experiences. Following social-distancing guidelines and regulations, the interviews were conducted separately using Zoom, the video-conferencing service that had become ubiquitous during the pandemic. The interviews were carried out between February and July 2021.

Experiences of the pandemic in relation to creative identity

Research and reports in the news media have been concerned with the creative industry and the future of arts institutions amid the pandemic (see, e.g., Jeannotte, 2021; Kenyon, 2020), but there is a lack of attention to the creative individual. Aiming to fulfill this gap, we asked participants if the pandemic had affected or changed *them* as creators in any way, to which the great majority of participants responded affirmatively. They explained how the pandemic made them rethink, or redirect different aspects of their practice, including the values that guide their work or the ways they would like to manage their creative practice in the future.

For some creators that were not able to work for some time because of the social nature of their practice, the pandemic turned into a time of reflection and self-exploration. F.H., a photographer currently based in Vancouver, commented on her experience:

Without working for so long, you forget what it is you like about doing the work that you do... It feels like it's going to take so long to get back to where I was, and then it makes you question – is 'back to where I was' where I want to go? Taking all this time off from work puts you in this weird place where you start rethinking everything.

F.H. emphasized how difficult it was for her to deal with the emotions that surfaced amid lockdown, and yet she recognized that the pandemic was, as she put it, "a necessary pause and reset button":

The good thing, though, is that it has given me this opportunity to really inquire. I think if I had stayed on the path of my regular life, my burnout would have only been exacerbated, and so I think I'm actually grateful for the time that I did have to be able to do this reflection and to quiet down, because it was much needed. And it's now put me in a place mentally where I'm ready to create new projects again.

According to Lazarus and Folkman's theory of psychological stress (1984), it is normal to experience a fluctuation of emotional states such as anxiety, fear or frustration in a stressful situation such as a pandemic. However, most of our informants (8) indicated that despite the difficulty of these emotions, they seemed to have benefited from the outbreak since it gave them a moment to further think about their creative practice, and even realize new and valuable aspects of their creative identity.

Stuart Goldsmith is a stand-up comedian from the UK. As COVID-19 interrupted all his live events, he started hosting a kind of comedy chat show format he spontaneously invented on Twitch, as well as offering online mentoring for new comics. He gave this answer when asked if his new work practices were as fulfilling to him as his previous ones:

Hugely fulfilling, and it also enables me to spend much more time with my family because I'm not on the road, so that's brilliant. I've been a comedian for a long time, and a break and a change from that and being really invigorated with a new project is enormously fulfilling, and that in itself has made me feel like 'Oh hang on, maybe I'm not simply a comedian, maybe I'm an idea-generating – to do with comedy – entrepreneurial kind of person', and that's super exciting.

Amid the obvious struggles, Goldsmith identified an important relationship between being a comedian and being a creator in a broader sense. The new limitations allowed him to expand his own creative identity, since, in his words, he was able to see himself not only as

a comedian but also as a creator of solutions, ideas, and opportunities. Goldsmith's observation aligns with Albinsson's thoughtful study on musicians' relationship with the label "entrepreneurs" (2018), where he concluded that cultivating managerial skills, such as the ones that Goldsmith was implementing, in the education of artists and creators could help them be more flexible, responsive, confident and solution-oriented. Skills that would be valuable at any time, but in particular would help them to adapt in a crisis.

Similar to Goldsmith's case, other creators were rapidly adopting online alternatives to any in-person interaction. This impacted how creators thought about their audiences, and their *potential* audiences and collaborators. Sofie Mikhaylova is a Toronto-based DJ, writer, and musician, who runs her own independent music label. In her interview, she argued that the pandemic changed her as a creator as it made her reconsider the nature of her audience:

Going forward, I don't think I'll ever be thinking in just the perspective of Toronto, local, I think I'm going to be thinking more globally in terms of audience reach and how the work can be translated to digital... It just made me rethink, or I guess realize again, how connected and how easy it is to talk to anyone from around the world living in this day and age..that's been very humbling and grounding but also extremely eye-opening to help me think more globally about my work, my practice and my words, so I do feel very supported on a global scale.

Mikhaylova's experience speaks to the huge increase of online content that was being consumed by the public due to lockdowns and social distancing. Unlike historical pandemics, the conditions of COVID-19 was one of digital technologies and virtual networks, which inevitably resulted in most people turning to the internet to continue with their responsibilities remotely. A social and work life that is even more digitally mediated brings different concerns for creators that demands further exploration including how this could affect their creative self-identity, performance and relationship with their audience.

Adaptation and positive outcomes of the COVID-19 pandemic for creators

As devastating as the pandemic has been for the health and wellbeing of millions of people, we cannot avoid the evidence that for many others there were positive outcomes and experiences within this context. (We acknowledge that as creative professionals, our interviewees were not apparently wealthy, but they were not among the least fortunate or the least privileged). This approach provides a more balanced understanding of a situation that presents an unprecedented range of challenges and opportunities to different people.

Several artists and creators used this time to make new things or use their practice as a catalyst for support in a time of crisis, which highlighted their capacity to cope with and capitalize on change. Matt Gooderson, a music producer, songwriter and composer shared his perspective on the idea of making his art during the pandemic:

I do know that a lot of seminal creative work has been born out of extreme restrictions. And that's fascinating really because you then start to question, maybe we're better creatives when we have this opposition, or just maybe different [circumstances], but it certainly gives rise to a much more focused discipline, because it must be done... To me as an artist it's of absolutely unquestionable importance that work must be made right now.

In fact, the literature suggests that it is precisely in more difficult times that human beings have been able to generate the most striking creative outcomes. "Although we would like to believe, quite simply, that freedom of expression favours creativity, history makes clear that creative work often proceeds successfully under oppressive outward conditions—indeed often in conscious, active opposition to them" (Gruber & Wallace 1989, p. 280).

For Isobel Anderson, a musician, sound artist and music mentor, the pandemic provided the perfect opportunity to create an online course to teach women and female-identifying musicians how to produce or record their own music:

I was so ready, and I was really wanting to do that before COVID hit, so the time and the fear just helped me to galvanize... Also I love building things and putting them together, so I loved doing all the graphic design for all of the PDFs and all the videos, the lessons. I just loved making stuff, I really enjoyed that. I don't really like being told what to do and replicating it.

Anderson taught at universities before the pandemic, which she had found to be very stressful and demanding because of the long hours and the little time she had for herself. Therefore, she felt understandably happier, and proud of this new project. When we asked her if this new project was more or less fulfilling than her work life pre-pandemic, she said it was "500% more fulfilling. I mean, more than that, I feel like I've genuinely made a difference in real people's lives".

Engaging with one's creative efforts is known to be an effective coping mechanism in the face of stress or painful emotions, a crucial strategy for managing difficult life situations, and a catalyst for personal fulfillment (Stuckey & Nobel, 2010). Moreover, the process of bringing an idea to life in the physical world is acknowledged to enrich our existence, generating an inherent satisfaction and a powerful sense of being alive (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Gauntlett, 2018; Ingold, 2013; May, 1994). Anderson's narrative is consistent with these ideas, which explain why she could have flourished during this complicated time.

Francisco Garcia, a commercial fashion and advertising photographer, commented how the pandemic made him more open to possibilities, since he gained a new love for film photography and started to develop film in his own bathroom. He found that he could 'fail' in a way that he wasn't comfortable with before – he felt more vulnerable, and more present in the moment. He summarised it in this way:

There's a very special thing that's happening, which is that we're having a lot of time to ourselves and our own thoughts in our own minds to think about life. I'm learning so much about photography again, you know, and I was at a bit of a low there, it was more like you know, go to the studio, shoot, get paid, pay the mortgage, just in that bubble, and then COVID hit. No money? Oh okay, so how do we do this? Yeah, you just start learning again. It kind of feels like I'm coming out of college again.

Garcia's excitement about the new possibilities he discovered, amid lockdown and social distancing, speaks to his creativity as an essential factor for adapting to unexpected challenges that often emerges catalyzed by spontaneity. Whereas some people might have seen the pandemic as a temporary and stressful obstacle that was interfering with their usual ways of working, creators from this study ultimately perceived the crisis as an opportunity to embrace new ways of thinking, working and communicating.

This particular finding substantiates previous research studies regarding the link between adversity and subsequent creativity – the idea that challenging life circumstances can play a significant role in fostering creative thinking (Forgeard, 2013). Moreover, it underlines what researchers and scholars have argued over the years: a creative life is intimately related to one's capacity to adapt, pivot and confront crises (Runco, 1999, 2007; Simonton, 2002).

Even though not all creators in our research were *compelled* to change – the illustrators who were already working from home notably said work life wasn't much different from normal – all of those who did modify their practices in a more drastic way used their creativity as a motivational force for growth and self-actualization. One final example in this section would be Salma Hindy, a comedian based in Toronto who gain a valuable experience while moving their usual stand up shows to an online setting.

I had mistakenly thought that if I was able to do the scariest thing to me, which was getting up on stage and performing, then I am able to do anything. But actually, I was still afraid of the online world. I was afraid of videos, I was afraid of, you know, trying something new. So, I think for me, it was a humble reminder that you still have to actively practice courage and your fears can show up in other forms. It's been a great time for me to remember that just because I'm doing one thing doesn't mean I can't push myself to explore other areas and grow.

For some creators, such as Salma, the digital migration due to the pandemic was also a good opportunity to recast some aspects of their practice in a novel way – stimuli that could be beneficial for their creative process, since dealing with uncertainty usually presses individuals to challenge their established assumptions, and to experiment (Beghetto, 2019). Taking a deeper look into their principles and emotions, and considering them as catalysts for a more considerate and integrated creative practice, enriched the overall experience of creators amid COVID-19.

Content and inspiration

Regardless of the disruptions some creators had to face during the first few months of the pandemic, all participants in our study continued working somehow. Even if they had to take a break in the first months of the pandemic when shows, events and contracts got cancelled, they were typically working again by summer 2020. Therefore, it was pertinent to discuss not only their practices and environment but also the things that they were creating, how COVID-19 affected their style or line of work, their sources of inspiration and the overall outcome of their creative efforts amid lockdowns and social distancing.

We now know that COVID-19 led to an unprecedented alteration of the dynamics of human–nature interactions worldwide (Soga, et. al, 2021). Parks and outdoor spaces – and supermarkets – were the only alternative available places to go during the most restricted months and a new-found special interest in nature began to flourish (Morse, et. al, 2020; Park people, 2020) Concerning the present study, it was striking to see how participants mentioned nature or the outdoors as a theme both for their content and as a space to find peace and inspiration. F.H., who had recently moved to Vancouver from Toronto, found within hiking a new routine that ended up being beneficial for her and her creative practice:

I realized suddenly that a connection to nature was important, so when I moved here I started doing a lot of hikes and that was really helpful for my mental health, but it was also super helpful for my creativity. Like, I was suddenly getting ideas about projects I could do in relationship to environmentalism.

Similar to F.H.'s experience, Matt Gooderson found nature, and specially silence, to be profoundly inspiring for his music practice. When asked about the good things he experienced during lockdown he first said “feeling nature more deeply”. He also commented:

I found huge inspiration in the silence of lockdown. The sound was incredible, the first lockdown, with no planes or calls. I think people experienced the sky being more blue, the air being fresher. And I don't really believe that in that short amount of time it could be true, maybe it was, but what I think is more likely is that we saw the sky bluer because we were living in a less visually stimulated world, we weren't traveling to as many places, so we were looking deeper and, for me, it was this, it was this opportunity to look deeper.

Overall, around half of the creators (7) we interviewed brought up that finding a connection with nature helped them improve their mental wellbeing and experience a sense of peace and inspiration. Research about this topic, in fact, suggest that direct contact with a natural environment can have beneficial effects on people's creativity in

terms of evoking greater curiosity and flexibility, attention restoration, as well as enhancing creative thinking and the incubation of ideas (see Plambech & Konijnendijk van den Bosch, 2015; van Rompay & Jol, 2016; Williams, et. al, 2018).

Furthermore, it was not a big surprise to note that this new interest in the natural world was also reflected in the work of some participants. After all, nature has been one of the greatest muses in the history of creative work around the world. Benoit Tardif, an illustrator based near the city of Montreal, found himself drawing what he considered to be “less sarcastic and more positive” messages:

I made one drawing in the week when COVID hit Montreal, and it was people in a house with flowers, birds, and I just said on Instagram: ‘The world is still beautiful’. And maybe I kept that in my head because I drew a lot of wildflowers, everything, mountains, in my sketchbook. And I still draw a lot since it's now in my vocabulary of images.

Paying special attention to the content and themes in the work that creators keep producing during this time could be fruitful since their creative outcomes could be understood as symbolic representations of this moment, as efforts shaped partly by the patterns of contemporary anxieties, and as tangible responses to the dynamic rhythm of life amid a global pandemic.

Another common source of inspiration among participants was other creators and their own creative communities. Stuart Goldsmith commented on the inspiring adaptation and resilience of others:

I've been very inspired by the pivoting of other comedians. People have just been able to devote themselves to think ‘I'm gonna do this, I'm going to do this every day’ and I've sort of been really inspired by that work ethic.

Jodianne Beckford, a Black photographer and creator, claimed to have been inspired by the community she was able to build around her love of plants, and the creative project and business idea she developed amid the pandemic called ‘Noire Girls Plant’:

The whole idea of it [Noire Girls Plant] was just sharing my love for plants and how we can use them to foster our own healing and mental health, and then it's kind of just snowballed since then. It created this community of plant people, which is amazing, and also people that look like me! I didn't think that there was a community of people of color, Black people also specifically, that was in the world of planting or horticulture.

Because most creative outcomes from professional creators and the overall act of making fundamentally involve, and greatly benefits from, connecting with other people (Csikszentmihalyi & Sawyer, 1995; Fischer et. al, 2005; Friedman et. al, 2016; Gauntlett, 2018), something that was difficult to do in the midst of social distancing, having a supportive creative community in some form seems to have played a key role in the creative process of some of our participants.

Negative effects of the pandemic and lessons for the future

Research and reports focused on the arts and creative industries have confirmed the disastrous impact of the pandemic on arts and culture-related workers (Jeannotte, 2021; Kenyon, 2020). Canada's “I lost my gig” survey, for instance, found that as of August 15, 2020 (based on 1037 responses) almost 30,000 gigs and contracts for artists were cancelled or postponed, which translated into a total capital loss of almost C\$20.7 million (I Lost My Gig Canada, 2020).

Lockdowns and social distancing made it impossible for creators to participate in collective cultural settings in person, or to perform in front of a physical audience, and these new rules also prevented them from doing other things that would normally nurture their creative practices, such as leaving their primary environment to gain input from somewhere else. In the light of these restrictions, this last section examines

what creators in our research said were the most pressing challenges they had to overcome.

One of the main concerns for the participants in our research (8 of 12) was the impact that COVID-19 has had on their mental health. Anxiety, stress and signs of depression were some of the feelings mentioned in the study by these creators who were dealing with situations ranging from concerns about financial stability to social isolation, or separation from loved ones. When asked about the advice they would give themselves if they were able to go back in time to just before the pandemic, photographer F.H. stated: "I would have definitely told myself to stop beating myself up so much and to deal with my mental health more proactively from an earlier date". Here, F.H. expands on how she dealt with losing job opportunities during the first months of the pandemic:

I would say, I have a very strong internal locus of control, so I take a lot of responsibility for everything in my life, so it doesn't matter if there's a global pandemic, I will still be like 'This is because of you', and so I was very depressed because I was really struggling with extremely low self-esteem. It was really hard and I felt like it was something I did wrong, you know, like I'm no longer good, I'm no longer desirable, I'm no longer hireable. All of this kind of negative self-talk business was ongoing for a really long time, and it really affected me emotionally, and it was really difficult to calm myself out of that mind space.

Human lives often include emotional turbulence, for different reasons, of course, even when there's not a global pandemic. But research suggests that being an artist or a professional creator can bring additional stress such as the pressure to be creative, relevant, original or good enough for their audiences and for themselves (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011). Artists and creators share a special kind of vulnerability that, while it may often benefit the outcome of their work, can be intricate to navigate, especially when it comes to separating their personal lives from their creative practice. COVID-19 has highlighted how fundamental it is for artists and freelance professional creators to have access to high-quality mental health resources.

Participants who were able to have psychotherapy sessions during the pandemic referred to therapy as a valuable and helpful way to mitigate the emotional distress caused by the virus. Illustrator J.G., for example, found a therapist when the pandemic started affecting his creative drive and motivation, especially during the winter:

What people can usually do in a pandemic is go to a park or go outside, but when it's dark and it's raining and it's cold then it's very unappealing, and I think the pandemic started affecting me like around that time where I wasn't really making any work that I found, I would say, creative. I even started going through therapy, because I was like 'Oh, I need to figure out what's going on mentally'.

Numerous studies have been focused on the variables that shape the work environment and affect creative performance, often highlighting the benefits of varying the workspace to gain different inputs and stimulate creativity. Participants in our research expressed different opinions about working from home and the regulations that prevented them from meeting with other creators or easily changing their work environments.

One the one hand, consider the experience of Benoit Tardif, an illustrator based near Montreal, who had a difficult time when the province put tighter restrictions on non-essential businesses such as dine-in restaurants and coffee shops, places that he visited as an alternative workspace several times a week:

A thing that I like to do a lot is working in coffee shops, so before COVID, maybe two, three, four times a week I went to work at a coffee shop and it was very, very good for my mental health not working at home nine to five each day. I used to take a walk to the subway, or take my bike and go to a coffee shop. There are other people... that is inspiring. I had a lot of great ideas for my projects there. In the lockdown that was awful.

Robert Epstein observed that "New ideas arise from an interconnection of old ideas. So that means, at the very least, you have to be exposed to a novel stimulus. That's where new ideas come from. And your environment helps to create those interconnections. And the good news is, to some extent, we all can control our surroundings." (Ifeyanyi, 2019, 2:32). Obviously, creators like Tardif were not so able to control their surroundings amid the pandemic, and for some of them, this meant that they lacked new stimulation for their creative practice.

On the other hand, Mike Regis, an emerging filmmaker and actor, pointed out the efficiency of working from home without having to go to physical meetings, which saved time and made things easier in his case:

I don't have to leave my house. Before, you'd have to go to some physical places, but now you just go to set. I actually kind of prefer it, because you would have to do so many other things in person. You literally just go in person for set now, or pickups and drop-offs, so I find it easier and it's more efficient as well.

Contrary to Tardif, Regis appreciated the fact that he didn't have to leave home to keep his projects going. The reason why these two creators used to change work scenarios pre-pandemic are different in nature, one of them did it to gain inspiration and for mental health reasons, while the other one had specific responsibilities that required his presence. But both experiences are valuable and representative of the nuances that need to be taken into consideration in the bigger conversations currently taking place in governments, companies and institutions about remote working in a post-COVID-19 era (see Wang et al., 2021).

Financial stability was another key issue aggravated by the pandemic. The precarious nature of creative and cultural work on a global scale is already well known and documented (Morgan & Nelligan, 2018). Some of the struggles that artists and creators were already facing before the pandemic include short-term contracts in complex projects, unstable working conditions, low wages, not enough support from governments or institutions and, for those at the start of their careers, a culture of "work as opportunity" and "unpaid internships" (Siebert & Wilson, 2013). On these terms, it is evident that the pandemic brought yet another obstacle to the financial situation of artists and independent creators. Sofie Mikhaylova remembered being worried about her finances as a DJ:

I was terrified, obviously, because I didn't know what I was going to do for money because all of my income was from nightlife and if there was no nightlife like how am I going to make money? It was scary. I didn't know what to do, I was very upset, I was like what am I doing with my career? I spent all this time building this career in nightlife and now the industry is crashing.

For the photographer Francisco Garcia, concerns about money were influenced largely by responsibilities such as having a family and paying a mortgage, which motivated him to think about ways to increase his income amid the crisis:

I started a print shop because I was like 'how the hell am I gonna make money now?' so then I opened up a print shop with just my prints online. I've sold three, but they're super sick and it's really fulfilling.

Garcia's narrative of suddenly having to develop a new source of income in the pandemic and finding it fulfilling at the same time, speaks to the experience of other participants who also managed to adapt their creative practice in order to keep making money from it, while enjoying the process and the creative challenge. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to deduce that the resilience of these creators always leads to economic growth, or that it is easily sustained. In fact, the assumption that all creators are "resilient" and that with the right attitude and skills they can manage financial insecurity, is problematic since this normalizes public disinvestment, and the idea that cultural and creative workers should rely on unstable networks and labour structures

(Comunian & England, 2020). While we find the creative adaptability and flexibility of our interviewees to be remarkable and noteworthy, it is important to underline that the pandemic presented a demanding and even frightening situation for many, not simply an ‘interesting challenge’.

Conclusions and general discussion

Overall, this study indicates that the participants not only adapted to the new circumstances by finding different ways to keep working, but that they were also able to see this moment as an occasion to advance new understandings about their creative practice, their medium and themselves. This motivation to pursue new, and often exciting, creative and personal objectives regardless of the difficult circumstances circles back to the conceptual frameworks of creative adaptability previously examined. That is, that creators’ usual sensitivity to one’s self and openness to change or experiment could result in positive cognitive, behavioural and emotional responses in a moment of stress (Orkibi, 2021).

In general, creators were able to navigate this moment and find various opportunities to thrive in it. In fact, we found that the respondents were more inclined to define the pandemic in terms of new possibilities and discoveries, rather than problems and impediments. Creators did much more than just aim to survive this crisis. This is reflected in the work and projects that have been produced during lockdowns – by the creators we interviewed, and many others – and the positive experiences and lessons they have fostered.

Our findings on how COVID-19 affected the creative practice of the participants can be summarized in three points:

1. Participants generated new perceptions about their creative identity. Different circumstances such as taking a long break from work due to a lack of contracts, the need to create an alternative source of income, or having the time to explore a new medium or expand their creative community online, led some participants to realize that the parameters by which they understand their creative practice could be flexible and ever-changing. In fact, when asked if the pandemic had changed them as creators, most of the participants responded affirmatively, often for two or three of these three reasons. First, they had gained a healthier and more informed approach to the relationship between their art and money. Second, they had realized that they did not have to label themselves as just one thing, such as ‘photographer’ or ‘comedian’, but that they could be businesspeople running different streams of activity at the same time, without these things necessarily conflicting or cancelling each other out. Third, they had expanded their sense of their creative community, since a more constant online presence had resulted in the formation of new audiences from different cities or even countries. Overall, the pandemic translated into an opportunity for these creators to advance new knowledge about themselves, their values and motivations, and identify how they would like to manage their creative practice in the future.
2. Various participants claimed to have found a valuable connection to nature and ‘the great outdoors’, amid the pandemic. There is a growing body of research showing that this desire to be in a natural environment emerged in the life of people from around the world, regardless of their background or occupation, who found in nature

a sort of ‘refuge’ to foster psychological stability (Grima et al., 2020; Soga, et. al, 2021). However, in the case of our participants, nature not only acted as a safe space to deal with mixed feelings and emotions, but also as a source of inspiration for their creative practice, and a starting point for exploring new connections and ideas. For example, some of the illustrators found themselves using more natural elements in their projects, and one of the musicians talked about rethinking the concept of silence after being out walking in the woods. Creator-nature interactions, then, were a common topic during our interviews, highlighting the fact that the pandemic had influenced creators’ motivations and opportunities to engage with outdoor activities. Taking advantage of this window of opportunity had perhaps produced a better picture of the deep relationship between nature and creativity.

3. The evident adaptability and flexibility of these creators do not exclude the numerous challenges and difficulties that they had to overcome. One of the most pressing negative effects of the pandemic was the psychological impact of the loss of freedom, uncertainty about the future, separation from loved ones and social isolation. Drawing from their experiences, and the perception that artists and creators tend to be more vulnerable and connected with their emotions due to the personal essence of their work, it is key to underline the need for more accessible and reliable mental health resources for workers in the creative industries. Financial security was also a common concern among the participants. It is well known that artists and creators are often dealing with precarious work conditions in terms of low wages and stable job opportunities. The pandemic only aggravated some of these issues when contracts, gigs and events were cancelled leaving them, and sometimes their families and dependents, in tough situations. Furthermore, the pandemic brought about a significant rise in the use of digital platforms and information systems, driving creators to a new scenario in which the main interaction with their audiences, clients and teams was mediated by screens. Our evidence suggests that this digital shift had a range of different consequences for artists and creators. While illustrators were usually not deeply affected since they already tended to work remotely, other creators such as comedians had to learn how to transform their practice and adapt it to a digital setting, such as streaming platforms and social media live streams, in a rapidly changing context.

In light of our conclusions and given the increasing research on COVID-19 in relation to all areas of knowledge, this study will hopefully stimulate new investigations regarding the key findings of this paper. It is important to note that some of the previously noted effects of the pandemic (e.g., financial insecurity, psychological distress and an increased interest in outdoors activities) could be applicable for the general population and not only artists or creators. However, it is also important to consider that artists often have a particular awareness of their emotions and ideas that allows them to perceive the world and navigate their context in multiple and complex ways. As such, the nuances of being a professional creator inform these effects in a very specific way that demands a further and more precise exploration.

Appendix

[Table A1](#), [Table A2](#)

Table A1
Structured questions asked to all respondents

1. Can you tell us about what you 'normally' do – how did you describe your creative work pre-Covid? And was it fulfilling?
2. Can you talk us through how Covid changed things? And was it fulfilling?
3. Has the pandemic changed you as a creator?
4. What has worked for you so far in this pandemic? (Coping mechanisms)
5. What were the worst points?
6. During this time, have you felt supported by other creators, organizations, or anyone?
7. How have you been finding inspiration during these times?
8. Have you been struck by any interesting other cases of people pivoting or changing their practices?
9. What platforms or technologies have worked better for you during these times?
10. If you could go back in time and visit yourself, one day before the pandemic began, what advice would you give yourself?
11. What advice would you give to other creators about how to make the best of this situation?
12. What are some good things that have come from the pandemic?
13. What have you learned that will continue to be useful in the future, even 'after' the pandemic?

Table A2
Interviewees

Participant	Creative practice	Race and gender identity	Country of residence
Salma Hindy	Comedian	POC. Female-identifying	Canada
Jodianne Beckford	Photographer	Black. Female-identifying	Canada
F.H.	Photographer	POC. Female-identifying	Canada
Benoit Tardif	Illustrator	White. Male-identifying	Canada
Sofie Mikhaylova	Musician. DJ.	White. Female-identifying	Canada
Mike Regis	Filmmaker	Black. Male-identifying	Canada
J.G	Illustrator	POC. Male-identifying	Canada
Francisco Garcia	Photographer	POC. Male-identifying	Canada
Isobel Anderson	Musician. Producer.	White. Female-identifying	UK
Stuart Goldsmith	Comedian	White. Male-identifying	UK
Matt Gooderson	Musician. Producer.	White. Male-identifying	UK

Funding

This work was supported by an Insight Grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and additional funding from Toronto Metropolitan University (recently renamed).

References

- Beghetto, R. A. (2019). Structured uncertainty: How creativity thrives under constraints and uncertainty. In C. A. Mullen (Ed.), *Creativity under duress in education? Resistive theories, practices, and actions* (pp. 27–40). Springer International Publishing. 1st ed.. 10.1007/978-3-319-90272-2.
- Bradshaw, P. (2020, June 29). *Homemade review - Kristen Stewart leads Netflix's lockdown short films*. IMBb. <https://www.imdb.com/news/ni62937701>
- Brewster, L. (2014). The impact of prison arts programs on inmate attitudes and behavior: A quantitative evaluation. *Justice Policy Journal*, 11(2), 1–28.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1996). *Creativity: Flow and the psychology of discovery and invention*. New York, NY: Harper Perennial.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M., & Sawyer, K. (1995). Creative insight: the social dimension of a solitary moment. In R. J. Sternberg, & J. E. Davidson (Eds.), *The Nature of Insight* (pp. 329–364). MIT Press.
- Cohen, L. M. (2012). Adaptation and creativity in cultural context. *Revista de Psicología, 30*(1), 3–18. <http://www.scielo.org.pe/pdf/psico/v30n1/a01v30n1>.
- Comunian, R., & England, L. (2020). Creative and cultural work without filters: Covid-19 and exposed precarity in the creative economy. *Cultural Trends*, 29(2), 112–128. 10.1080/09548963.2020.1770577.
- Fischer, G., Giaccardi, E., Eden, H., Sugimoto, M., & Ye, Y. (2005). Beyond binary choices: Integrating individual and social creativity. *International Journal of Human - Computer Studies*, 63(4–5), 482–512. 10.1016/j.ijhcs.2005.04.014.
- Forgeard, M. (2013). Perceiving Benefits After Adversity: The Relationship Between Self-Reported Posttraumatic Growth and Creativity. *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*, 7(3), 245–264. 10.1037/a0031223.
- Friedman, H., Friedman, L., & Leverton, C. (2016). Increase Diversity to Boost Creativity and Enhance Problem Solving. *Psychosociological Issues in Human Resource Management*, 4(2), 7–33.
- Gauntlett, D. (2018). *Making is connecting: The social power of creativity, from craft and knitting to digital everything* (2nd ed). Cambridge, UK: Polity.
- Grima, N., Corcoran, W., Hill-James, C., Langton, B., Sommer, H., & Fisher, B. (2020). The importance of urban natural areas and urban ecosystem services during the COVID-19 pandemic. *PLOS ONE*, 15, Article e0243344. 10.1371/journal.pone.0243344.
- Gruber, H. E., & Wallace, D. (Eds.). (1989). *Creative people at work*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hesmondhalgh, D. & Baker, S., (2011). *Creative Labour. Media Work in Three Cultural Industries*. Routledge.

- Hughes, S. M. (2016). Beyond intentionality: Exploring creativity and resistance within a UK immigration removal Centre. *Citizenship Studies*, 20(3-4), 427–443.
- I Lost My Gig Canada. (2020). ILMG. Retrieved August 11, 2021 from <https://ilostmygig.ca>
- Ifeanyi, KC., Host (2019). How to Boost Your Creativity by Changing Your Environment. [Audio podcast episode]. *Creative conversation by Fast Company*. <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/how-to-boost-your-creativity-by-changing-your-environment/id1393035409?i=1000452999220>.
- Ingold, T. (2013). *Making: Anthropology, archaeology, art and architecture* London, UK.
- Jeannotte, M. (2021). When the gigs are gone: Valuing arts, culture and media in the COVID-19 pandemic. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, 3(1), Article 100097.
- Kenyon, N. (2020). Not back to showbusiness. *TLS*. <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/not-back-to-showbusiness/>.
- May, R. (1994). *The courage to create*. New York, NY: WW Norton & Company.
- Morgan, G., & Nelligan, P. (2018). *The Creativity Hoax: Precarious Work and the Gig Economy*. Anthem Press.
- Morse, J. W., Gladkikh, T. M., Hackenburg, D. M., & Gould, R. K. (2020). COVID-19 and human-nature relationships: Vermonters' activities in nature and associated nonmaterial values during the pandemic. *PLoS ONE*, 15(12), Article e0243697. 10.1371/journal.pone.0243697.
- Newton, E. (1977). Slave artisans and craftsmen: The roots of Afro-American art. *The Black Scholar*, 9(3), 35–42.
- Orenstein, A. (2016). Artistic creativity and the healing process. *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*, 26(3), 386–406.
- Orkibi, H. (2021). Creative Adaptability: Conceptual Framework, Measurement, and Outcomes in Times of Crisis. *Frontiers in psychology*, 11, Article 588172.
- Park People. (2020, July 16). COVID-19 and Parks: Highlights from our national surveys. Retrieved from <https://parkpeople.ca/2020/07/16/covid-19-and-parks-highlights-from-our-national-surveys/>
- Plambech, T., & Konijnendijk van den Bosch, C. C (2015). The impact of nature on creativity – A study among Danish creative professionals. *Urban Forestry & Urban Greening*, 14(3), 255–263.
- Ross, A. G. P., Crowe, S. M., & Tyndall, M. W. (2015). Planning for the next global pandemic. *International Journal of Infectious Diseases*, 38, 89–94.
- Rudowicz, E. (2003). Creativity and culture: A two way interaction. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 47, 273–290. 10.1080/00313830308602.
- Runco, M. (1999). Tension, adaptability, and creativity. In S. W. Russ (Ed.), *Affect, creative experience, and psychological adjustment* (pp. 165–194). Routledge. 1st ed.. 10.4324/9781315784557.
- Runco, M. (2007). To understand is to create: An epistemological perspective on human nature and personal creativity. In R. Richards (Ed.), *Everyday creativity and new views of human nature* (pp. 91–107). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Settele, J., Díaz, S., Brondizio, E., & Daszak, P. (2020). COVID-19 stimulus measures must save lives, protect livelihoods, and safeguard nature to reduce the risk of future pandemics. Retrieved from <https://ipbes.net/covid19stimulus>

- Schrift, M. (2006). Angola prison art: Captivity, creativity, and consumerism. *Journal of American Folklore*, 119, 257–274.
- Siebert, S., & Wilson, F. (2013). All work and no pay: Consequences of unpaid work in the creative industries. *Work, Employment and Society*, 27(4), 711–721. [10.1177/0950017012474708](https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017012474708).
- Simonton, D. K. (2002). Creativity. In C. R. Snyder, & S. J. Lopez (Eds.), *Handbook of Positive Psychology* (pp. 189–201). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Soga, M., Evans, M., Cox, D., & Gaston, K. (2021). Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on human–nature interactions: Pathways, evidence and implications. *People and nature*, 3, 518–527.
- Statistics Canada. (2020, April 8). *How are Canadians coping with the COVID-19 situation?*<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-627-m/11-627-m2020029-eng.htm>
- Stuckey, H. L., & Nobel, J. (2010). The connection between art, healing, and public health: A review of current literature. *American Journal of Public Health*, 100(2), 254–263. [10.2105/AJPH.2008.156497](https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2008.156497).
- Tomić, I., Milić, V., Lazić, D., & Marinković, S. (2019). Psychological survival in Banjica concentration camp due to inmate creativity: A recommendation to future victims. *Austin Anthropology*, 3(2), 1008.
- van Rompay, T. J. L., & Jol, T. (2016). Wild and free: Unpredictability and spaciousness as predictors of creative performance. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 48, 140–148. [10.1016/j.jenvp.2016.10.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2016.10.001).
- Wang, B., Liu, Y., Qian, J., & Parker, S. K. (2021). Achieving Effective Remote Working During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Work Design Perspective. *Applied Psychology*, 70(1), 16–59. [10.1111/apps.12290](https://doi.org/10.1111/apps.12290).
- Weiner, L. (2014). *Creative diaries of the holocaust: A phenomenological exploration of the engagement with creativity during a time of trauma* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from Proquest (UMI 3631007).
- Williams, K. J., Lee, K. E., Hartig, T., Sargent, L. D., Williams, N. S., & Johnson, K. A. (2018). Conceptualising creativity benefits of nature experience: Attention restoration and mind wandering as complementary processes. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 59, 36–45.
- Zinn, H. (2013). *Artists in times of war*. Seven Stories Press.
- Zomorodi, M. (2020). Quarantine is perfect for discovering the beauty and power of boredom. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2020/may/01/boredom-creativity-quarantine>.