

Employment motivations and values in the creative industries: Reorienting from creativity to well-being among-Generation Zs in Ireland

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ecs**Sarah Arnold**  and **Anne O'Brien** 

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Abstract

This study aims to better understand the experiences and motivations of creative industry workers who graduated degree programmes at a time of significant work and employment instability during the Covid-19 pandemic. Using a case study approach involving a qualitative questionnaire with 16 open- and closed-ended questions, we present responses from 20 graduates of media studies programmes at an Irish university. Findings show that young people who graduated at the time of the pandemic did experience career disruption and felt financially compelled to rethink their career ambitions. Pandemic-related economic uncertainties meant that many participants either did not enter creative industries or took up roles that did not utilise their creative degrees. However, many of these young people have found job satisfaction in 'being mentally well' at least as much as 'being creative', and prioritise good quality of life and achieving work-life balance. Good mental health and well-being are pronounced personal and career motivators, with new work regimes such as remote and hybrid working seen as important rewards and incentives.

Keywords

Covid-19, creative industries, Generation Z, motivations, pandemic, well-being, work

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Introduction

The purpose of this study is to understand how new entrants find value in and are motivated to work in creative industries (CIs). It draws from literature on the quality of creative industries work, on the experiences of new entrants and early career workers, on creative work during the Covid-19 pandemic, on well-being and care in CIs, and on Generation Z workers. Scholarship on CIs often emphasises the extent to which workers are exploited and subjected to poor working condition (Banks, 2017; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011). It describes how entrants become career scramblers who face economic and personal hardships due to systemic inequalities (Gill and Pratt, 2008). Creative workers are understood to be highly motivated by the promise of ‘being creative’ and engaged in informal but flexible work that gives them freedom and autonomy (McRobbie, 2016). Younger creative workers and new entrants, especially, sacrifice security and worker protections in order to fulfil their creative ambitions. Elsewhere, studies of workers’ motivations and values capture the nuances of each generation’s attitude to work, employment and career. Studies of typologies of Generation Z workers identify motivations and values beyond simply being ‘creative’, which include employment and financial stability, learning development, personal well-being and work-life balance (Twenge, 2023). This study combines CI, worker motivations and ‘Gen Z’ literatures to better understand the experiences of workers from CI degree programmes who graduated at a time of significant work and employment instability.

This case study of new entrants to media work adopted a qualitative questionnaire of 16 open- and closed-ended questions that were completed by 20 graduates of media and cultural studies programmes at an Irish university who entered the professional labour force during the Covid-19 pandemic. Irish CIs comprise both Audiovisual and Digital Creative Industries, which include UX/UI, social media, games, content creation, marketing and branding, and are framed in policy and public debates primarily as subsectors of the economy, with particular attention paid to growth and employment in these areas (Creative Ireland, 2018, 2023). Irish CIs are more vaguely defined than in other Western European countries and interweave cultural with creative sectors (Arnold et al., 2024). The CIs in Ireland are relatively small in scale with approximately 50,000 employed, or 3 percent of total employment (Crowley, 2017). Within Irish CIs, media production, and film and television subsectors, in particular, plays a prominent role and accounts for nearly 15,000 full-time jobs (Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, 2016). The survey participants were graduates of media studies programmes and so their responses were specific to that subsector. Clearly, employees from other subsectors of CIs may bring additional nuance and inflection to their experiences, nonetheless, in the Irish context, media workers are relatively typical creative workers experiencing many of the same entry challenges, precarious employment patterns, dense networks, and similar values and beliefs about their work as employees from other subsectors. The study includes responses from people who secured media or creative work but also those who did not. Findings show that young people who graduated at the time of the pandemic did experience career disruption and felt financially compelled to rethink their career ambitions because of it. Economic uncertainties caused by the pandemic meant that many participants either did not enter media industries or took up roles that did not utilise their

creative degrees. However, many of these young people found that that new regimes of work, including remote work and working from home, promoted their well-being. They emphasised the importance of 'being mentally well' and prioritising work-life balance, and associated the idea of creative success with well-being. Despite their career disruption and the challenges in accessing or sustaining creative work, these particular young people were highly attracted to work that kept them well. This study therefore suggests that CI literature would benefit from considering more recent transformations in work and changing attitudes towards work, rather than seeing young people and new entrants as stable categories that experience transitions to work in uniform ways, and that are driven mainly by a desire to 'be creative'.

Literature review

Scholarship on CIs and work not only identifies motivations and rewards for those seeking creative work, including autonomy and self-expression, but also stresses the adverse conditions of creative work (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; McRobbie, 2016; Marčeta et al., 2023). Creative work is conceptualised as being 'good' in respect of the agency, self-determination, flexibility and passion it inspires among creatives (Stahl in Banks et al. (2013)). This is particularly the case for younger creatives who are motivated less by the stability and homogeneity of work and more by freedom and the feeling of making a difference (Taylor and Littleton, 2008). Creative work is understood as a 'calling' whereby workers see their creativity as something innate and essential. However, they also operationalise this 'calling' narrative to compensate for poor career advancement (Reid et al., 2016). Despite the 'calling', creative work is often exploitative, precarious, challenging and exclusionary (Banks, 2017; Gill and Pratt, 2008; Morgan and Nelligan, 2018). CIs are often sites of privilege and inequality, with multiple barriers to entry for many social groups and classes. Exclusionary practices occur through lack of access to networks that perpetuate privilege, through low or non-paying work and through exploitative use of internships, as well as through opaque entry routes and informal recruitment practices (Brook et al., 2020a). Inequalities are also reported on multiple fronts, with exclusions occurring because of social class, family status (especially motherhood), race and ethnicity, and disability among other identities (Brook et al., 2020b; Dent, 2017; Gill, 2013; O'Brien, 2014; Wing-Fai et al., 2015).

Nonetheless, CIs remain attractive to young people, particularly to graduates of creative, arts and media degrees. In Ireland, for example, there are reported to be over 200 media programmes at further and higher education levels, a high proportion relative to the availability of creative work (O'Brien et al., 2021). Media graduates undertake years of study but graduate as employable rather than graduating into employment (O'Brien et al., 2021). Some graduates never achieve entry into the CIs, leave soon after commencing their careers or leave mid-career after multiple attempts at career development or sustainability (Wallis et al., 2020). Students and graduates mitigate such difficulties by being pragmatic, committing to upskilling, networking and self-branding (Noonan, 2015; O'Brien and Kerrigan, 2020). Such activities constitute additional work and require time, energy and effort.

This precarious situation for graduates and those already established in creative careers was exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Studies evidenced that new entrants were particularly vulnerable at this time (Comunian and England, 2020). They had no reputation to lean on and no networks for finding work, they had no track record of work to evidence their abilities and they had less knowledge of available pandemic supports (Snowball and Gouws, 2023). In-work poverty among graduates and young people was further exacerbated by lockdowns and industry closures, which were especially prevalent in the creative sectors. Graduates consequently found little work, were desperate for any work and accepted poorer conditions (Pun et al., 2024). However, some scholars have found that the disruptions to work that resulted from pandemic lockdowns were potentially generative. Dent et al. (2023) found that workers collectivised in order to improve their conditions. Duarte and Gauntlett (2022) noted that workers found opportunities for new creative practices and broadened their creative identities. Furthermore, the pandemic experience inspired some creative workers to reflect more on their status, security and well-being (Marshall and Whitfield, 2024; Soronen and Koivunen, 2023). The turn towards self-care, concern about mental and physical well-being, preoccupation with financial security, career stability and sustainability, while always present to some degree, was amplified during and since the pandemic.

The conditions that exacerbate economic and employment precarity in creative and media work – portfolio careers, project-based work, freelancing, interning – also have a mental and emotional impact for creative workers (Deuze, 2023). Several recent reports on creative workers found that they experience mental health issues that are related to pressured work environments, particularly during or since the pandemic (Arts Council, 2020; Creative Access, 2024). For example, the Looking Glass survey on mental health in UK audiovisual industries found that workers experienced notably higher instances of mental ill health than the workforce at large, including depression, self-harm and suicidal ideation (Film and TV Charity UK, 2024). Workers attributed this to poor work-life balance, high workloads, bullying and hostility in the workplace as well as to the dearth of formal mechanisms for accessing help and support. Deuze (2023) argues that experiences of informal work, long hours, requirements to upskill and poor employment conditions are causes of poor mental and physical health and are disproportionately experienced by marginalised and minoritised groups. In recent years, pandemic-related upheavals in creative work and the subsequent discourse of the ‘great resignation’ may have generated more attention to health and well-being by workers.

In particular, creative workers belonging to Generation Z (the subjects of this study) are said to be particularly attuned to mental health and well-being, as well as more sensitive to stress and also more ethically conscious (Katz et al., 2022; Rue, 2018). Born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s, Generation Zs are often considered the first digital natives who can harness digital and media technologies more effectively and fluently than their elders (Katz et al., 2022). Generation Zs have inherited a neoliberal landscape of work, marked by more flexibility in employment practices (temporary, part-time work), boundaryless work and careers, the reduction or elimination of job security and protections, and a shift from an ethos of employment to entrepreneurship (Crowley and Hodson, 2014; Gill and Pratt, 2008; Taylor, 2015). Studies also suggest that Generation Zs view workplace and organisational hierarchies less favourably than

previous generations and prefer more democratic and horizontal structures (Gabriellova and Buchko, 2021). They are less inclined towards in-person communication and lean towards virtual and digital communication (Turner, 2015; Twenge, 2023). Generation Zs are also said to have suffered because of a combination of excessive access to social media in youth, parenting styles that prevented them from managing stress and economic conditions that leave them with little financial security (Gabriellova and Buchko, 2021; Twenge, 2023). This results in the stereotyping of Generation Zs as 'snowflakes', supposedly entitled and hypersensitive, despite this being a generation of people that are more inclusive, empathetic and agile than previous ones (Browne and Foss, 2023; Rue, 2018). Generation Zs are also reported to highly value good work-life balance, to prefer individual to teamwork, and to have less loyalty to organisations (Leslie et al., 2021). This study is interested in understanding both the external conditions, like the Covid-19 pandemic, which shape Generation Z creative graduates and new entrants, as well as the internal motivations that drive them in work.

In sum, the literature on CIs suggests less-than-ideal working conditions, challenging entry routes and points of access, exclusionary and discriminatory practices and poor compensation. Creative workers have reported as much, particularly in recent times since the pandemic. While the promise of creativity and the lure of passion-work meant that creative work remains a popular aspiration and motivation, the combination of changing working patterns prompted by lockdowns and the different values and attitudes of Generation Zs means that new entrants may have changing expectations and priorities regarding work, some of which reflect an ethos of self-care as well as an impulse to be creative. Our study finds that workers articulate values and motivations that emphasise self-care, personal well-being and strong work-life balance alongside motivations of passion, creativity and productivity. However, to date there is little research on how younger generations' values, motivations and concerns shape their attitude to and experiences of creative work. This study addresses that gap.

Method

This study is qualitative in its approach and focused on generating in-depth and nuanced understandings about lived experiences of career entry and progression to CIs among a cohort of graduates of media degree programmes in Ireland in 2020, during the first series of pandemic-related lockdowns. Data were gathered using an online questionnaire comprising 16 open- and closed-ended questions. The questionnaire was issued in 2023 to 75 potential participants, with 20 responses. The first set of multiple-choice questions gathered information on general geographic location and some aspects of social identity, such as gender and age, but did not extend to an analysis of social class, which does require further research. A second set of open-ended questions asked about experiences of seeking and entering work during pandemic-related lockdowns, as well as the impact of their experiences on career progression and development. A third set of open-ended questions asked about participants' attitudes to their current work and career status and invited them to evaluate the legacies of recent changes on their work and careers. While no specific questions related to well-being and mental health were asked, references to such were highly notable and numerous in the questionnaire responses.

Table 1. Participants.

Name	Location	Role
Sarah	Urban	Equipment/Device Sales
Susan	Rural	Customer Advisor
Orla	Urban	Tech Sales
Anna	Urban	Administration
John	Urban	Multimedia/Graphic Design
Colm	Urban	Marketing Account Executive
Alex	Rural	Tech Consultant
Joanne	Urban	Finance
Hugh	Urban	Media Sales
Grace	Rural	Marketing Executive
Craig	Rural	Editor
Siobhán	Rural	Business Administration
Tara	Rural	Retail Manager
Veronica	Rural	Broadcast Journalist
Will	Rural	Digital Marketing Executive
Brenda	Rural	Retail Manager
Ronan	Urban	Retail Manager
Ciaran	Urban	Customer Support
Deirdre	Rural	Event Management
Nina	Urban	Media Account Executive

Once the questionnaire closed to responses, the data were reviewed, any identifying information was deleted and pseudonyms were applied. General career areas and generic roles were used to describe participants' work if specific job titles made participants identifiable. The participants were based all across Ireland, in both rural and urban settings. Occupations varied, too, with eight in work that can be defined as media and/or creative work. Other candidates worked in non-media roles but identified closely with their media and creative subjectivities. Several participants had not entered media or creative work but all participants indicated that they had wanted to do so when they initially graduated. Table 1 summarises the participants.

The study adopted reflexive thematic analysis, which helped to structure and organise the data (Braun and Clarke, 2019). The questionnaires were read and reread so that researchers could both familiarise themselves with the data and begin to identify any common themes that emerged from the individual responses. While pre-existing categories were generally used to organise the data (workplaces in the pandemic, unforeseen opportunities, etc.), the researchers also allowed for unanticipated themes to emerge from responses. These especially pertained to participants' articulations of values and motivations in work. Codes were developed through key concepts and feelings expressed, for example, stress, ambiguity, stoicism, satisfaction. Codes were clustered to generate key themes, two of these are discussed in the findings: initial regret at unsatisfactory job seeking and subsequent recognition of new opportunities in a changed work landscape along with prioritisation of wellness and work-life balance.

Findings

The two findings are detailed below. First, participants reported feelings of disappointment and unfulfilled ambition resulting from their experiences of seeking work and entering into CIs. The second finding was that new 'geographies' of work provided many advantages for participants and they preferred distance, independence and detachment (from work) expressed in their overwhelmingly positive attitudes to hybrid and remote working. This preference for new geographies of work is correlated with an overt concern for work-life balance, good mental health and emotional well-being. Evident in the participants' accounts of their experiences of seeking media work are familiar narratives of poor entry routes, career scrambling, exploitation via unpaid or low-paid internships. These issues have all been documented in the literature on precarity in CIs (Brook et al., 2020b; McRobbie, 2016). However, what has not been examined in great detail is the extent to which creative workers are motivated by and attuned to self-care and well-being and the way they find autonomy, if not in creative work, then in their conditions of work – remote and hybrid – that allow them space and independence. Dent et al.'s (2023) work has highlighted the lack of care evidenced by employers and government with regard to creative workers. They note the role that cultural intermediaries – unions, advocacy groups, charities – play in taking on welfare and care roles for creative workers, but note how this is ad hoc and poorly resourced and funded. Carey et al.'s (2023) report on the quality of creative work found that poor working conditions were reported to 'negatively impact the health and wellbeing of the creative workforce' (p. 23). Well-being and mental health did feature in reports and scholarship of creative workers experiences during the pandemic, but much of this associates well-being and mental health issues with the pandemic's impact on creative sectors rather than on current priorities among creative workers (Brunt and Nelligan, 2021). Our study differs in respect of its focus on a particular generation, Generation Z, who are said to have different motivations, values and priorities than previous generations, which shapes their attitudes to creative work. We are also concerned with the legacy of pandemic-related changes within CIs for workers' expectations of their working lives. In fact, the turn towards well-being and self-care in CIs as elsewhere that was initiated by the pandemic has perhaps spurred Generation Zs to prioritise their physical and mental health above previous motivations and priorities such as creative freedom. Further research is needed to determine whether this is a short-term legacy of the pandemic or something more long-term.

Finding 1: missing out and moving on from CIs

Scholarship on Generation Z's relationship to work and attitude to employers often suggests that they are disloyal and will move jobs and careers in opportunistic ways (Benítez-Márquez et al., 2022; Zahari and Puteh, 2023). This is perhaps understandable since Generation Z have also witnessed economic downturns, declining conditions of work and growing inequality (Scholz and Rennig, 2019). There is little incentive for them to maintain loyalty in such circumstances and so 'Generation Z is not that easily exploitable' (Scholz and Rennig, 2019: 281). This is not to suggest that Generation Zs are 'entitled' or overly sensitive, instead they can be thought of as pragmatic realists. In the data

that follow, participants' accounts of their experiences not only suggest disappointment with the stifled opportunities in the context of the pandemic, but also suggest Generation Z's recognition of other opportunities and possibilities.

Four of the participants (Alex, Joanne, Tara and Deirdre) felt that the 'ship had sailed' on their media careers. They graduated at a time when lockdowns prevented them entering creative work, and thought, in the years since, their graduate 'currency' had weakened, and they felt that 'fresher' graduates were more desirable. For these people, the pandemic closed a door on their media careers, even though media industries in Ireland generally returned to work the year after they graduated. Alex, for example, said that

I feel like I've fallen behind, I'm this far on from graduating and have little to no experience in my field of study that I wish to work in. Getting jobs in film or editing is near impossible now since the pandemic and now the SAG-AFTRA strikes, it's one thing after another. (Alex, rural, tech consultant)

Like Alex, Susan and Ciaran implied that their 'new entrant' status had a time limit on it and that they were no longer eligible to seek work in media industries.

I couldn't get a job in Media like I wanted to because companies weren't hiring. There was nothing available at all in the industry as production was halted due to lockdowns. (Susan, rural, customer advisor)

Ciaran also added that his education had a shelf life that had expired.

Because of the pandemic I didn't go straight into a grad job like I would have liked to and by the time it had finished I felt like I had forgotten everything I had learnt in my degree. (Ciaran, urban, customer support)

These and other participants felt a sense of urgency in the need to move from education to media work. They felt that if they missed the window and took other jobs outside of CIs, they would not likely have another chance. Ronan felt that the most obvious route into CIs was through an internship but that he had 'outgrown' internships since 'the longer I went without an internship the less likely I would take one considering the length of time since I graduated. This created a vicious circle of not entering a field related to my degree' (Ronan, urban, retail manager). Even though participant John worked in multimedia design, he felt that he de-skilled during periods of unemployment. He also felt that the 'work landscape has changed massively in the fields I was interested in working in' (John, urban, multimedia/graphic design). Many of them reported applying for multiple jobs as well as changing jobs to get media work. While it is well documented that new entrants struggle to start, and often opt out of, creative careers, the participants in this study predominantly cited the pandemic as the root cause of difficult, or lack of, entry to CIs, even among those who were still keen to enter or stay in creative work (Brook and Comunian, 2018).

The pandemic, therefore, represented a significant interruption to graduate and career goals for many of the participants. Unlike more senior people with defined career paths and years of employment under their belt, Generation Zs were at a formative stage of

their professional identity development. With much of the opportunity for creative careers and work undermined by the pandemic, they were required to engage in multi-sectoral job searches and to rethink their initial career plans. Studies of Generation Z careers and employment during and after the pandemic described this disrupted opportunity and argued that it stunted their professional development (Becker, 2022; Delbosc and McCarthy, 2021). Given that creative work was already perceived to be competitive and difficult to secure, some of the participants engaged in professional 'self-preservation' by turning to other forms of work that were available.

Ireland experienced a large number of prolonged lockdowns during the pandemic, which had a particularly severe impact on creative sectors such as audiovisual production, live events and the arts generally (Barton et al., 2023). There was sustained press attention on the vulnerability of creative workers and on the financial precarity in which these workers found themselves (Arts Council, 2020). All of the participants in this study had aspirations to work in CIs, but due to the limited work available in these sectors during the pandemic and in its immediate aftermath, some of the participants changed sectors in order to gain any kind of employment. However, they came to see this as an opportunity and saw the personal and professional benefits they acquired through pivoting to different roles and sectors. Brenda (rural, retail manager) stated several times that she was 'lucky' to find work during the pandemic. Anna, now an administrator, stated that

the job I initially accepted was not my first choice. However, I do believe it allowed me to build my skillset to a point where I have been able to transfer to a role that is more suited to my future plans. (Anna, urban, administration)

Anna recounted that she witnessed many of her peers remaining unemployed for extended periods of time and 'almost felt pressured to take whatever job I could find' but added that she was 'grateful for the role I stepped into' despite it being something she would never have ordinarily considered. This optimistic perspective was shared by other participants who evidenced gratitude rather than despondency. Susan became a customer advisor which she enjoys, but still recognised the impact of the pandemic on her career aspirations,

. . . I found it ok but I'm now in a different industry and didn't get a job working in media like I wanted to. I really enjoy the job I'm in now and have advanced a lot in my career in the last 2 years, which I'm grateful for. I think I could have had a different path if I didn't graduate into a lockdown. (Susan, rural, customer advisor)

Th unavailability of creative careers, while generating disappointment initially, was later re-evaluated as having provided more opportunities to participants. For some, the pandemic lessened their aspiration to have creative careers and they re-oriented towards other rewarding career goals and professional activities. This reflects existing scholarship on Generation Z's propensity for employment mobility (Rodriguez et al., 2019) but adds empirical evidence specific to creative work aspirants. Similar processes of adaptation and reprioritisation of work were evident in the value ascribed to place and space by

participants. The opportunity to work from home, part-time or wholly, was a major benefit for participants, regardless of whether they were in creative or other work.

Finding 2: new 'geographies' of work and mental well-being

Like many industries and employment sectors in Ireland, remote and hybrid working arrangements increased dramatically during the pandemic and have since been formally adopted in many organisations and companies. A 'Work from Home Provision' was introduced in Irish legislation in 2024 to allow workers to request full or partial remote working as part of the Work Life Balance and Miscellaneous Provisions Act 2023 (Citizens Information, 2024). While employers are not required to accept the request, the provision itself is representative of a growing shift towards better work–life balance and enhanced employment rights. Furthermore, the persistent housing crises in Ireland, in which property is both unaffordable and unavailable, mean that remote and hybrid working arrangements alleviate some of the financial and housing barriers that had made work unavailable for those living in remote areas or places outside of the main urban employment centres. Generation Zs are particularly impacted by the housing and cost of living crises in Ireland, with 41 percent of those between 18 and 34 still residing in their parents' home, according to the 2022 national census (RTÉ Brainstorm, 2024). Reports on Irish Generation Zs suggest that they have serious concerns about the impact of the housing crisis on them and on their financial security (Amárach Research, 2022). In addition, Generation Z employees experience CIs as exclusionary, nepotistic, highly competitive and exploitative (O'Brien and Kerrigan, 2020; O'Brien et al., 2021). Collectively, then, Generation Zs in Ireland have experienced multiple crises related to cost of living and employment, challenges in entering and sustaining work in CIs, and as a result have reprioritised values and motivations. This is evident in our participants' descriptions of what they feel the positive outcomes of the pandemic have been for work and employment. These outcomes almost exclusively refer to the productivity, mental health and well-being benefits afforded to them by working from home or in hybrid arrangements.

Nina, for example, resides in an urban centre and sees both productivity and personal benefits attached to working from home.

I have far less distractions at home. I'm awful for chatting away to people around me so when I'm in the office, I always feel I'm less productive. It is also a 90-minute commute to the office for me so I really love those extra two hours in bed when working from home! (Nina, urban, media account executive)

Craig, likewise, referred to time saved from commuting to urban centres and having some space to himself. 'It allows me to save time and money from commuting. And being able to work in my own space is great' (Craig, rural, editor). Nina, Craig as well as Veronica work in roles that have been traditionally city-based since Ireland's creative economy is largely centred on urban areas, especially the capital, Dublin. Veronica (rural, broadcast journalist) admitted that had the pandemic not happened, she would have

stayed living in Dublin. A typical expectation of new entrants to creative work is either a move to the city or emigration to a larger creative hub such as London (Lawton et al., 2013; Power and Collins, 2021). CIs in Ireland, while dispersed across rural and urban settings (the film studio Ardmore, e.g., is outside of a main city), are situated mainly in cities that are increasingly unaffordable and difficult to travel to. As Ahrens and Lyons (2021) have found, higher urban housing costs in Ireland are associated with longer and more commuting, which in turn can have negative health benefits for those commuters. Therefore, facing such a situation, our participants have leveraged some of the remote and work from home opportunities available since the pandemic and opted to prioritise their personal time, seeking out jobs that allow for working from home at least some of the time. Their main motivation for working from home and the value they get from such working arrangements is much better work-life balance and affordability.

Work-life balance was referenced time and again as a priority for our participants, which reflects the literature that emphasises the importance of this for Generation Z workers (Dolot, 2018). However, work-life balance doesn't feature extensively as a theme or object of study in CIs literature. While there is acknowledgement that CIs can be defined by poor work-life balance and that creative workers desire better work-life balance and working conditions, there is less attention paid to how creative workers rank their professional values and motivations and where work-life balance resides in that ranking. In our study, work-life balance was perceived to be one of the positive externalities of the pandemic and something that was at the forefront of workers' minds. Siobhán, for example, said that 'I am adamant that working from home is an effective way of providing employees with a better work life balance, which is a positive outcome of the pandemic' (Siobhán, rural, business administration). Hugh cited hybrid working as a key incentive for taking up his role 'I am 2 days in the office 3 days at home. I love this aspect of my job as it gives me a great work life balance' (Hugh, urban, media sales). Anna valued the personal time she regained through remote working:

I was given the opportunity to spend more time on myself and to balance life and work. Time that would have been spent commuting was replaced with time for a walk/making a home cooked breakfast, lunchtimes can be used for cleaning the house or running to the shops etc. (Anna, urban, administration)

These responses evidence a certain amount of agentic self-care on the part of participants. While motivated by the cost-of-living crisis and the lack of opportunities to relocate to creative centres, the participants, nonetheless, felt rewarded with more personal time, time with family, well-being and quality of life. Scholarship on young people in CIs has previously found them to be motivated by the promise of creative expression and autonomy, passionate work, but often finding creative work to be exclusionary, elusive and of poor quality (Duffy, 2016; Taylor and Luckman, 2020). Our participants, who faced career disruption because of the pandemic, found job satisfaction in roles that allowed for more work-life balance. While none reported that they were no longer driven to 'be creative', creative success was described by most through concepts related to mental health and well-being, many of which were tied to remote or hybrid working.

For example, avoiding burnout, stress and maintaining good mental health were all cited as benefits to changing trends in employment location. Orla, for example, stated, 'I enjoy remote working . . . I can't imagine working a whole week in city centre, it's draining and with the cost of living crisis I could never earn enough to live there' (Orla, urban, tech sales). Colm cited a number of reasons why he preferred the new remote working trend, all related to quality of life and well-being. 'No commute, saving money, mental health benefits, ability to travel more often' (Colm, urban, marketing account executive). Alex also referred to saving time and being 'Not as tired, [having] more time to spend with family and friends' (Alex, rural, tech consultant). Sarah said she could avoid a 2-hour commute, which 'helps with burnout and allows me to do things like go to the gym' (Sarah, urban, equipment/device sales). Colm said that '[working] from home is incredibly positive for my mental health' (Colm, urban, marketing account executive).

Scholarship on young people in creative work has pointed to the 'trade off' that new entrants make between financial security and passion work, whereby young creative workers sacrifice things like stability, compensation and time in order to be able to pursue and perform creative work (Banks, 2017). Alacovska et al. (2021), for example, have found that where younger creative workers are drawn towards urban centres because they are creative hubs, that by mid-career goals of creative workers shift towards quality of life and well-being. Our participants seemed less attached to passion work and cited well-being as an incentive and motivator much more than creativity. However, all of the participants had graduated into the pandemic, in which creative jobs were scarce, life and work pressures intense and mobility limited. Whether this prioritisation of well-being is exclusive to this generation, to new entrants in CIs or to those commencing CI careers in the pandemic needs to be examined further.

Conclusion

Using the generational framework to analyse the experience of young people and their attitudes to creative work proposes a significant shift away from common thinking about new entrants in CIs. Scholarship on CIs currently largely describes young people as willing to make big sacrifices to be creative (McRobbie, 2016), such as being exploited by CI organisations through poor quality work and low or unpaid internships (Brook et al., 2020a; Moody, 2020). It describes them as career scramblers who have to be highly mobile and flexible in order to enter CIs (Noonan, 2015). Young people and new entrants are said to have tolerated this because being creative was perceived as a calling or vocation, something that simply had to be pursued regardless of the conditions and challenges (Duffy, 2016). In some ways, the struggle to gain and sustain creative work is wrapped up in the mythology of creative work, in what Alacovska and Kärreman (2023) call the 'social imaginary of the tormented artist'. However, beyond the CIs scholarship, business and management and work scholarship finds that young people, particularly Generation Zs, prioritise many different things, and their priorities and motivations are generational and contextual rather than sectoral. This research departs from accounts of the attraction of creative work as intrinsically tied to questions of identity construction and a creative 'depositif' (McRobbie, 2016). Instead these findings suggest that there

may be a need to further question whether there is a new reprioritisation by workers of their own well-being, which is replacing creative fulfilment as their key concern.

This literature finds that Generation Z workers favour stability and security and are less incentivised by the allure of 'cool, creative and egalitarian' workplaces that ask for a lot and give very little (Gill, 2002). Generation Zs are socially concerned, value fairness and respect, expect strong leadership, will switch roles and careers if they are unfulfilled, and place a premium on well-being and good mental health (Becker, 2022; Delbosc and McCarthy, 2021; Leslie et al., 2021; Turner, 2015; Twenge, 2023). Our study has found that the Generation Zs that sought entry into creative work during the pandemic have faced challenges and have responded by prioritising well-being and quality of life at least as much as 'being creative' if not more. Scholarship on the quality of creative work has established that well-being is emerging as a concern in CIs, and there are several organisations and charity groups that have been established to encourage better mental health and emotional well-being among CI workers (e.g. Film and TV Charity UK or, in Ireland, Minding Creative Minds). Shaughnessy et al. (2023) have also identified the significant issues of precarity and financial instability experienced by creative workers. They note that the need for advocacy groups evidences that creative work is often unsustainable and leads to poor outcomes for workers. Where they advocate for collectivised approaches to achieving better work for creatives, our participants took a highly individualised approach and used the work from home opportunities that have emerged during and since the pandemic to find localised solutions to the issues of poor work-life balance and well-being. While this is an interesting development, we end with a number of cautions related to the scale and context of the research.

The study was small in sample size and limited in time frame. Larger studies are required to understand if this is a phenomenon experienced by larger Generation Z cohorts, whether it is experienced beyond Ireland with its specific financial and geographic pressures, and whether the same prioritisation of well-being is happening for other generations. Furthermore, while prioritisation of well-being may suggest agency and self-care on the part of participants, it must be considered alongside the turn away from state and employment protections and towards the neoliberal individualisation of care. Why participants felt that mental health was at risk and why they were attracted to being away from the workplace are possible causes for concern. Despite the recent attention, well-being is still nonetheless reported as poor among those in creative workplaces across the country (Arts Council, 2020; Creative Ireland, 2024; Minding Creative Minds, 2023). Our participants are evidence of this ongoing challenge to support mental health and well-being. Their desire to exit workplaces is a sign that something is amiss in the creative industries.

Data availability statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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