

The Resilience and Adaptability of an Innovative Ecosystem of Creative Entrepreneurs during Crisis Times: Baltic Creative CIC – A Case Study

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Abstract

This empirical chapter explores the case of *Baltic Creative Community Interest Company*, a creative hub that enabled and demonstrated intrapersonal entrepreneurial capitals (Pret, Shaw and Drakopoulou Dodd 2016) to adapt quickly and develop novel offers for their tenants during an unprecedented period of crisis and change in the wider ecosystem.

Baltic Creative CIC is a community owned property development company established to regenerate an underused post-industrial area in Liverpool and support the Creative and Digital community. Over the past decade, they have become a creative hub where small, unique micro businesses thrive alongside more established enterprises.

Using an organisational ethnographic approach, we highlight the complexity in the conversion of entrepreneurial capitals and how this has demonstrated resilience and adaptability in the *CIC* during the global coronavirus pandemic in the 2020s. During the first coronavirus lockdown in 2020, they responded swiftly to tenants by providing a wide variety of business support initiatives. Regular communications on sector specific Covid-19 operational guidance and a support programme to help tenants apply for Liverpool City Council Small Business Support grants.

The establishment of this hub for creative entrepreneurs prior to the recent disruption proved invaluable. Although they were severely tested, emerging behaviours were identified, agility, adaptability, and resilience during periods of crisis. This chapter offers key insights for scholars and those leading on creative hubs and cluster policy development and economic initiatives for creative sector support regionally, nationally, and internationally.

Introduction

Given the unavoidable impact of the global coronavirus pandemic, it has and will continue to have a profound effect on every organisation including the creative sector. As Walmsley, Gilmore, O'Brien and Torreggiani (2021, p.4) noted "...the pandemic has impacted the creative and cultural industries more globally and traumatically than any other crisis in living memory. It has wrought a seismic shock across the cultural sector in particular."

This chapter explores the resilience and adaptability of an innovative hub of creative entrepreneurs during crisis times in Liverpool, UK. Its contribution is its contemporary insights of the creative industries applicable to practitioners, policy makers and academics as identified by Khlystova et al (2022).

Through an organisational ethnographic approach, the research seeks to identify activities of intrapersonal entrepreneurial capital conversions, the interactions and experiences between *Baltic Creative CIC* and their tenants and the significance of being part of a resilient and adaptable creative ecosystem.

The Liverpool Context

The late 20th Century urban decline, regeneration, and subsequent renaissance of the northern city of Liverpool in the UK has been well documented, with commentary and critique from a variety of perspectives and scholars, most recently Campbell, 2019; Couch & Fowles, 2019; Heap *et al.*, 2017; Thompson *et al.*, 2019. Since the 1990s, large scale structural developments and funds such as ERDF (European Regional Development Fund) helped to refurbish buildings and upgrade infrastructure in Liverpool. However, this appeared to have been to the detriment of local clusters and creative ecosystems and resulted in fragmented creative entrepreneurial communities across the city. An urban landscape is not just physical assets, its social and cultural capital are equally important for it to thrive. Ragozino (2016) suggests that a social enterprise business model, with a hybrid approach to profit and purpose – such as a Community Interest Company (CIC) is well suited to nurture and sustain relationships among people as well as between people in the urban landscape.

Baltic Creative Community Interest Company (referred to as '*the CIC*') was established in 2009 and quickly became a hub for the Creative and Digital community to coalesce. Through a grant funding agreement with the Northwest Development Agency and ERDF *the CIC* received just under £5m to purchase and refurbish a site with a remit to regenerate the area, by creating the much-needed environment for the creative and digital sector to grow.

By 2012 *the CIC* had refurbished 18 warehouses (45,000 sq ft) and developed a central hub with a café. This satisfied growing market demand and allowed a variety of small companies from creative and digital sector to come together. The CIC was a key driver in reviving the area now known as the Baltic Triangle, importantly the buildings were owned by the community through an asset lock and represented by a board of trustees who retained control. This empowered them to make a permanent change to the creative infrastructure on behalf of the community. The local authority, commercial property owners and speculators could not increase rents or move the community on once the area became more inviting and affluent. A practice seen many times before in the global north, post-industrial areas though regeneration and gentrification involving artists and creatives (Valli, 2021).

By 2020 the CIC housed over 180 businesses with 650 employees and had extended its footprint in the area to over 120,000 sq. ft alongside many more businesses in the adjacent streets and buildings. With a management team of five people and a non-executive voluntary board of eight members the CIC draws on a wide range of skill sets to ensure the original vision of the CIC is maintained.

In March 2020, the global coronavirus pandemic forced the closure of indoor public spaces, offices, and communal workspaces and those who could work from home were required to do so by law (Johnson, 2020). Only essential workers were allowed to travel and enter their workplace, people who could not work from home were supported by the UK governments furlough scheme or later the Self-Employed Income Support Scheme (SEISS). The government directive posed a huge challenge to the *CIC*, from the perspective of a public health crisis, duty of care and safety to staff and tenants, but also operationally as the core revenue stream was generated through rental income from the community of creative entrepreneurs. This paper will now explore how the management approach and tenants used their entrepreneurial capitals to continue to work together in the ecosystem.

Literature / Theoretical Framing

The popularity of hubs and clustering in the cultural field has led to multiple forms and scales of clusters being developed (Cooke, 2008; Picard & Karlsson, 2011; Pratt, 2004, 2021; Mommaas, 2004; Wen, 2018). The development of creative clusters in vacant factory buildings and warehouses driven by local authorities' desire to repopulate and regenerate inner city spaces has led to innovative forms of clusters that act as physical hubs for creative practitioners. These physical hubs allow creative entrepreneurs to form their own unique ecosystems while at the same time remaining part of the wider creative ecosystem (Pratt, 2021).

The exploration of the cultural and creative industries using ecological thinking has been growing in recent years (de Bernard, Comunian & Gross, 2021). Although terminology is still being debated, in this study the ecosystem is defined as “all ...[actors] in a particular area considered in relation to their physical environment” (Hornby & Cowie, 1995 cited in de Bernard *et al.*, 2021, p.9) with the ecosystem being the object of study. In this ecosystem importance is placed on the relations among actors (Foster, 2020) and the ecosystem is described as “a developing set of interconnections and interdependencies” amongst the actors (Gross & Wilson, 2019, p.7). Different creative physical hubs and ecosystems are configured to suit diverse needs (Avidikos & Pettas, 2021; Jiménez & Zheng, 2021; Lee *et al.*, 2019; Virani & Gill, 2019). As identified by Mert (2019) some creative physical hubs and ecosystems are created with a community and social focus and *the CIC* is an example of this.

It is proposed here that as tenants agree to rent a space in *the CIC* (a creative hub) they also form part of a unique creative ecosystem, they have chosen to become members of that specific field (Bourdieu, 1993). For a creative hub to form, develop and survive an appreciation of how that specific ecosystem of actors operates is needed (Pratt, 2021). This includes how the processes and practices between the management and the various actors within the ecosystem operate. During periods of crisis these structures, processes and practices need to be rigorous enough to support the ecosystem but also adaptive enough to be able to change to meet unplanned for circumstances. The ability of the ecosystem to respond to both internal and external changes not only in periods of crisis but also post crisis are crucial factors for the long-term success and viability of the ecosystem.

At an individual actor level during periods of crisis an individual’s self-efficacy, that is an individual’s belief in the personal capability to accomplish a job or a specific set of tasks, will be tested in unforeseen ways (Bandura, 1977; Gist & Mitchell, 1992; McGee, Peterson, Mueller and Sequeria, 2009). The individual’s choices, level of effort and perseverance may be influenced and supported by being part of a functioning creative ecosystem rather than operating alone (Chen, Gully & Eden, 2004).

Using Bourdieu’s (1990) approach to practice theory and drawing on the research from Pret, Shaw and Dodd (2016) relating to intrapersonal entrepreneurial capitals and capital conversions, the types of capitals and how they were combined prior to, during and post crisis was explored in detail. Entrepreneurial capitals defined by Hill (2021, p.101) as “...only those aspects of capitals brought into doing business” can be categorised into economic, social, symbolic, and cultural capitals and can be converted into distinct types of capital by combining various capitals together.

Economic capital, for example financial assets, can be “...immediately and directly convertible into money” (Bourdieu 1986, p.242). Although important, economic capital is only one type of capital that is required in entrepreneurial practice and as Hill (2021, p.100) states there are a “...wide variety of capitals [are] involved in creative production.”

Cultural capital presents itself in three forms objectified, institutionalised and embodied behaviour. Cultural capital objectified in material objects and media is transmissible in its materiality (Bourdieu 1986). In institutional form cultural capital is objectified into qualifications and skills training. In terms of cultural capital in an embodied state and it presupposes embodiment and “...implies a labor of inculcation and assimilation, costs time, time which must be invested personally by the investor” (Bourdieu, 1986, p.244), for example the work experience of entrepreneurs.

Social capital is defined by Bourdieu (1986, p.248) as “...the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition.” It refers to an individual’s network of social exchange relations and is the sum of all actual and potential resources that can be accessed through a durable network of relationships.

Symbolic capital has been defined by Bourdieu (1984, p.291) as “...a reputation for competence and an image of respectability and honorability.” Individuals can draw on and can be associated with the possession of prestige, status and positive reputation.

Although the different types of capitals can be seen as being distinct, they can be converted into other types of capital. For example, social capital can be converted into cultural capital through the process of relational learning. Social capital into symbolic capital through the affiliation with reputable others can create a spill-over effect, while association with unreliable partners can impede reputation-building (Hill, 2021). Symbolic capital can be converted into social and cultural capital by facilitating access to social networks and exclusive education (Pret *et al.*, 2016). The conversion of capitals is not an automatic process and as Bourdieu (1986, p.253) notes it should be taken “...into account both the labor-time accumulated in the form of capital and the labor-time needed to transform it from one type into another.” During the process of conversion “...the (apparent) incommensurability of the different types of capital introduces a high degree of uncertainty into all transactions between holders of different types” and this uncertainty can increase the risk of loss of capital during the process of conversion (Bourdieu 1986, pp.253-254).

By defining the actors within the creative physical hub and ecosystem as individual and group entrepreneurs who have consciously agreed to work collaboratively as part of that ecosystem allows these actions to relationally create entrepreneurial capitals through situated practices which can be developed and adapted over time (Reid, 2020).

Methods

Organisational ethnography provides insights and pays attention to the complexity of everyday life in organisations – in this study it is within the creative hub known as Baltic Creative CIC. This method also considers how the CIC is positioned in the ecosystem - the wider political, cultural, social, spatial and temporal dimensions and the activities and interactions that shape entrepreneurial activity. This approach allowed us to move beyond accounts which frame an organisation or enterprise as pre-ordained, ready-to-use or a decontextualised business model. (Watson, 2011). We used this approach to gather data as one of the co-authors is a founder director, now Chair of *the CIC* and positioned in the organisation throughout the pandemic.

Data Collection and Analysis

As an exploratory study, this qualitative approach is iterative and flexible, it captured both the lived experience of the crisis through two key interviews with the Chair in 2022, her reflections of the organisational response and analysis of the activities published by *the CIC* on the website. Engagement with data was a cyclical process, where data collection, analysis and interpretation often took place concurrently. Using template analysis (King, 2012; Waring & Wainwright, 2008) encouraged data generation at the same time as reviewing literature, so the most relevant and meaningful theoretical framework was identified early on. These preliminary findings were captured in a table outlining first order concepts and then second order themes, a similar approach used by Hill (2021). This gave a sense of the relationships emerging which we then considered to be the ‘capital conversions’ between the four entrepreneurial capitals (economic, social, cultural, and symbolic). We then applied the capital conversions theoretical framework devised by Pret, Shaw and Drakopoulou Dodd (2016) to form the discussion section.

We are mindful to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the tenants, the findings, data, and quotes are from an organisational perspective (intrapersonal) - management reflections rather than tenant feedback directly between each other (interpersonal). The intention is to add to a growing body of research and learn from the crisis to create stronger more resilient creative communities rather than a tenant narrative at this stage (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004).

Findings

The data collected suggests new activities and behaviours in *the CIC*, both from management and tenants as a direct response to the pandemic (first order concepts). Drawn from that are six 2nd order themes of operational and strategic activity managed by the CIC. This allowed us to identify the entrepreneurial capital conversions, and from that we identified the core activities that relate to resilience and adaptability of the CIC. See table 1

First order concepts	Second order themes (Operational and strategic activity managed by the CIC)	Capital conversions (Pret et al 2016)
Formal and experienced management structure (CIC) UK Government compliance Physical and communal space and safety - public health Asset and building closure (lockdown) Covid support strategy Operational guidance	1) Operational compliance and guidance RESILIENCE	cultural x social: <i>management skills and knowledge were combined with existing strong relationships to keep tenants and staff safe and regularly updated.</i>
Letting strategy and tenant turnover Information / data gathering Tenant survey Staff furlough / redundancy Working from Home	2) Understanding tenant behaviour RESILIENCE	cultural x economic: <i>management knowledge of government and financial support (furlough scheme etc) was used to spotlight cash flow challenges for CIC and tenants.</i>
New product development Tenant activity and innovation Shift to digital / online offers	3) Innovation, opportunity, and change ADAPTABILITY	cultural x symbolic: <i>tenant skills, digital innovative practice as well as a strong sector reputation combined to enable tenants to adapt and innovate as lockdowns continued.</i>
CIC led regular communication statements with tenants Website updates / slack / emails BLM statement Messaging - tenants shift to offer online services and new market offers	4) Communication from the CIC ADAPTABILITY	symbolic x social: <i>a solid sector reputation and a strong network were combined to communicate tenant services as lockdowns continued, enabling tenants to test the market and develop new products and income streams (economic).</i>

<p>External relationships with support agencies Local authority (Liverpool City Council) LCR CA European Hub toolkit</p>	<p>5) Local and regional partnerships and advocacy</p> <p>ADAPTABILITY</p>	<p>social x cultural: <i>a strong network and sector reputation created an opportunity for entrepreneurial learning (cultural) and dissemination / knowledge sharing and reinforcing symbolic capital.</i></p>
<p>Access to government financial support LA Small business support grants £10k CBILS and payment ‘holidays’ Furlough /SEISS Deferral of VAT and other payments</p> <p>Rental income – voids and non-payment of rent Legal action</p>	<p>6) Government financial support and internal cash flow / revenue generation</p> <p>RESILIENCE</p>	<p><i>economic x cultural: financial support (furlough and grants) and the skills to apply this to the management of the CIC</i></p> <p><i>economic x social: tenant income streams guided by the CIC and the ability to disseminate this to the network created an opportunity for cash flow and avoided some rent arrears.</i></p>

Table 1: Coding Scheme – Actions and Conversions of Capital relating to resilience and adaptability

Discussion

The findings clearly demonstrate resilient and adaptable behaviour as a response to the pandemic. In unprecedented circumstances the value of being part of an agile creative hub and ecosystem is clear. All actors, whether they were tenants, part of the management team or on the non-executive voluntary board harnessed, developed, and consolidated their entrepreneurial capitals efficiently and effectively for the benefit of both individuals and the collective whole. To achieve these multiple forms of capital conversions were identified, and these have been discussed further below.

Resilience

Evidence of resilience can be found in the capital conversions of three key areas of the six themes as discussed below. The formation of the Baltic Creative CIC prior to the COVID pandemic and the established practices that had been embedded prior to the crisis period had allowed them to form a robust physical hub and ecosystem. The reactivity of the creative ecosystem as a whole and the roles which the various members played demonstrated the connected nature of the ecosystem and these connections remained resilient and adaptable to change to suit the ecosystem’s needs (Gross & Wilson, 2019). With the closure of the physical hub the CIC members needed to move all practices online and rely on the capitals of individual and group members of the ecosystem to provide guidance, leadership and solutions to challenges based on various capital conversions (Pret et al., 2016).

Operational Compliance and Guidance: Keeping Trading (Theme 1)

Cultural capital was developed in several ways. New specialised knowledge was obtained, efficiently gathered from external expert sources by the management team and collated via a central online platform. The ability of the CIC to act as a hub allowed it to react quickly to changing advice, this meant that consistency was maintained, all information was kept up to date and tenants were confident that

their focus could remain on their own specific organisation's operational needs during a highly turbulent time.

"It was essential that we did everything we could to communicate with tenants quickly when the [lockdown] news broke and a couple of weeks later our survey showed how important and reassuring this was to many of the tenants." Operations Manager

Online COVID guidance was provided one week before lockdown commenced on 23rd March, preparing as well as possible the tenants and community for the change to come. The online platform was accessible to all and provided support and links. A safety guidance booklet for tenants around office working and using communal spaces safely was created, updated, and re-distributed each time restrictions changed. The CIC was involved with the 2021 UK Government testing initiative to provide tenants with lateral flow testing kits, again position themselves a head of the changing covid landscape.

Understanding Tenant Behaviour: Adapting to Suit Tenants Needs (Theme 2)

As the operating conditions changed it was vital that the CIC understood changing tenants needs. As the physical hub of the CIC closed due to Government compliance the ecosystem was maintained digitally using online social meetups and events that provided information on specific COVID support, for example, local grant funding and a four-part series for tenants returning the workplace in partnership with a local social enterprise.

"We helped micro businesses and artists, [with tenancy agreements below the local council business rates threshold] apply for a £10k grant. If they hadn't been with us at the CIC they may not have been entitled to it and it had a significant impact on the community economy (estimated £900k) this was a massive support for people when their incomes disappeared without knowing when things would change". Operations Manager

Regular tenant surveys were undertaken to identify the challenges, allowing the CIC to mitigate for potential non-payment of rents and assuring the board that *the CIC* remained financially viable. Responding to demand from both management and tenants' health and wellbeing support was provided with free online health and wellbeing sessions including Pilates being provided.

To build resilience, existing management cultural capital was converted into both social and cultural capital to keep tenants safe. What would have previously been physical interactive relationships became strong online interactions. The tenants' financial situations were considered when making decisions for *the CIC* as a whole (Bourdieu, 1986)

Government Financial Support, Internal Cash Flow and Revenue Generation: Maximising the Financials (Theme 6)

Prior to the COVID pandemic, the CIC Board had strong economic capital, shown the ability to competently manage its finances, including accessing European and UK funding, since its inception. The very formation of the CIC was built on a financial model that considered the need to efficiently bid for such funding. This historical reputation for financial competency reputation was heavily drawn upon during the COVID pandemic. Support with accessing funding, a recognition of various tenants' financial viability during specific time periods and the ability to communicate with funders proved to be vital for many tenants to remain viable during this challenging period. The ability for tenants to confidently gain support in financial matters allowed tenants to place much of their focus on keeping their own organisations viable and ensure their products and services were adapted to suit the customers' needs.

Online workshops were held that ensured that tenants were up to date with local grant funding initiatives and regular surveys were held to ensure that any challenges tenants were facing were captured and any potential problems for the *Baltic Creative CIC*, for example non-payment of rents

were identified as soon as possible so that planning could be undertaken to mitigate for circumstances were possible.

“We shifted the ‘Baltic Brew’ get togethers online – the first one was really about bringing people together and checking in, we managed to share some great advice about financial planning, grants and wanted to create an environment for peer-to-peer engagement.” Marketing Manager

Many tenants were eligible for a small business ‘Local Restrictions Support Grant’ of £10,000 issued by the local authority but for several reasons the application was considered difficult to navigate. Working with the City Council rates office the *CIC* helped tenants secure the grant which helped with fixed costs like rent and electricity.

Economic capital was also converted into cultural and social capital by the increased knowledge gained relating to financial support and by the ability to share tenant stories of success despite cash flow problems (Bourdieu, 1986).

Adaptability

As well as building resilience the efficient conversion of capitals also allowed *the CIC* to adapt to new opportunities. Evidence of adaptability can be found in three key areas of the six themes as discussed below. Existing cultural capital was harnessed to innovate and change which provided a high level of symbolic capital for both individual actors within the *CIC* and for the *CIC* as a whole operating in the ecosystem (Bourdieu, 1986). This increased level of symbolic capital has been maintained post pandemic restrictions as the buildings are fully let in 2022, despite a reluctance for many other sectors to return to the workplace.

Existing symbolic capital was also converted into social capital so that new services were communicated effectively, and social capital was converted into cultural capital by the building of a strong reputations that the Baltic Creative *CIC*’s creative ecosystem was innovative, reactive, supportive, vibrant and willing to share their entrepreneurial learning (Bourdieu, 1986). This reputation, and thus the symbolic capital, continues to be developed with a healthy rate of enquiries from potential new tenants and new opportunities for collaborations with the wider creative ecosystem being further developed post pandemic.

Innovation, Opportunity, and Change: (Theme 3)

Turbulent times created an uncertain business environment and forced tenants to adapt to survive. With over 50% of tenants innovating, this became an important focus for the *CIC* management to support. To ensure this was effective the *CIC* broadened its contacts and network creating events online with partners.

“Before the pandemic we had over 1000 visitors coming to see us in Liverpool and we missed those connections and wanted to reach out to other people and places. We designed series of events with Ethos magazine (a tenant) – it helped us to reflect and consider where we could be in the future, they were really inspiring, and these global partnerships and visits are starting up again” Chair

Communication from the CIC: Strong Communications Both Internally and Externally (Theme 4)

It was vital that there remained efficient internal and external communications. A key priority of the *CIC* was the further development of the online communication systems. As a collective with strong social roots face-to-face communication supported by online support had always been the standard operating model. However, with the need to reduce unnecessary socialisation and strict social distancing rules put into place nationally the *CIC* management team and board had to convert all their communications online. With high levels of digital literacy within the *CIC* all communications were

transferred online by the marketing manager with support from an external PR agency. This led to multiple award nominations and awards for tenants and CIC from BIMA and Liverpool City Region Combined Authority. Greater use of digital communications also enabled the CIC to issue important public statements. Good news stories were shared internally and externally, and good practice shared with the wider creative community.

Local and Regional Partnerships and Advocacy: Connecting the Networks Online and Powerful Advocacy (Theme 5)

The UK Government imposed lockdown restrictions on all non-essential businesses in the UK. This meant that for most organisations all networking with partners, whether local, regional, national, or international, was transferred online. To ensure that tenants were supported effectively the CIC team explored numerous resources and networks that were available online and consolidated information on the main CIC website.

The use of existing networks such as the European Creative Hubs Network (ECHN) also allowed the learning and support created by the Baltic Creative CIC to be shared with the wider ECHN so that mutual learning and understanding could be gained as the CIC responded to challenges that emerged because of the pandemic.

Advocacy was also used to show solidarity with critical issues such as the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020. This also led to several strategic decisions being made by the CIC

“It was important to the board to make a public statement on BLM in 2020, not just to show solidarity but to be held accountable by our creative community and make a real commitment and change in 2021 and beyond...Strategic decisions such as developing an EDI policy and embedding it in practice also took place. As we emerge from the pandemic, so are our partnerships – Taste Ramadan. What we learn as a CIC and as we work with different partners, we share that with tenants.” Chair

Online network events highlighted professional business services such as legal, Health & Safety etc, the Kickstarter scheme support: supporting young people into the workplace and sector-specific opportunities: BIMA bespoke affiliate membership for tenants with access to awards programmes, conferences, and training. The combination of symbolic capital and social capital ensured that the CIC adapted to a changing ecosystem remained a hub for its community to coalesce around.

Conclusions

To date the analysis of the capital conversions in the CIC has only been undertaken at an intrapersonal level (Pret et al., 2016). To explore if and how specific capital conversions occurred, and continue to occur, on an interpersonal level (Hill, 2021) further research is needed that focuses specifically on individuals with the creative hub and ecosystem.

Baltic Creative CIC is a creative hub within a wider ecosystem in which the physical hub is the buildings, and the ecosystem is the actors the types of capital that were converted during a period of unprecedented disruption can be analysed in detail.

The efficient conversion of capitals allowed the CIC to not only remain resilient but to also adapt, change and pivot during a period when all actors were being severely tested. Despite these challenging times key learnings have been made. The CIC focused on being ‘as safe a space as possible’. One of the key learnings is the resilience and adaptability of the actors came from the fact that they saw themselves as an identifiable creative ecosystem. They looked out for each other, and it was the

conversion of their capitals that kept that ecosystem healthy. This was evident when the physical hub had to close, and they ecosystem pivoted quickly online.

It should be noted that data was collected only during the pandemic period and further research will be needed to explore how the creative hub and ecosystem adapts and changes in the future. The conceptualisation of a cluster of creative entrepreneurs as its own distinct creative hub and ecosystem offers the potential of further research as the agility of such ecosystems to adapt to changing circumstances could offer an interesting contribution when considering the development of thriving creative communities in the future.

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