“We live in a capitalist world, we need to survive!”: Feminist cultural work, platform capitalism, internet entrepreneurship, and pandemic precarity

- Hannah Curran-Troop (City)

Abstract:

This paper analyses the working practices of several feminist creative and cultural enterprises in London (which I term ‘feminist CCIs’). In particular, it shows how pandemic precarity (Curran-Troop, Gill, Littler, 2021; Banks, 2020) has driven feminist CCIs towards more entrepreneurial, self-promotional, and self-branding practices in order to sustain their work. Drawing on both digital ethnographic material and interviews with 12 workers in feminist CCIs conducted online between 2020 and 2022, the article provides insights into the landscape and contemporary realities of arts and cultural funding within these fields. It considers how decades of austerity measures and cuts have forced some feminist CCIs to operate independently outside of the UK public sector funding models. Survival tactics include adopting corporate funding models, subscription and membership schemes, platformisation and digitalisation. Focusing on funding, money and subjectivity, it unpacks the contradictions these imperatives bring to feminist politics: tensions about which some feminist CCI workers themselves are aware of and critical of. In the process, this paper considers how activism, feminism, entrepreneurialism, and precarity are fused together and negotiated in this form of ‘freelance feminism’.

Keywords: ***Feminism, precarity, entreprenuerialism, branded partnerships, activism, pandemic, platformisation, creative and cultural industries (CCIs).***

Introduction

The devastating effect of Covid-19 for arts and culture - as well as for many other sectors of public life - is widely acknowledged. As we watched the rapid closures of theatres, museums, galleries,

cinemas, performing arts centres, and concert halls back in March 2020, it soon became clear that the creative and cultural ecosystem (and particularly venue-based sectors) would prove to be one of the pandemic's hardest-hit areas. Returning to live arts and experiencing culture with crowds of others became an increasingly uncertain, if not an impossible prospect. Widespread collapses in income and employment, brought about by the mass shutdowns, quickly exposed the precarious livelihoods and working conditions of the people comprising these industries. As a direct consequence of these events, the structural conditions of precarity within the creative and cultural industries (CCI) (as well as other industries with gig-economies) - long critiqued within academic literature (Morgan & Nelligan 2018, McRobbie 2016, Gill 2002, Gill, Conor, Taylor 2015, Banks 2007, Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2015, Pratt 2017) - were now made visible to the public. In addition, attention was also drawn to the ways in which the decade-long decline in public funding could be seen to be a root cause of this emergency (Banks & O'Connor, 2020). These conditions then coalesced into shifts in some creative industry workers' imaginaries across the summer of 2020. This materialised as a renewed interest in 'community' and networks of care; what has been termed as a 'solidarity turn' (d'Alancaisez, 2021); calls for alternative models (Communian & England, 2020); an uptake of art worker unionising and public protest; as well as demands for a reversal of CCI precarity (Banks & O'Connor, 2020).

At the same time, the pandemic has evoked more reactionary neoliberal trends across the creative and cultural industries. Specifically, counter narratives to *resilience* and *adapting* to the economic crisis have materialised, whilst new ways of producing, distributing, and monetising cultural content have emerged. Some examples have been a rise in 'internet-powered entrepreneurship' (Tehabsim, 2020), platformised cultural production across platforms including *Substack*, *Patreon*, and *GoFundMe*, as well as a sharp increase in commercial and branded 'partnerships'. Conceptualised as a reaction to the heightened concerns around the fragility of the economy and the lack of job security in the current moment (Dewey, 2020, Cotton, 2020), in these online, flexible, cultural

economies, individuals are responding by taking the economic precarity of Covid-19 into their own hands. These kinds of responses are in distinct contrast to the initial reactions outlined in the section above, and this distinction forms the framework of this article's inquiry.

For a deeper analysis of the *significance* and *meaning* of these contrasting CCI pandemic reactions, this article focusses in on the working practices of feminist creative and cultural enterprises in London (herafter termed 'feminist CCIs'). It shows how 'pandemic precarity' (Curran-Troop, Gill, Littler, 2023) has driven feminist CCIs towards more entrepreneurial, self-promotional, and self-branding practices in order to sustain their work in the crisis. This inquiry is informed by, and connects to, the rich body of existing scholarship on self-employment and cultural entrepreneurship (Oakley, 2013; McRobbie, 2011; Taylor, 2015; Bandinelli, 2020) gender, precarity and platformisation (Gill, Conor, Taylor, 2015; Duffy, 2017), popular and commodity feminism (Goldman, 1991; Banet-Weiser, 2018); as well as contemporary 'corporate wokeness' and wokewashing (Sobande, 2019; Kanai & Gill, 2020). Concentrating on funding, money and subjectivity within feminist CCIs, the article unpacks the contradictions these imperatives bring to feminist politics: tensions which some feminist CCI workers themselves are aware of and critical of.

This paper forms part of a wider four-year PhD project concerned with feminist creative and cultural work and organisations in London (feminist CCIs). Primarily, it draws from a digital ethnography undertaken between March 2020 and March 2021 surveying the online user-generated content of both feminist CCIs and the wider creative and cultural sector. Analysing the social media posts and feeds (Twitter, TikTok, Instagram posts and Live broadcasts) as well as the websites of feminist CCIs and key cultural institutions in London such as Tate Galleries, Southbank Centre, Whitechapel Galleries, and the ICA, this digital ethnography was fundamentally concerned with subjective accounts of experience in these online, public domains. This digital ethnography material forms the first section of the paper which introduces some of the emerging themes of the feminist CCIs and

the wider CCI responses. The second section then provides a deeper analysis and critical discussion of these themes through drawing from 12 semi-structured interviews with feminist CCI workers – women and non-binary creative and cultural workers who have worked within/with a feminist CCI in the last three years. All of these interviews were undertaken between June 2020 and July 2022, online via Zoom, with interviewees recruited through snowball sampling. In then drawing from this digital ethnographic and interview empirical material, this article extends debates around the wider CCI reactions to austerity, funding cuts and precarity by considering how this relates to feminist and activist cultural organising. In particular, it demonstrates how activism, feminism, entrepreneurialism, and precarity are fused together and negotiated within these fields. It examines how the pandemic, in conjunction with the decades of UK austerity measures and funding cuts, have coerced some feminist CCIs to operate independently and outside of the UK cultural economy. In doing so, the article contributes towards and extends contemporary understandings of the phenomenon of 'freelance feminism'. A term which is being co-constructed and formulated throughout this Special Issue, Freelance Feminism is understood as phenomenon in which feminist projects are now running through a casualised gig-economy, many of which are sustained through news models of entrepreneurial precarious labour - including branded partnerships, Patreon, and subscription-based packages (Curran-Troop, H, Gill, R & Littler 2023)

"Another world is possible": Art worker activism, unionising, and alternative models

One positive to draw from the ongoing systematic crisis evoked by Covid-19 has been the raised public awareness around widening inequality in the UK (Quilter-Pinner, 2020). Such an awakening was not exclusive to the cultural industries *per se*, but seemingly for society at large. These discourses and positions were widely circulated throughout the first UK lockdown materialising a reformed concern and appreciation for the NHS (Brooks & Moris, 2020); an acknowledgment that the majority of 'frontline workers' represent the lowest paid section of the UK workforce (McRobbie,

2020) (not to mention disproportionately from minority and underprivileged backgrounds); an understanding that the UK benefit system and Universal Credit is an inadequate amount for most to live on (Klair, 2020); public outcry around the precarity and casualisation of work in the gig-economy (Yerby & Page-Ticknell, 2020); and even a wider popularisation of demands for Universal Basic Income (Hannah & Friebal, 2020). Amidst these public conversations - and as the horrifying realities caused by the Conservatives' reduction of state services have become more widely apparent - there felt a temporary sense that the nation was on the verge of a reckoning for actual change. This issue provoked many people to consider whether returning to 'Business as Usual' was really what was needed in a post-pandemic/new-normal future (Banks, 2020).

In relation to these discourses, Covid-19 sharply exposed the fragility of creative and cultural sector and raised awareness around the insecure working environments that are rife in these industries. Surveys undertaken at the beginning of the first lockdown revealed cultural workers' acknowledgment of the precarious conditions they face, as well as expressing aspirations for alternative models (Communian & England, 2020). Such models included calls for a reversal of precarity within the culture industry, imposing a new set of labour regulations, as well as hopes for a renewed acknowledgement - by government - of art and culture's importance for any liveable post-virus society (O'Connor 2020, Banks 2020, Harrison, 2020). Such an idealisation would, for some, involve repositioning culture within an 'economy of needs': re-aligning arts and culture with public services - health, education, social services or housing (Banks, 2020), and re-positioning them as part of the social fabric (O'Connor, 2020). These new visions and hopes for alternative frameworks also aroused conversations around the importance of 'togetherness' and 'collectivity' in reimagining the ways culture is produced and consumed in contemporary society (Banks & O'Connor, 2020).

Wider calls for CCI collective action have also took shape as a result of mass redundancies within the sector. With the June 2020 estimation of 3000 redundancies across the museum and gallery sector

alone – examples including 100 employees at the V&A (Brown, 2020), 10% of Science Museum Group staff (Adams, 2020), half of the Tate Enterprises staff (Brown, 2020), and a staggering two thirds of the Southbank Centre's employees (which include the Royal Festival Hall, the Hayward Gallery and Queen Elizabeth Hall) (PCS, 2020). Such revelations sparked numerous forms of protest across the summer of 2020, including: Southbank Centre employees' open letter, #SouthbankSOS; Tate PCS Union members' 42 day strike; Arts Educators, curators, artists and critics from across the country compiling an open letter condemning the proposed redundancies (Arts Educators, 2020); as well as the Turner Prize recipients open letter in solidarity for art worker redundancies: "artists are workers, workers are artists, we stand in solidarity with one another" (Turner Bursary Recipients, 2020). These protests also featured cultural workers pushing back against the proposed imposition of commercial restructuring as institutions attempted to weather the ongoing economic uncertainty, as demonstrated by Southbank Centre employees:

> "What's troubling is that this time has not been used to lobby the government for more funding for the arts or for its own staff. Instead, they move to an even more commercial model. That doesn't add up to me because it's already been proven that it's a fragile one." (SouthbankSOS, 2020)

What was clear here is that - as a consequence of the harsh institutional responses to economic crisis - some UK arts and cultural workers were working collectively, demanding fairer treatment and working conditions, as well as holding the government accountable for sustaining the futures of these industries.

Reinventing the wheel: the hustle economy, resilience, and cultural entrepreneurship

In laying out the above responses following March 2020, it is equally critical to examine the reactionary trends the ongoing crisis evoked. Whilst parts of the cultural sector reacted with *resistance* to the structural inequalities that Covid-19 exposed, counter narratives around *resilience* and *adapting* to the economic crisis also prevailed. The sheer pace of income reduction following the first set of restrictive measures in 2020, arguably forced many CCI workers to 'think on their feet' - particularly the freelance and self-employed - to consider the ways in which they would sustain themselves under these new conditions. Indeed, these forms of *resilience* in crisis have already been theorised within CCI research following the aftermath of the 2008 economic collapse (Filion, 2013, Robinson, 2010, Pratt, 2017). Conceptualised back then as "the capacity to remain productive… absorbing disturbance and adapting with integrity in response to changing circumstances " (Robinson, 2010, p. 14), 'resilience' in the CCIs has particular reinvigorated resonance in the wake of the pandemic.

The notion of 'individualised resilience' (McRobbie, 2020) has received an abundance of critique within academia. Specifically, for how it insists that through 'enough resilience' and the 'right attitude and structure', CCI workers can adapt individually to funding cuts and income collapse (Comunian & England, 2020:116). In addition, others have highlighted the ways in which the 'affectivity' of work in these fields only further compounds this issue: "the social and economic costs of constant reinvention are high […] the affective relationships that are generated via cultural labour encourage self-exploitation" (Pratt, 2017, p: 136). Further, 'resilient responses' to crisis by CCI workers have often involved working in more precarious conditions than before, materialising in 'increased self-employment, freelancing, and entrepreneurship' as cultural workers navigate making a living in increasingly uncertain times (Comunian & England, 2020:117). These patterns and shifts have also materialised in the wake of Covid-19. What's more, with the suffering of existing cultural economies due to the ongoing restricted measures, new ways of producing, distributing, and monetising cultural content emerged.

The world of online cultural content was a key instance of this shift. As millions of people turned to digital cultural consumption during the lockdowns, the digital economy saw a rise in 'internet-powered entrepreneurship' (Tehabsim, 2020) and platformised cultural production (Duffy, Poell & Nieborg, 2019). What has been described as the 'hustle economy' (Dewey, 2020), these kinds of ecologies comprise online labour markets in which 'platform-dependent workers create and monetize their own digital products' through digital-subscription platforms (Dewey, 2020). Examples of the platforms in which these kinds of economies are operating across include *Patreon, Twitch, Tiktok, Substack, Etsy, Teachable, Knowable, Podia, Thinkific, Supercast, Lulu, Smashwords, Outschool,* and *OnlyFans*. Amidst the protracted economic crisis and growing unemployment rates throughout the first lockdowns, we saw surges in platform usage as individuals - including teachers, hairdressers, chefs, and cashiers as well as CCI workers - sought out new 'safety nets' to monetise their skills (Cottom, 2020).

> It wasn't just Patreon, either, which added more than 100,000 new users between mid-March and July. OnlyFans reported daily six-figure sign-ups on its popular cam site. Etsy logged 115,000 new sellers in the first three months of the year, more than double the past two years' user growth. Teachable, which lets people make and sell online courses, signed on 14,000 new creators between March and July, and in July reported its first quarterly revenue over $10 million (Dewey, 2020).

These kinds of increased online entrepreneurial activities have since been conceptualised as a reaction to the growing awareness around the fragility of the economy and the lack of job security during the peak of the pandemic (Dewey, 2020, Cotton, 2020). Such trends are in stark contrast to the collective responses described in the first section of this chapter. Rather, in these online, flexible, cultural economies, individuals were reacting by taking the economic precarity of Covid-19 into

their own hands. The field of cultural journalism isone example of this shift, reflected in the sharp increase of freelance writers turning to the online platform *Substack* as a means of monetising their skills. Launched in 2017, *Substack* enables writers to draft, edit, and send e-mail newsletters to subscribers through tiered use-subscription packages, whilst also offering a range of benefits including health-care stipends, design help, as well as financial advances (Weiner, 2020). Such attractive perks saw key cultural writers moving to the platform, including former *BuzzFeed* culture writer, Anne Helen Petersen, *Times* food writer, Alison Roman, *Guardian* writer and former *Vice* employee, Johanna Fuertes-Knight.

In noting the premise of financial security that a platform like *Substack* offers, as well as the visibility and increased audiences online cultural production provides, it is crucial to highlight the increased precarity of these ways of working. Although *Substack* encourages writers to 'work for them', and promises financial handouts, it doesn't actually 'hire' writers, nor offer the economic and social security of traditional employment. These issues have already been criticised regarding the contradictory nature of platformised work, where, although 'cultural workers are finding new routes to audiences and visibility' through platformisation, 'structural realities and inequalities' are very much commonplace within these fields (Duffy, Poell & Neiborg, 2019; Srnicek, 2016). Furthermore, in the face of the ongoing crisis, this kind of independent work runs the risk of exacerbating pressures and precarity within such 'highly unpredictable, "always on" career fields' (Duffy, Poell & Neiborg, 2019). It is also evident that in response to Covid-19, wider processes of platformisation, 'people to people economies' (Nurvala, 2015) and the 'Uberisation of work' (Nurvala, 2015; Edward, 2020) are also taking shape within the CCI: it is in effect, the Uberisation of creative work. Additionally, it is the creatives in precarious positions who are forming this new ecology and formation – the freelance writers, designers, photographers, and artists – who, traditionally, have none of the benefits of secure employment such as sick pay, maternity pay, pensions, and holiday entitlements.

Feminist CCIs in Crisis

As the focus of this research enquiry, and with their close connection to the above CCI responses, we now turn our analytic attention to feminist CCIs. Broadly speaking, feminist CCIs are a network of self-identified feminist and women-led organisations and enterprises which sit across the fields of journalism, publishing, film, visual arts, performance, music, dance, and fine art photography. For the purpose of this article's UK focus, this section analyses feminist CCIs located within the UK CCI, (though important to note here is that feminist CCIs are an international phenomenon and are operating currently in various cities across Europe and the US). Feminist CCIs usually promote themselves as having the shared aim of providing 'solidarity' and 'opportunities' for women and marginalised CCI workers, and attend to a multitude of feminist topics through their creative and artistic work. Whilst frequently describing themselves as activists and *industry disruptors*, feminist CCIs also repeatedly present themselves as 'community organisations' (which, interestingly, includes an overlap between the users, activists, and consumers that participate within these cultures and industries). In addition, feminist CCIs also relate to Nick Srnicek's conceptualisation of 'platforms' in the way that – alike the platform-based business' Srnicek interrogates – feminist CCIs position themselves as 'intermediaries that bring together different users: customers, advertisers, service providers, producers, suppliers, and even physical objects' (Srnicek 2017:23).

Some examples of the organisations comprising these feminist CCI ecologies in London include, but are not limited to, *Women Srsly Performance Collective*, *London Feminist Film Festival, Galdem Zine, Sister Magazine, Grrrl Zine Fair, Girls in Film, Fem Zine London, Cuntemporary, BBZ London, Mushpit Magazine, OOMK Zine, Pussy Palace Collective, Cuntry Living Zine, The Bunny Collective,* and *Feminist Internet.* Within this sample, I interviewed 1 feminist CCI workers, the majority of which already had

established CCI careers, each describing their working status as either 'freelance' or 'self-employed', and affiliating themselves with a range of professional creative careers and titles including artist, film-maker, writer, independent curator, founding editor in chief, and creative consultant, as well as, *feminist activists* when advocating for their work within these organisations.

However, as cultural enterprises with distinctly fragile economies, the pandemic brought adverse consequences to the livelihoods and working lives of feminist CCIs. In addition, as organisations whose financial security relies almost entirely on physical events, photoshoots, workshops, parties and video projects, the lockdowns and wider economic devastation affecting the cultural sector found feminist CCIs in extremely compromised positions regarding their present function and future continuity. In the face of this ongoing economic volatility, and as captured through this research's digital ethnography and interview material, feminist CCIs mirrored many of the themes occurring across the wider UK creative and cultural landscape. Some of these themes included heighted expressions of community and solidarity; a focus on wellness and care; anti-productivity discourse against: increased entrepreneurialism and platformisation; increased self-promotion and branding; as well as a rise in commercial sponsorship, as explored in this next section.

Community acts, collaboration and networks of solidarity

Like the wider CCIs, community and togetherness were markedly important issues to the feminist CCI's initial responses. Centring feminist rhetoric around care and solidarity during the first lockdown, these organisations displayed a distinct momentum, if not pressure, to remain digitally visible as part of their commitment to this 'community'. They set up weekly 'community check-ins' on Instagram Live; they almost trebled their Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter posts, and showed a heightened sense of responsibility to support the more vulnerable sectors of their community

(including sharing LGBT foodbank initiatives, sex worker hardship funds, and financial grants for female freelancers). As part of this community organising, and alike many workers in the wider CCI, the feminist CCIs demonstrated great concern for the increased precarity of freelance workers within these industries. In light of this, feminist CCIs utilised their social media to raise awareness of the devastating effects the pandemic brought to their industries; to 'spotlight makers, artists and small businesses' within these fields; and to promote how important, now more than ever, 'community acts, collaboration and networks of solidarity' are for these enterprises (Anonymous feminist CCI Instagram Post, 2020).

Anti-productivity and ambivalence towards capitalism were also prominent themes for the feminist CCIs during the first UK lockdown. This was demonstrated through the ways feminist CCIs placed notable emphasis on 'slowing down', promoting mutual aid initiatives over commercial models, as well as echoing the wider UK CCI criticisms around the structural causes of this emergency. Some of the feminist CCIs also expressed the need to resist pressures of increased productivity in the face of the crisis, urging followers to do the same. Such conversations took place predominantly on podcasts, and featured candid and vulnerable discussions around mental health, isolation, loneliness, and withstanding coercions to be energetic and creative in lockdown. Other, similarly 'mindful' approaches to the lockdown struggles included feminist CCIs adapting their cultural content. In April 2020, some feminist CCI Editors announced they would 'sensitise' towards their audiences and followers by publishing 'lighter style content' such as film and reading recommendations rather than political pieces during the lockdown. In an Instagram Live episode, one Editor explained this was because she felt her readers craved 'a sense of escapism during these times' (Anonymous feminist CCI, 2020). Further instances of feminist CCIs adapting their cultural production to account for the difficult times included launching projects around the themes of grief, loneliness, isolation, separation and mental health.

"Help us continue our work": plaformisation and internet entrepeneurship

To be sure, how feminist CCIs were *talking* about the pandemic reflect the wider CCI workforce reactions such as industry activism, unionisation and calls for alternative models. The first lockdown also saw feminist CCIs actively resisting the productivity cultures and individualised resilience which has historically materialised in times of crisis across the CCIs (Filion, 2013, Robinson, 2010, Pratt, 2017). And indeed, discourses around mental health and wellbeing, vulnerability, and a focus on collectivity and community dominated much of the feminist CCIs online content from March 2020. However, since these initial discussions, many feminist CCIs have simultaneously had to reshape their existing models to adjust to the uncertain times. Many of these models - which include platformisation, internet entrepreneurship, and branded sponsorship - reflect much of the wider CCI contrasting reactions, and no doubt present tensions and contradictions to these organisations' positions, subjectivities, and feminist politics.

As mentioned earlier, and theorised elsewhere (Duffy, Poell & Nieborg, 2019; Soronen & Koivunen, 2022), contemporary cultural production has become increasingly platformised and digitalised. This has immensely intensified in the wake of the pandemic, and has since evolved to be the dominant means of economic survival for most feminist CCIs. Podcasts represented the first instance of this rapid shift to platformisation, with many of the feminist CCIs launching new series throughout the first lockdown. Synonymous with the feminist CCIs' incentives to foster community and connection during the challenging times, podcasts were utilised as a medium offering new forms of audience engagement and participation (Yeates, 2020). Indeed, podcasts quickly became a popular means of communication for feminist CCIs, (alongside a stand-in for the space previously filled with live events and other forms of in-person community presence). Podcasts also allowed them to discuss in-depth the difficulties and shared experiences brought about by Covid-19, with many episodes centering topics around destigmatising mental health as well as self-care and wellbeing. However, as the

weeks of the first lockdown went on, the themes of these podcasts altered to reflect wider fears around the increased precarity of work in these fields, as illustrated in the titles of these three podcast episodes: 'Negotiating your dates: Self Employment Finance Lessons', 'We Need to Talk About Money', and 'Freelance Money Lessons' (Anonymous Feminist CCIs, 2020). These kinds of sentiments were also present within the feminist CCI 2020 Instagram Live broadcasts, which featured advice on how to negotiate rates, and specifically, how such rates should increase to account for the pandemic environment.

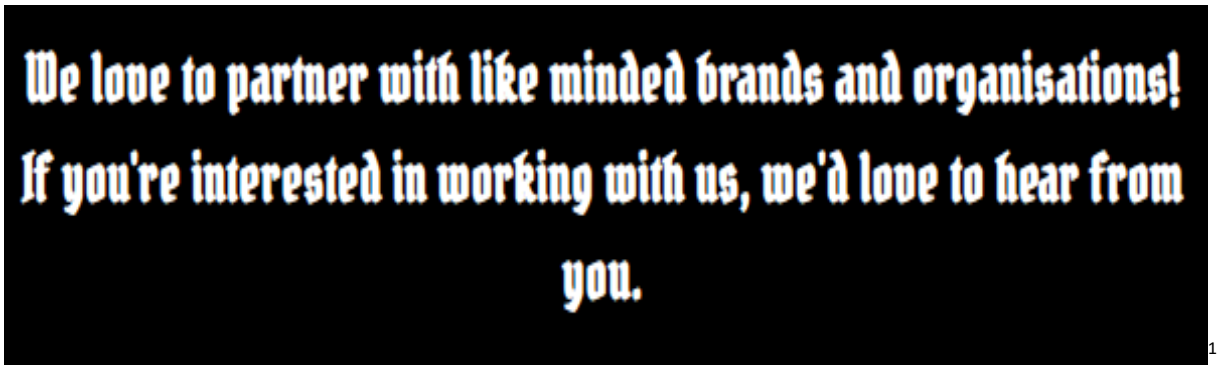
Further entrepreneurial and commercial approaches can be seen in how feminist CCIs sought out corporate sponsorship of the podcasts. Making use of digital platforms such as *Apple Podcasts* and *Spotify*, many of the feminist CCIs also secured commercial advertisements from companies (such as *Melissa Shoes, Samsung*, and *Kickstarter)* as a means of sustaining this work. The wider dramatic increases in podcast consumption - seen through *Spotify* reporting usages doubling in June 2020 (Porter, 2020) - also reflects how this shift in demand pressed many CCI workers to move towards this financial model. In addition, the practical implications of the lockdown plus the confinements of working from home meant that many of the feminist CCIs believed this model was not only a lucrative option, but *a necessity* within these times. This issue, alongside the wider economic volatility of the times, has given rise to new forms of 'pandemic precarity' (Curran-Troop, Gill, Littler, 2021) which have significantly reshaped the feminist CCIs initial approaches to freelance work and money. Such approaches are evidenced not only in the styles of podcast content I drew upon earlier, but also in the ways the feminist CCIs promoted these commercial models as 'collaboration *opportunities'*. Advertised extensively across their social media platforms and websites, the framing of these corporate advertisements is clearly indicative of the ways the heightened precarity now facing feminist CCIs has coerced them into more commercial and entrepreneurial styles of work which were nonetheless presented through the more politically neutral or uncommercial phrase 'collaboration'. Further, the complex and unequal power relations involved in 'collaborating' with brands invokes additional constraints on feminist CCI labour and subjectivity, as I discuss shortly.

Other instances of the feminist CCIs' entrepreneurial pandemic approaches can be seen through the launching of membership and subscription-based packages soon after the podcasts. In correlation with the wider digital cultural economy's increases in 'internet-powered entrepreneurship' (Tehabsim, 2020) and platformised cultural production (Duffy, Poell & Nieborg, 2019), many feminist CCIs decided to monetise their digital products and content through these membership packages. As with the corporate-friendly language surrounding the podcasts, feminist CCIs promoted these membership schemes as exclusive 'opportunities' for followers to support their work. Specifically, these financial commitments promised attractive 'perks' in return, comprising discount codes; work opportunities; wellness tricks and tips; as well as access to 'carefully curated' members Whatsapp groups (Anonymous feminist CCIs, 2020). The corporate and persuasive language surrounding these packages is another instance of how, in the face of pandemic precarity, feminist CCIs were seemingly pushed towards more commercial forms. Another dimension to this was the way feminist CCIs assigned a huge amount of responsibility (and *urgency*) towards their audiences to help sustain their economic survival. These imperatives later materialised in June 2020 as a series of pressing and persuasive appeals across the feminist CCIs' social media: "help us continue our ground-breaking work", "help us keep our doors open", "become a member today!!" (Anonymous feminist CCI, 2020).

"We LOVE to partner with likeminded brands!" Feminism meets the corporates

Another connecting facet of pandemic precarity and growing internet-entrepreneurship has been the feminist CCIs broader and increased involvement with commercial sponsorship. One concerning aspect here is that the vast majority of these campaigns materialised following the feminist CCIs' increased social media activities across lockdown one. Feminist scholar, Brooke Erin Duffy, describes such styles of digital labour and commercial attention as 'aspirational labour' (Duffy, 2017), a term

which is highly relevant in conceptualising the feminist CCIs' increased social media usage, and particularly, in considering the moment of uncertainty in which they undertook this work. In addition, and like the women in Brooke Erin Duffy's study, feminist CCIs can be seen to be performing unpaid digital labour in the hope that it may lead to paid work. The gendered nature of 'aspirational' social media labour is also critical in considering how this uncompensated work may in fact further the precarious positions of feminist CCI workers. In this sense, feminist CCIs digital labour can be understood as 'feminised' and 'future facing', principally driven by the 'possibility' of securing compensation through commercial sponsorship (Duffy, 2017). And although some feminist CCIs did secure branded campaigns across the summer of 2020, these were one-off fees, unable to provide feminist CCIs any form of longer-term, financial stability.



[1]

The issues and concerns outlined above were, however, wholly absent from the feminist CCI's online discussions of this work. Instead, many of the feminist CCI's social media and websites framed these commercial campaigns in eminently positive ways, frequently promoting the work as 'collaboration *opportunities'*. Almost echoing the language of a formal job advertisement, many of these announcements encouraged brands to 'get in touch to work *together'* (Anonymous Feminist CCI, 2020). In particular, and as became apparent within the interviews, the feminist CCIs placed huge emphasis around the prerequisite that partnerships were with 'similar-minded' brands who 'aligned

[1] Anonymous feminist CCI social media post, 2020

with their values' (Anonymous Feminist CCI Worker, 2021). Others felt it was not only necessary for the brand to 'fit' the enterprise's shared values and ideologies, but that the collaboration should also '*feel* on brand' (Anonymous feminist CCI worker, 2021).

My in-depth interviews with feminist CCI workers were highly generative in providing further nuance to the promises and pitfalls of these kinds of working relationships. Within many of these conversations, feminist CCI workers opened up about the negative experiences they'd had with brands, details which were not made visible online. The feminist CCI workers also described the ways in which their work was 'restricted' by accepting corporate funding. In particular, some of my interviewees felt these models significantly impacted their creative autonomy in the way that projects were often beholden to the funding partner's vision rather than their own. One interviewee described how

> "They squish ideas, want things to be done in a certain way, want to use your film for their own promotional material…there's like a limitation there because they're ultimately the client and they need to be happy with it as much as we need to be happy with it" (Anonymous feminist CCI worker, 2021).

Other interviewees highlighted the unequal nature of these branded collaborations. In sharp contrast to the online discourse - which wholeheartedly presented these working relationships as *balanced* and *fair* - many interviewees outlined their concerns about these hierarchies. One common theme was that brands' 'lack of understanding' of smaller enterprises and independent workers evoked collisions and tensions throughout their 'partnerships'

> "When you partner with a big corporation, there's often like a big lack of understanding of like how a small kind of indie collective works" (Anonymous feminist CCI Worker, 2021)

Another interviewee told me that this 'lack of understanding', plus her independent freelance position within the creative industry, resulted in brands taking advantage and exploiting her situation.

> "When you study a creative degree, they don't teach you like how to manage your finances or how much you should charge for writing an article or something like that. And I think that allows these like bigger corporations to kind of profit off that because they *know* that you don't know…" (Anonymous feminist CCI worker, 2021)

She went on to say

> "Whatever you all do, whether you're a Fashion Designer or Writer or whatever, you really have to protect yourself because these big corporations basically don't give a fuck…" (Anonymous Feminist CCI Worker, 2021)

Undoubtably then (though they withheld making these positions visible online), these workers are acutely aware of the limitations of working with corporate brands. Equally, as illustrated by many interviewees sharing the negative experiences of negotiating these dynamics, people in feminist CCIs are generally conscious and critical of the power relations within these working relationships.

"A more realistic model": Cultural work in the post-pandemic, post-austerity landscape

Whilst drawing attention to feminist CCIs' struggles around the power relations of corporate sponsorship, it's also instructive to examine their imaginaries of alternative models, which provide further critical insights into feminist CCI subjectivities in times of crisis. As is common knowledge in CCI research, funding plays an instrumental role in the production processes and labour conditions of cultural work. Public subsidies are especially critical to small and medium sized arts organisations across the 'cultural industries production system' (Pratt, 1997). Unlike larger CCI institutions which supply profit-making physical equipment, infrastructure, facilities and materials, arts organisations like the feminist CCIs have been unevenly impacted by the decades of austerity policies and imposed stringent cuts on publicly funded arts (Banks, 2020). In addition, the pandemic has exacerbated these material pressures, further intensifying the lived economic insecurity, precarious livelihoods, and inequalities experienced within the contemporary cultural workforce. And although government packages such as the Self-Employed Income Support Scheme (SEISS) and Arts Council Culture Recovery Fund were released at the start of the pandemic, this 'safety net' proved to be a net with many holes, leaving thousands of UK freelancers and independent cultural workers unsupported.

All of the feminist CCI workers I interviewed were acutely aware of these issues and conditions. Many articulated their growing fears around the pandemic environment and the ways in which this was devastating their imagined future in these fields. When asked about their experiences applying for the Covid-support packages, however, it quickly became clear the feminist CCIs shared an assumption of the impossibility of attaining public funding. One interviewee who was awarded a grant in June 2020 went into detail about how arduous, complicated, and time-consuming this application was. She told me her time was "better spent elsewhere" (Anonymous Feminist CCI Worker, 2020). Such sensibilities were also reflected in surveys undertaken in April 2020 which revealed UK CCI workers generally felt a lack of clarity around which Covid-relief schemes were available to them. Those CCI workers who did apply for schemes likewise found them to be 'over-complicated and lengthy to access' (Communion & England, 2020). A further barrier was that

because the wider collapse in CCI employment was so extensive, feminist CCIs believed securing Covid-19 governmental grants would be more competitive than ever, thus, not 'worth' the required time and labour of an application.

Another emerging thread was that my interviewees generally conceptualised governmental and local council funding pools as 'unreliable' sources of income. When I asked whether they would make use of public money were it available, 80% of interviewees said this was not only an 'unrealistic' model, but an 'idealistic' one. The common rationale here was that because UK arts funding was assumed to be so scarce, the feminist CCIs saw themselves as better off pursuing alternative income sources through brands and commercial work. This issue is reflective of the wider CCI landscape where decades of austerity cuts have encouraged the cultural sector to rely on their own 'entrepreneurial nous' and 'independent forms of money-making' (Banks, 2020). With this in mind, we can see that some feminist CCIs are now operating independently and outside British cultural funding structures, in arguably more precarious and unsupported ways. Moreover, the often-vocalised disagreements with the Conservative party appears to have evoked a general distrust and disillusionment with the contemporary State amongst feminist CCI workers. Most of the interviewees told me they resisted engaging with a government who "did not represent their concerns" and favoured working with brands who "aligned with their values" (Anonymous Feminist CCI Worker, 2021). One interviewee explained:

> "I don't like the government very much, they don't really get much right…
> In an ideal world, with a lovely government, yeah, I would say that everyone gets a nice chunk of money. But it's not realistic…" (Anonymous Feminist CCI Worker, 2022)

Another interviewee built on this point, further illustrating this question around money, ethics, and political imaginaries amongst these workers:

> "And I know some people try to do ethical funding, but like, money itself is never going to be ethical…. like the whole thing, the whole system and everything is so problematic. The wrong people have had the money for the longest time for the wrong reasons… you're never going to fix that, so just take the money!!" (Anonymous Feminist CCI worker, 2022)

She went on to extend and complicate this issue:

> "I mean, if I sent an email to Jeff Bezos and said: "can I have a million?". And he's like "yeah, here you go"! I'm not gonna be like, "no thank you!!"… like he has *too* much!! And I deserve it!??" (Anonymous Feminist CCI Worker, 2022)

It is abundantly clear within these articulations that feminist CCIs have a knotty and complicated relationship towards funding their work. In addition, these articulated struggles resonate with the wider complications and questions the phenomenon of Freelance Feminism evokes: 'what new constellations now materialise at this intersection of feminism and entrepreneurialism?' (Curran-Troop, H, Gill, R, & Littler, J 2023). On the one hand, feminist CCIs display such an entrepreneurial sensibility where they position themselves as 'deserving' the corporate money of those in elitist positions. Yet, in ways, they are also critical of these systems of unequal wealth more generally. Further, and as they problematised these monetary systems within the interviews, there was also a sense that they saw themselves as powerless to effect or restructure these forms. Rather, these workers voiced their practice of collaborating with brands as pragmatism, endeavouring to utilise the resources available to them within the existing framework:

> I think it's difficult because we live in a capitalist system, so in the end, it needs to exist at the same time (Anonymous Feminist CCI worker, 2021)

Another interviewee reflected this:

> "That's the thing about our society, you fucking need money… we need to survive!" (Anonymous Feminist CCI worker, 2021)

Additionally, and in contrast, one interviewee expressed a more hopeful and opportunistic stance by outlining the ways commercial funding provided them the autonomy to pursue their work:

> "If these people are going to give us money, we're doing to take it, and let's use it to do something good…it's better the work gets done than not at all" (Anonymous Feminist CCI worker, 2021)

Undoubtably then, the current conditions in the UK CCI present a predicament for feminist CCI work and subjectivity. The exacerbated risk and uncertainty characterising their CCI working conditions (Communian & England, 2020), alongside their assumed absence of UK social security, wholeheartedly evokes heightened pressures to the ways feminist CCIs approach their work. Some of the feminist CCIs also envisage branded sponsorship as a means through which they can continue to work throughout these difficult conditions. These contrasting positions, alongside the broader ambivalence towards effecting structural change, no doubt plays an instrumental role in the contradictory reactions of feminist CCIs towards the pandemic and ongoing experiences of precarity.

What next? The imagined futures of feminist creative and cultural work

In attempting to understand the *significance* and *meaning* of the contrasting reactions detailed in this article, it is useful to conceptualise the feminist CCIs as a microcosm for the broader patterns that have prevailed (and continue to prevail) in the wake of Covid-19. Their initial responses are particularly resonant with the wider 'discursive explosions of care' and togetherness that has permeated into many sectors of public life since the beginning of the pandemic (The Care Collective, 2020). And although such rhetoric was widely circulated across the pandemic's initial moments, the feminist CCIs' shift towards commercial and consumer-driven models speaks towards the broader fusing of 'COVID-19, capitalism and consumer culture' which has expanded since March 2020 (Sobande, 2020; 2022). In this way, 'commodified notions of connection, care and community in times of crisis' can be also be seen through feminist CCIs' commercial restructuring around these exact themes (Sobande, 2020, The Care Collective, 2020). In addition, we can also consider the commercial interest of brands in feminist CCs - particularly amidst the wider cultural pandemic backdrop of 'we're all in this together', mutual aid initiatives, and 'lean on me' discourses - as a specific moment in which these corporate bodies are paying more attention to smaller, grassroots initiatives with social causes. As Sobande articulately argues in her book *Consuming Crisis*, brands now claim to care (Sobande, 2022). This, compounded with feminist CCIs' rising fears around the 'testing circumstances' plus assumed impossibility of public funding, arguably positions feminist CCIs in such a quandary where they feel they've little alternatives than to accept these funding pools.

These pressing conditions are indeed indicative of the existing CCI research around self-employment, resilience, and "sustaining yourself through difficult circumstances" (Communian and England, 2020:117). Moreover, the ways in which feminist CCIs describe their current working conditions as 'surviving' and 'struggling to keep the doors open' is distinctly reflective of the 'resilience' and 'adaptability' models materialising in the wake of the 2008 economic crisis. Beirne et al's 2017 study vividly describes the personal costs of these kinds of approaches:

> […] These artists and communities were surviving rather than prospering. They were passionately frustrated rather than assuredly transformative, resigned to exploiting gaps and opportunities, with a resilience that was often difficult to sustain and which took them on an emotional rollercoaster (Beirne et al., 2017: 217)

Likewise, the Covid conditions between 2020 and 2021 forced feminist CCIs to adapt their existing ways of working in order to sustain themselves in unpredictable times. In turn, the feminist CCIs displayed such a resourcefulness indicative of the wider shift and *push* towards neoliberal, entrepreneurial CCI working cultures during and in the wake of the pandemic. Their awareness of the difficult circumstances, yet experienced pressures to economically 'survive', seemingly overthrow any imagined possibilities of meaningful or concrete structural change for feminist CCIs. Further, it is clear some feminist CCI workers conceptualise the CCIs as durable and adaptable enough to inevitability weather this ongoing crisis:

> It's very difficult but art and culture have always found a way to survive, and I think that's what gives me hope about covid and all the things that it's affected. And I know that a lot of venues have shut down, and things have ceased to exist, but they'll pop back up again and find a way because they always do...(Anonymous feminist CCI, 2021)

With this in mind, we can see that the perceived scarcity of the lockdowns of 2020 and 2021 drove some of these organisations towards more resilient, opportunistic, and individualistic strategies. And although the core empirical data of this project stretches up until 2021, and thus, these events form the argument of this article, many of the organisations have since continued to use the platformised and commercial models even after the initial pandemic urgency has eased 'post-pandemic'. In drawing attention to these developments, it is clear the pandemic worked as a catalyst for the contrasting and contradictory responses around activism, resistance, and care, and later, of

increased entrepreneurialism and individualised ways of surviving. Simultaneously, the pandemic has deepened and intensified the structural conditions of precarity that existed across these areas prior to the lockdowns. It is in this space that we are seeing this form of 'freelance feminism' emerge. Moreover, in this form of 'freelance feminism', a new negotiation and entanglement between activism, feminism, and entrepreneurialism prevails, a paradox which has been particularly exacerbated during and in the aftermath the Covid-19 pandemic.

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