

# *Arts Entrepreneurial Work in Changing Contexts*

## *Sustaining Creative Life and Work after COVID-19*

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**ABSTRACT:** The COVID-19 pandemic significantly shifted the context of artistic and creative work, forcing individuals to adapt to wide-reaching changes in the way they operated in both work and life. Relying on interviews with data from 66 U.S.-based arts graduates, this article speaks to needs in sustaining creative life and work after the first year of the pandemic. Interviewees related that their needs for a sustainable creative work and life were primarily that they needed the social and physical distancing restrictions of the pandemic to end, more time and capacity to be creative, and monetary support. Ultimately, we argue that the changing context of the pandemic required substantial entrepreneurial ability toward being adaptable, superseding capacity for creativity during the first year of the pandemic. Our findings reflect that when arts entrepreneurs' self-structured careers required new or intensified effort toward non-arts aspects of their work, their feelings of, or capacity for, creativity may be diminished.

**KEYWORDS:** arts entrepreneurship, COVID-19, pandemic recovery, artistic careers, creativity, United States, adaptability, non-standard work. **DOI:** [doi.org/10.34053/artivate.13.1.185](https://doi.org/10.34053/artivate.13.1.185)

## **Introduction**

Immediately at the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, the United States' arts sector and creative industries took a massive hit. Though all artists and creative workers were affected in some way, negative impacts of the pandemic were felt differently depending on career stage, arts discipline, and structural position within one's field. Recovery programs

targeted at artists in the U.S. were initiated at the federal level, but these efforts did little to shift the structural foundations that make artists, who are precariously situated even in the normal course of their work, and did not offer long-term solutions for artists as they looked toward a post-COVID future. Thus, as arts and creative workers shifted their work and personal lives to accommodate the realities of life during the pandemic, they found themselves dealing with the normal challenges and precarity of creative careers while simultaneously adapting to mandatory governmental, social, and economic changes in how they self-managed their careers.

According to established theories, arts entrepreneurship is a way of connecting means and ends mediated through a particular structure (Essig, 2015) or a process of “innovative choices and risks intended to recombine resources and pursue new opportunities” (Chang and Wyszomirski, 2015, p. 11) wherein arts and creative workers create value. Arts entrepreneurs are perhaps uniquely positioned to deal with changes, like those brought on by the pandemic, as arts entrepreneurial skills position individuals to apply extant resources and skills toward new, changing opportunities. In this article we rely on evidence from interviews with 66 arts graduates based in the United States to examine the question of what interviewees say they needed to sustain their creative and working lives after the first year of the pandemic. The most frequent responses to this question are examined in this article, with interviewees most frequently stating that addressing the acute challenges of the pandemic and their own capacity to be creative were their greatest needs for sustaining their creative life and work.

In their taxonomy of arts entrepreneurship, Chang and Wyszomirski state that arts entrepreneurship should support arts and creative workers’ “creativity and autonomy,” as well as “advance their capacity for adaptability” (2015, p. 11). However, our findings illustrate some degree of disconnect in arts and creative workers’ capacity to act creatively during a time when they necessarily exercised their capacity for adaptability at an unusually high level. Our findings suggest that there are perhaps limits to, or imbalances in, the coupling of these two features, creativity and autonomy with capacity for adaptability, within arts entrepreneurial work as times when mediating structural or contextual change. Theoretically, these answers, situated within the context of the pandemic, provide an opportunity to examine important intersections of concepts within arts entrepreneurship theory. Practically, these findings reflect that in self-structured portfolio careers, periods of new or increased effort toward addressing the non-arts aspects of work contribute to arts entrepreneurs not having sufficient capacity for, time for, or feelings of creativity.

## **Background and Literature Review**

Theoretical understandings of the work arrangements and affordances for arts entrepreneurs highlight the inherent flexibility of this kind of non-standard work. In the gig work and portfolio careers that characterize much of the arts and creative industries, workers are responsible for finding and piecing together opportunities to financially and creatively

sustain themselves (Lingo and Tepper, 2013; Wyszomirski and Chang, 2017). For some artists and creative workers, the flexibility afforded by entrepreneurial, self-structured work arrangements can be adaptive and support the development of a strong career. However, for many workers the complexities and challenges of self-structured working arrangements makes work in the arts and creative industries ambiguous, unstable, and even untenable.

All working arrangements have become more precarious and more flexible in the neoliberal era that began in the late 1980s; even employees of large organizations find themselves in work arrangements that leverage increased flexibility to the benefit of employers while shifting the risk of market conditions onto workers (Cornfield, Campbell, and McCammon, 2001; Smith, 1997; Kalleberg, 2011). Because of such society-level shifts toward a more precarious world of work, all workers, even organizational employees, are subject to frequent job changes, often due to organizational changes (Smith, 2001) and weak internal labor markets (Cappelli, 2001). For this reason, it is not only self-employed workers and freelancers in arts-based work who can be thought of as arts entrepreneurs. Even arts and creative workers who are employed in organizations are still subject to the multiple job holding, side-work outside of their primary job, portfolio careers, and other precarious situations (Menger, 1999; Throsby and Zednik, 2011). In effect, the majority of arts and creative workers are free agents who hold a series of short- and medium-term contracts or short- and medium-term relationships with employers or clients. The arts entrepreneurship perspective is to some degree situated within and in response to a broader understanding of precarious work, so these free agentic working arrangements fit well within conventional understandings of arts, creative, or cultural entrepreneurs as freelancers, gig workers, self-employed workers, and business owners (see, e.g., Khlystova et al., 2022; Wyszomirski and Chang, 2017; Frenette et al., 2018; Woronkiewicz and Noonan, 2019). As such, understandings of arts entrepreneurship position the concept as a mechanism for understanding how artists and creative workers can self-manage their careers.

## Pre-COVID Understanding of Creative Work and Arts Entrepreneurship in the United States

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, scholars had considered myriad uncertainties and inequities impacting artistic and creative careers. There is some degree of consensus regarding the resources that artists need in their career paths, including education and training, financial security and monetary support, and social ties to others in artistic occupational communities (Menger, 1999; Lingo and Tepper, 2013; Menger, 2006). Most directly, the Strategic National Arts Alumni Project (SNAAP) survey asks arts alumni currently working in the arts what resources they need in their careers but lack. Reports from these data show that resources artists lack for their careers are, in descending order of reported prevalence, publicity and recognition of their work (26%), networks (18%), business advising (16%), loans (15%), studio space (11%), equipment (9%), and performance space

(5%) (Skaggs et al., 2017) Broadly, these responses indicate the importance of having a strong community of colleagues and audiences through publicity and recognition of their work and networks (44%), business and financial resources through business advising and loans (31%), and the space and equipment to do their work (25%). Given this body of research, relevant to an arts entrepreneur's ability to be adaptable throughout the course of a career, there exists a strong understanding of the structures that support and impede artistic and creative careers.

Outside of the structures and resources that arts entrepreneurs need for career maintenance, there are likewise entrepreneurial practices that scholars have shown to be important for arts entrepreneurs. The arts entrepreneurial mindset is increasingly emphasized by scholars, especially the necessity of including it in collegiate education for artists and creative workers (Chang and Wyszomirski, 2015) to promote strong, sustainable careers for arts and creative workers. The entrepreneurial mindset is not only about new venture creation; rather it reflects understandings that entrepreneurial learning leads to broadly applicable competencies (Toscher, 2019) that can be used in a variety of work arrangements. When combined with entrepreneurial skills, an entrepreneurial mindset can help generate financial means to support creative work (Beckman and Essig, 2012). However, while many artists and creative workers realize the necessity to learn entrepreneurial skills after they start their business (Welsh. et al., 2014), there is a significant entrepreneurial skill gap across cohorts of U.S. arts graduates (Skaggs et. al, 2017). For those who do learn entrepreneurial skills, it is importantly known to be a "practice of self-preservation" that helps them to maintain creativity and autonomy in their artistic work (Robinson and Novak-Leonard, 2021, p. 17). Thus, research supports the idea that career skills, which might allow an arts entrepreneur to be adaptable, are related to and support the creative aspects of arts entrepreneurial work.

In addition to needed resources, skills, and entrepreneurial mindset, arts and creative workers presumably need creativity. In the United States, individuals think of creativity more broadly than only in terms of the arts, and there are enduring connections between the conception of creativity and art (Novak-Leonard, Skaggs, and Robinson, 2022). Entrepreneurial artists do see themselves as creative, and their understanding of their own creativity crosses domains within and beyond their artistic practice, extending from the individual into the community (Robinson and Novak-Leonard, 2021). Creativity is as much a social process as an individual one (Godart et al., 2020; Wohl, 2021). Context, whether defined as creative places, creative groups, or creative eras (e.g., Farrell, 2001; Frenette, 2019; Peterson and Berger, 1975), shapes how creativity happens and what emerges from individual and collective creative processes.

## COVID-19's Impact on Arts and Creative Workers in the United States

According to Florida and Seman (2020), the impact of COVID-19 to the American creative economy was devastating. Analyses in their report showed an estimated loss of 30% of all jobs and 15% of total monthly wages among those in creative occupations. Among the

more than 10,000 artists who responded to the Americans for the Arts' (2020) COVID survey, 31% were working in a non-creative job in addition to their work in the arts, almost half had been furloughed or laid off, and 80% reported a decline in revenue-generating creative productivity. Given that the arts and creative industries account for 4.5% of the United States' GDP and 3.4% of the total workforce, sector-wide impacts of the pandemic are reflected in cancelled events, monetary loss, venue and organizational closures, and loss of jobs, gigs, and working hours (Guibert and Hyde, 2021; Noonan, 2020). The pandemic's effects on the United States' artists and creative industry workers were immediate, but its fallout continues.

Throughout this time period, questions of how artists could sustain their work and identity emerged, including what a sustainable career might mean for artists during the pandemic. Sustainability might include things like a regular income, a physical place to do work, capacity to do work, affected by mental health, emotional health, time, and support for artistic identity (Caut, 2021). Entrepreneurs' identities are constructed to suit their cultural conditions or situations (Ratten, 2020), so it is likely that individuals would find that their artistic identity was challenged during the massive period of change brought on by the pandemic. The effects of COVID-19 created dissonance between how many artists viewed their role, purpose, and reality. Closures, social distancing, financial struggles, and physical and mental health concerns all impacted the status quo that shape artist identities, sometimes leading to identity crises, that is, uncertainty about themselves and their roles (Szostak and Sulkowski, 2021). These massive cultural and economic shifts forced artists and arts organizations to adopt significant, recurring adjustments that changed repeatedly as understandings of the severity and nature of the pandemic changed. In response, some artists and creative workers acquired new skills in order to adapt and maintain the careers they had already built before the pandemic (Sargent, 2021; Skaggs, Hoppe, and Burke, 2021). In short, arts and creative workers during the pandemic had to exercise their capacity to adapt to new circumstances.

The arts and creative industries are notably social in nature, with informal connectivity, collaboration, and relationships structuring much of the creation, production, and distribution of art (e.g., Menger, 1999; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2010). In addition to the direct labor and economic impacts of the pandemic, lockdowns, and social distancing, the structural underpinnings of daily life were significantly disrupted during the pandemic. Closures of schools, daycares, and adult care facilities shifted care work increasingly into the home and predominantly onto women, lowering women's labor force participation relative to men in the U.S. and Europe (Collins et al., 2021; Bariola and Collins, 2021; Feng and Savani, 2020) for both artists and non-artists. The social world of artists during the pandemic shifted to online spaces and away from typical modes of creating, selling, performing, and engaging in the artistic work and arts participation (Buchholz, Fine, and Wohl, 2020; Dowd, Tai, and Zaras, 2023). This shift in particular increased the need for technological and digital skills, which were necessary in adapting to life and work that was increasingly mediated by digital technologies (Belfiore and Lee, 2020; Skaggs, Novak-

Leonard, and Barbee, 2024). These shifts, including moving businesses, classes, and exhibitions or performances online were a heavy lift, requiring significant time, effort, and increased resources given to acquiring new technology and digital skills to adapt to an era of primarily online work.

Despite the overwhelming challenges of the pandemic for the arts and creative industries, some question if COVID-19 presented a moment of exogenous crisis or simply an exposure of the cracks and inequities that characterize business as usual in the business of art (Comunian and England, 2020). Even in normal times, let alone during crises, artists and creative workers find themselves in labor markets that place them in a challenging position of balancing passion with the constraints of a precarious structure (Frenette, 2016; Paulsen, 2021; Rosenstein et al., 2013, Woronkiewicz, 2015). The COVID-19 pandemic significantly shifted the context of the already precarious world of artistic and creative work, forcing individuals to adapt to wide-reaching changes in the way they operated in both work and life.

When we say “context” throughout this article, we follow established writing in arts entrepreneurship theory that seeks to define the pathways that arts entrepreneurs use to connect their work to clients, audiences, employers, and other supporters. Chang and Wyszomirski’s (2015) definition of context falls within what they call “external environments”, which include arts fields, regions and locales, organizations, and businesses (p. 25). Linda Essig’s (2015) conception of “mediating structures” is similar and includes firms and artist collectives (p. 242), and Wyszomirski and Chang (2017) call these sorts of organizations, networks, and conventions in artistic and creative professions the “established professional support structure” (2017, p. 3). By these definitions, the context of arts entrepreneurial work during the pandemic was significantly altered, with organizations shuttered, events cancelled, employment and contracts lost, and both spontaneous and routine gatherings with colleagues stopped. The context of these sweeping changes leads us to ask whether and how the changing context of this period shaped how arts entrepreneurs working within this context envision the sustainability and future of their careers. Within an understanding of arts entrepreneurial theory, we posit that the sweeping changes in context during the pandemic impacted other aspects of the definitional framework of arts entrepreneurship outlined by Chang and Wyszomirski (2015): arts and creative workers’ ability to be adaptable, their capacity to be creative, and their perception of their ability to create economic value in their work.

## **Data and Methods**

To understand artists and creative workers’ ability to be adaptable and to be creative, given the altered context presented to them in the first year of the pandemic, we draw on qualitative data from sixty-six in-depth semi-structured interviews with arts graduates during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. We conducted recorded interviews on Zoom with verbal consent from participants and transcribed them verbatim in accordance with this project’s IRB agreement. Interviews lasted on average 56.14 minutes.

Interviewees were solicited from social media posts and university alumni listservs, leading to a sample of U.S.-based arts alumni from a broad range of ages and disciplinary backgrounds. Select socio-demographic characteristics are presented in Table 1. This convenience sample is not representative of U.S. arts entrepreneurs or even of U.S. arts graduates and is thus limited, but the individuals interviewed do approximate much of the socio-demographic profile of respondents of the 2017 Strategic National Arts Alumni Project (SNAAP) surveys (see, Frenette et.al., 2018).

As a group, this sample of artists is more homogenous than the wider U.S. population in terms of racial and ethnic background (National Endowment for the Arts, 2019). Our sample is also more educated than artists as a wider occupational group, with all interviewees holding at least a bachelor's degree due to the research project's focus on arts graduates. In addition to the socio-demographics of our sample presented in Table 1, our interviewees were engaged in a wide array of artistic practice, including Visual Arts (31%), Performing Arts (41%), Media Arts (11%), Arts Administration, Education, or History (13%), and Architecture or Design (3%). Forty-five percent of interviewees had a multi-disciplinary artistic practice, reflecting extant quantitative research about arts graduates (Frenette et.al., 2018). We use these occupational categories to align our work with SNAAP since our sample deals specifically with collegiate arts graduates; this methodological alignment is thus limited in scope related to the complexity of arts entrepreneurs currently working in the U.S. creative sector. Our findings should therefore be evaluated with this in mind and are likely to err on the conservative side in terms of the impact that the pandemic and other challenges have had on more precariously situated arts and creative industry workers.

We recruited and interviewed these arts graduates as individuals, not as members of any specific organization or profession. Only a small minority were organizational employees whose work and creative life were fully supported by that organization. As such, essentially all interviewees fit the description of someone with a portfolio career. In having a portfolio career, characterized by free agency and self-structuring, they had to manage their approach to dealing with the pandemic mostly on their own. Even employees had to interpret and adapt to their organizations' pandemic policies in flexible ways that worked for their specific work and home situation. As discussed above, the dynamics of precarity that structure arts and creative labor markets push most all arts workers, whether employed or self-employed, to adopt arts entrepreneurial practices. For this reason, despite some heterogeneity in the primary employment arrangement of these interviewees, conceptually their work and careers are unfolding within the realm of arts entrepreneurship.

**Table 1:** Sociodemographic Characteristics of Interviewees (n=66)

	$\bar{x}$	$\hat{p}$
<b>Interview Length<sup>1</sup></b>	56.14	
<b>Age<sup>2</sup></b>	43.06	
<b><i>Race/Ethnicity</i></b>		
<b>White</b>		86%
<b>Black</b>		2%
<b>Hispanic</b>		3%
<b>Asian</b>		3%
<b>Multiracial</b>		6%
<b>All Non-White</b>		14%
<b><i>Gender</i></b>		
<b>Male</b>		44%
<b>Female</b>		47%
<b>Nonbinary or Genderfluid</b>		9%
<b>Identifies as LGBTQ+</b>		15%
<b>Identifies as Disabled</b>		21%
<b><i>Marital Status</i></b>		
<b>Married/Partnered</b>		54%
<b>Single</b>		46%
<b>Number of Children</b>	0.79	
<b><i>Highest Degree Earned</i></b>		
<b>Bachelor</b>		32%
<b>Master</b>		59%
<b>Doctoral</b>		9%

*1 Measured in minutes*

*2 Measured in years*

To analyze our interview data, we followed a flexible coding procedure (Deterding and Waters, 2018). First, we index coded the interviews to link key research questions with interviewees' answers. The index code of particular interest in this analysis is linked to the penultimate question asked of interviewees: "What do you need to help sustain your creative life and work now and in the future?" Index coding reduced the total corpus of data germane to this research question down to 57 single-spaced pages of relevant



responses from 53 interviewees, with answers varying in length from a few short sentences to multi-page elaborations. We then applied analytic codes within this index code to define the patterned variations in artists' answers to this particular question. The analytic codes that emerged during this process were: monetary support (16), COVID (18), and sustaining creativity and time for creativity (30).

Table 2 shows the distribution of codes across answers, including the frequency of specific patterns of overlapping codes. Codes are not mutually exclusive, and it was common for single respondents' answers to be coded as including more than one code. Additionally, codes that were present but infrequently included: lack of job-seeking training, versatility toward future trends, mental health, and mentorship. Together, these analytic codes structure the arc of the findings section in this paper and contribute to constructing an emergent understanding of what arts graduates say they need as they enter a post-COVID future. Any personally identifying details have been obscured within quotes and descriptions to ensure interviewees cannot be identified.

**Table 2:** Analytic Code Combinations and Frequencies across Responses

<b>Code</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Monetary Support	3
Monetary Support + COVID	3
Monetary Support + Creativity and Time	9
COVID	11
COVID + Creativity and Time	3
Creativity and Time	17
Monetary Support + COVID + Creativity and Time	1
None	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>53</b>

## Findings

In their influential 2015 article in *Artivate*, Chang and Wyszomirski's definition of arts entrepreneurship is: "arts entrepreneurship is a management process through which cultural workers seek to support their creativity and autonomy, advance their capacity for adaptability, and create artistic as well as economic and social value" (p. 11). In our findings, we elaborate upon the three analytic codes that were most frequent in our analyses of 66 interviews with arts graduates asking them what they need to sustain their working and creative lives. While not an exact match to Chang and Wyszomirski's definition, the three most frequent analytic codes in our research broadly map onto the three parts of the definition: monetary support (create value), COVID (advance adaptability), and

creativity (support creativity and autonomy).

Prior findings from our team's research, reported by [blinded] in 2021, indicated that arts graduates during COVID-19 had significant needs in terms of access to social networks of audiences or collaborators, business advice and accurate information about how to do their work during the pandemic, and access to space and equipment to do their work effectively (Skaggs, Burke, and Hoppe, 2021). The interviewees also noted that they did lack some skills that were necessary for successfully navigating their work during the pandemic, notably technological and collaborative work (Skaggs, Hoppe, and Burke, 2021) and lacked or had mixed-access to opportunities for building and sustaining social capital in their careers (Skaggs, 2024).

Across all of our interviews, arts graduates discussed the ways that they adapted to the changes brought on by the pandemic, such as moving their classes online, setting up a home office or home studio that meets the basic work needs, and cancelling or postponing work that could not take place safely (Skaggs, Hoppe, and Burke, 2022). The concerns outlined here suggest that some interviewees found limits to how adaptable they could be—without vaccines and access to physical spaces and communities, they felt stuck. These individuals took on significant amounts of labor and expended considerable personal and professional resources to adapt their work to the constraints of the pandemic.

We now turn to the focal empirical and theoretical concerns of this paper. At the end of our interview with each arts graduate, we asked what they needed to sustain their creative life and work after the onset of the pandemic. Our coding process identified widespread concerns about the pandemic itself and about needs for the time and capacity to be creative. Another concern was aimed at acquiring monetary support to reduce precarity in their careers, an ongoing and well-documented need among arts and creative workers that predates the pandemic but gives credence to the idea that the pandemic further exposed cracks in the arts and creative labor market, particularly in the limits to arts entrepreneurs in accessing or actualizing economic value. In alignment with our theoretical framework and toward elaborating a more nuanced theory about the relationship between adaptability and creativity among arts entrepreneurs, we focus now on how arts graduate interviewees conceptualized their concerns about the pandemic and about their ability to be creative.

## Monetary Support

Despite a focus on the potential continuing impact of the pandemic on their creative lives and work, artists highlighted the outsized impact money and economic precarity had on their potential for sustaining their creative life and work. Thirty percent of interviewees (16) noted such structures of economic precarity, most often citing the need for financial support or stability in earnings for artistic work. In reference to income and finances in exchange for artistic work, a 33-year-old visual artist said: “there’s no real support so you can’t continue to build your studio because you don’t have the money to do it. You can’t continue to make the artwork that you want to make because you can’t afford to buy the

materials that you want.” He went on to say, “having those opportunities is probably the thing that I see affecting my careers and artists, the most. If those kind of pick up, if I don’t start seeing more opportunities show up on the internet and all these kind of application websites—then, you know, the career as an artist is still going to continue slowly.”

A 32-year-old musician said: “I would like to be like as financially stable as possible.” She continued, adding, “I like to have a good work situation so that I can do my art, because obviously, you know, what I do unfortunately doesn’t pay much. Like performance, if I could, I would just perform for a living and play all the music I love and care about and make my living that way but that’s not really possible.”

Also thoughtful about the financial system that underlies work in the arts, a 45-year-old glass artist said, “You know, how much do you make an hour? I don’t respond to that. I don’t make anything an hour. I donate an hour of my life. So, time is the only thing we have, you know . . . As I’ve kind of reached the nexus of my life at this point and it sucks because it’s really hard not to dive into the bottle of whiskey or you know, and just try to drown out these thoughts because it’s stifling at this point in my career, you know. You’re at your mid-career and you’re having to start all over again, and I just don’t know.”

These representative responses from artists show how artists process their need for monetary stability and support as being central to making their art, having good career opportunities, and being able to sustain a career that has been developed over their working lives. Considerations about monetary support are primarily focused on earned income, but other artists were insistent that their needs for the future included external support from the government or from grantors to support their artistic work and organizations. One interviewee, a nonbinary photographer in their 20s, said that what they needed for a strong future is simple: financial support. They were frank, stating, “The easiest thing would be like more money from the government.”

A 23-year-old arts administrator said that she anticipated a number of local arts nonprofits dissolving over the next few years and that government or local monetary support would be needed to stop these organizations from folding.

Speaking to the ongoing issue of procuring grants, work, and clients within a portfolio career, a choreographer in her late 40s found financial support to be the most important thing she required for the future of her creative life and work. She replied to the question about what she needed, saying, “Money. Any funding. The time and energy wasted on grants that I don’t get or awards I don’t get or jobs I don’t get, you know piecing together essentially a minimum wage salary each year. It’s piecing together \$1,500 to \$2,000 at a time, and I’m tired of having, you know, eight contracts and keeping track of eight different contracts. So, like this is the system needs to change to really support this work.”

Other supports that artists needed were, most notably, business advice and mentoring to support their continued artistic work. These needs were often paired with hopes for a stronger economic future. For instance, a fifty-two-year-old dancer and choreographer had been working with a business coach but said, “I feel like I definitely need that support, but I can only sustain paying her for so long because I don’t have enough income

coming in, and my credit cards can only sustain me for so long.” She felt that she was in a “chicken-and-egg” situation, saying, “if I could make enough money, and then I could be in my own space . . . and then if I could hire the proper marketing people who could really help push me and put me in front of audiences and help me look good and have the right audio.” Exasperated, she said, “it’s almost like a whole other profession.” It is clear that this artist needed support so that the administrative and business side of her work does not eclipse her ability to make and perform art.

## COVID-19 Concerns

Not surprisingly, COVID-19 was a top concern for many arts and creative workers in considering what they needed to sustain their creative life. Of the fifty-three respondents who answered the question of what they needed to sustain their creative life and work in the future, 34% of respondents (18) spoke of the impact that they perceived the pandemic would have moving forward from the time of our interview. Responses, though united by their attention to COVID-related themes, expressed concerns stemming from the virus itself and vaccine uptake, the need to return to collaborative work or in-person spaces with audiences, and general worries about long-lasting changes brought on or accelerated by COVID. These responses were primarily centered around needs for either community or space. Both themes were linked to fears about physical health and safety, and many people expressed hope that vaccines might solve this problem.<sup>1</sup> Illustrating the contours of the changing context and external environment of U.S.-based arts and creative work during the first year of the pandemic, it is clear that access to opportunities, spaces, and networks was limited, vastly altering the context within which the entrepreneurial action occurs.

Vaccines were mentioned primarily in relation to the performing arts where they were viewed as essential to gathering audiences again or shifting back to in-person performances and exhibitions of artistic work. Given the timing of our interviews, between November 2020 and March 2021, when vaccines were available to some individuals based on age and health status though not yet available to the general adult public in the United States, it is unsurprising that vaccines were top of mind. Expressing the centrality of the vaccine to a post-COVID future, a forty-five-year-old woman who is in the performing arts and music education said of what she needs to support her creative and artistic future: “There’s nothing. Aside from a vaccine.” Some COVID-related concerns centered around a return to working collaboratively with peers and colleagues. An arts educator in his forties held similar sentiments, saying, “All I could do at this point is just hope that they get the vaccine and that this virus eventually goes away and things will go back to normal.” A female arts administrator in her fifties whose optimism toward the future relies on an efficacious vaccine reported, “Well I’m super excited about the vaccine. I’m super

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<sup>1</sup> These interviews were collected between November 2020 and March 2021, before the vaccine was widely available for all Americans. Interviewee outlook and hopefulness was somewhat different depending on whether they were interviewed before the vaccine rollout began.

optimistic that if they can get it rolled out that we can resume some kind of normalcy. I would, you know, be right up there first in line to start supporting some of the arts organizations that are coming back and the students who want to be on campus.” Relatedly, the future of audiences gathering to re-engage in arts participation was top of people’s minds, particularly for performing artists.

Other responses directly invoked a loss of the physical space needed to do work and concerns about the future implications of a move to digitally mediated work, art and interactions with others. “A lot of [the] time my apartment feels more like a prison,” said the arts educator quoted above. A classical musician in his twenties reported that he “just need[s] space again, like in whether it’s physical space or just something. I just need some place somewhere to do something that’s not my apartment. I’ve occasionally done recording projects with friends like virtually, but that’s, I mean, it’s a little bit unfulfilling.” Just as pre-COVID arts alumni said that space for creating and performing art was not as readily available as needed, artists looking toward a post-COVID future also expressed the need to access and inhabit physical spaces and social communities outside of the home.

Both vaccine uptake and the need for access to physical spaces for making, performing, and gathering were rhetorically linked to normalcy in the context of access to audiences, collaborators, and spaces where they would typically create, perform, teach, or administer arts and creative work. In the dramatically altered day-to-day context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the loss of access to social and professional networks, audiences, studio space, performance space, and events cut arts and creative workers off from people, spaces, and situations that previously structured their work and access to opportunities for future work. Despite having emerging or established careers and college degrees in the arts, their previous repertoire of strategies and tactics were not appropriate for the altered context of the pandemic.

This limitation spurred considerable efforts toward adapting work to the realities of the pandemic. The considerations needed to create, produce, and share artistic work when social and physical distancing were required necessitated adaptations to business and creative practices (e.g., creating and marketing online classes to new audiences; staging zoom theatre productions and rehearsing online; working with students in new digital modalities). Despite this effort to adapt, many of our interviewees had essentially hit a limit of how much they could adapt in the moment without access to the ability to gather with others in shared spaces.

## Creativity and Time

Thirty interviewees (57%) spoke of the need for pathways toward sustaining their creativity and making time for their art in the future. Creativity and expression were themes present in several artists’ responses. A painter in her fifties said, “I think to sustain my career I need new and different discoveries that sharpen my senses and just make me awe inspired. And that’s what I try and do with my work, so I have those experiences and I try to capture [them].” Likewise, a writer and editor in her fifties found that throughout the

pandemic she had “a low motivation problem for a while, because everything just seemed so devastating. And I think that’s where the mental health component was coming in. But then I had this shift where I realized that when I started reading again, and when I started enjoying words again, that I realized, ‘Oh, this is how I’m going to sustain my motivation.’ By giving myself this gift of sitting down and writing, or reading, or researching, or interviewing or pre-interviewing people. Like, that’s where the joy comes back.” Discovery, creativity, and motivation are invoked by these interviewees. More broadly, responses indicated a true deficit of creativity during the pandemic that, without substantial effort, they worried may continue into the future.

Related to creativity itself, numerous interviewees forwarded time and routine as an essential resource that they need in support of their future artistic work. A non-binary dance artist in their twenties said, “That would be helpful if I could just like have more time to like to think creatively. Because right now it’s really just in the evenings and weekends.” A performance artist in his sixties hoped, “Certainly, getting back into some kind of performance routine so that I can practice the art that I’ve been studying all my life.” A twenty-nine-year-old arts educator and fiber artist found that working from home got in the way of having a well-structured routine for work, artmaking, and non-work time. She answered, “I think I just need for myself to be a better manager of time and to be able to really have those hard stops of, like, I’m going to work from 8:00 to 2:30 today. And then I’m going to just close my computer, and I’m going to do something else . . . just like pick up my crochet hook and crochet something without thinking about my business, without thinking about anything else.” One visual artist and educator in his thirties who had taken on a primary caregiver role for his children during the pandemic replied, “The biggest thing is still time.” He found that he did not have enough time to engage in his personal artistic practice while focusing on domestic caregiving, teaching, and supporting his arts students. A performing artist in his mid-thirties said, “For me, I think for future creativity I need to be better about setting up my life in a way that allows me to be creative without too many barriers. And it’s possible . . . with this experience, I definitely feel like I have the ability now to create a workflow and like a schedule that is realistic.” Workflow, time, and scheduling were impeded for many artists based on their numerous, sometimes conflicting commitments, exacerbated during the pandemic’s erratic lockdown and work-from-home phases in the U.S.

A musician in his late sixties spoke of his creative work and generating new ideas being stymied by the lack of community and exposure to other artists and their ideas. He said, “I want to sustain it,” and continued by clarifying, “I need to get out and talk and listen to other people . . . Without that resource, things kind of fall flat.” A thirty-eight-year-old arts administrator said she was secure in her career’s financial structures but found that her creativity had suffered during the pandemic; she felt “selfish in a way” when taking the time that she needed to be creative. She continued, “To be honest, it’s like I have to make myself bored of regular home stuff before I can get into the zone of making art.” Finally, she said that in terms of what she required to be able to sustain a future of creative

work and life, her ultimate needs are “having the time and not worry about like these other, you know, Maslow needs.” The invocation of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs shows an understanding that, like numerous other artist interviewees, her needs to make a living with her art and care for her personal and family needs leaves her feeling guilty if she takes the time needed to really get “into the zone of making art.”

As respondents noted, they experienced the need for time to be creative, even as they were given significant free time through the various lockdowns, time gained from not commuting to work and the pause on events and social gathering. At first glance, this seems to be a paradox. However, the context within which these interviewees were working and living shifted dramatically during the pandemic. Just as concerns with adapting to the pandemic stemmed from the lack of access to normal organizing structures (e.g., social relationships with peers and colleagues, audiences, spaces for creating and performing, and events), so too did lack of creativity appear to be tied to the loss of these normal organizing structures. Additionally, the contextual loss of structure, either as routine, project-oriented goals, or general normalcy, created a mental block for many individuals, weakening their ability to be creative.

### Co-occurring Themes

The occurrence of the three themes outlined above were not mutually exclusive. One response directly cited links to all three themes: the pandemic, monetary support, and the intersections of time and creativity. A theatre and music artist in his thirties said:

I think I just need the unemployment check [to] keep coming in. And I think I’ve sort of found a routine where I can kind of feel like I can be creative and feel like I can produce art. Whether or not anyone will hear it, I don’t know, and maybe that doesn’t matter, you know, at the end of the day; maybe it’s enough to just write something and have it be there. I think that, in terms of when this is all over, it’s really just about getting people to go to [the] theater again. I don’t know, that’s sort of like a magic, like kind of thing to say. I don’t know that there’s one sort of simple [fix] like a vaccine. I mean, that’s a great start, but I don’t know. Even if we’re all vaccinated by August [or] July, are people going to want to sit in a crowded theater?

While some artists’ responses did focus on at least one of the issues detailed above, there was some degree of co-occurrence of the themes in other answers. Of responses that invoked more than one of these themes, the most common combination was monetary support with creativity and time (9). The same number of artists’ answers dealt with monetary support and COVID (3) and with COVID alongside creativity and time (3).

In addition to the clear importance or salience of issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic, financial support, and creativity, other less-frequent themes came through in the interviews. Four artists spoke of needing to be adaptable, learn new skills, or job training. Two artists brought up specific mental health concerns at this point in the interview,

suggesting that mental health and wellness, whether directly related to the pandemic or not, is a relevant issue of concern in artists' continuing creative life and work.<sup>2</sup> Lastly, two artists spoke of needing community for their work, one invoking the need for mentorship and one saying that they required a network.

## **Discussion**

Following the call within the existing literature to use the arts entrepreneurship taxonomy as a way to identify relevant variables toward building models to better understand arts entrepreneurship (Chang and Wyszomirski, 2015), this article investigates how massive shifts in one variable (context) during the COVID-19 pandemic impacted other aspects of their creative life and work. Our findings indicate that within the arts entrepreneurial framework, changing contexts have sweeping implications for arts entrepreneurs, potentially impacting their ability to be creative and their capacity to adapt. Necessarily, a contextual change requires adapting, and it seems that, at least in this case, the significant energies were spent adapting rather than on being creative or making time for creative work. Perhaps in time periods with less change individual arts entrepreneurs might better balance their creativity and adaptability. These findings suggest that adaptability and creativity are not necessarily equally available and that situations that require significant adaptability may inhibit creativity or at least perceived capacity for creativity.

Given the effort needed to acquire needed skills and resources to adapt to the demands of working during the pandemic, it is not surprising that these interviewees would feel that they had less time and capacity to be creative. In particular, this finding is perhaps unsurprising given their lack of access to the structures that had previously scaffolded and supported their work (e.g., social networks, events, jobs and contracts). Within Essig's (2015) conception of entrepreneurial action as connecting means to ends, it would seem that these U.S.-based arts graduate interviewees marshalled their means toward the ends of adapting to the massive changes of the pandemic. Instead of being able to balance capacity for creativity and adaptability to incremental or minor changes, interviewees had to devote time to understanding a quickly-changing context and make decisions about how to respond to the changes.

Despite the clear importance or salience of issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic, financial support, and issues relating to creativity, other less-frequent themes came through in the interviews. In this analysis, we discuss concerns about the COVID pandemic in relation to the stress of adapting to new circumstances. It is worth mentioning that an additional four interviewees spoke of needing to be adaptable outside of the context of the pandemic, for example, through learning new skills or job training. Further, two participants brought up specific mental health concerns, suggesting that mental health and

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<sup>2</sup> Only two interviewees talked about mental health and well-being as what they needed to sustain their creative and working lives after the first year of the pandemic, which is the primary framework of this aspect of our research. To be clear, mental health and well-being were larger themes throughout the interviews and are not theorized as a primary aspect of this article.



wellness, whether directly related to the pandemic or not, are a relevant issue of concern in artists' continuing creative life and work. Lastly, two interviewees spoke of needing community for their work, one invoking the need for mentorship and one saying that they required a network. Each of these categories is likely relevant for further research in relation to arts entrepreneurship but is outside of the scope of the current study. Our findings suggest that concerns around the pandemic and concerns in terms of time and capacity to be creative are illustrative of the connections between arts entrepreneurship, creativity, and adaptability in changing contexts.

Though the focus of these interviewees' responses was distinctly on either COVID-specific concerns or the loss of time and capacity for creativity (indeed, only four responses invoked both of these concerns within their answer), the same contextual changes led to both concerns. It is possible that the need for additional time and capacity for creativity could have also been a concern prior to the beginning of the pandemic; however, the specificity of responses related this concern to structural and relational changes in interviewees' professional and personal lives due to, and during, the pandemic, which suggests that this concern was linked to the pandemic.

## Conclusion

This research highlights needs that artists expressed toward supporting their creative life and work after the first year of the pandemic and theoretically ties them to the changing context of the pandemic. Our findings imply that access to, or capacity for, creativity are limited when work activities are especially taxing in other areas. While the pandemic was the cause of the changed context, instrumentally the new context for arts and creative work was characterized by the consequences of the pandemic: a lack of access to networks, spaces, events, and routines that previously structured artistic and creative work. In the absence of these structures, time and capacity for creativity was reduced due to increased time and effort spent on adapting to the new context.

It is no surprise that artists and creative workers wished for a vaccinated future without lockdowns and social distancing. Fulfilling immediate physical safety needs would promote reconnection with others through collaboration, co-presence in artistic spaces and at arts events, and allow for social and economic benefits to grow across artistic communities. While artists and creative workers have found numerous ways to shift their efforts into digital spaces, reconnecting in physical venues and in-person communities remains important to artists. Since this phase of our research concluded in 2021, there was a slow trickle of rescheduled arts events and reopened venues, and in subsequent years there has been a return to and creation of what some would call a "new normal". Despite hopes or insistences that the pandemic is over, the threat of new variants, regional variations in vaccine access and hesitancy, along with recurring periodic resurgences of the virus (Sargent, 2021) make interviewees' concerns about COVID and a rebounding of the art world a current concern, not just one that was left behind in 2020 or 2021. Future research should continue to monitor the lingering impacts of the pandemic on artists and

creative workers after the urgency of a need for the vaccine has passed and should address some of this study's limitations (e.g., by recruiting a sample that more closely matches the sociodemographic and educational characteristics of the American workforce).

Many study participants reported that they need time and mental space to be creative during the early onset of the pandemic. Still more felt that they just were not able to be creative in the ways or to the extent that they would like. Solutions for supporting and cultivating creativity, time for creative thought and practice, and routine are not easy to identify. How should policymakers and other arts advocates solve a systematic need for more time and space to think and create? In short, this expressed need is likely intimately tied to structural concerns that shape arts entrepreneurial work. Within the U.S. arts and creative ecosystem, the public is more supportive of artists self-funding their own work than they are of other pathways to funding, including public funding (Novak-Leonard and Skaggs, 2021). While it is easy to take a cynical view of this support for individualism over public support for artists, support for self-funding, that is, an arts entrepreneurship-focused approach might provide an opportunity for tailoring efforts toward improving structural support for arts entrepreneurs, aligned with other small business venture investments, in the United States.

The complexity and intensity of self-structuring a career consumes the time and mental space that might be fruitfully used for creative practice, so efforts made to support individuals in such careers could hold potential. Similarities between existing research from before the pandemic and our own emphasize that the difficulties experienced by arts and creative workers during the first year of the pandemic were stacked on an already precarious, unstable, and inequitable context within which arts and creative careers unfold. Given the knowledge that essentially all arts and creative workers exist within a precarious structure, working to address the structural issues that require individuals to be adaptable to near constant changes in the context of their work is necessary for pandemic recovery as well as a need that predates the pandemic.

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