

# Privilege and Practice— Challenges for Doctoral Education in Art and Design

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## Abstract

Increasingly, doctoral education is being challenged to reflect and act on issues of access and equity. I argue that in art and design the expanding doctoral expectations and emphasis on doctoral community impact the multiple and intersectional concerns around diversity, equity and belonging that urgently need to be acknowledged and addressed. The benefits of community are widely acknowledged in the literature on doctoral education, and it is increasingly recognised that there are specific nuances to the needs of practice research doctoral communities. Prompted by insights from interviews with art and design doctoral researchers, I examine available data on participation in doctoral research in art and design in the United Kingdom in conjunction with literature on doctoral education and practice research. My aim is to highlight concerns relating to privilege and belonging in art and design doctorates that should make us increasingly uncomfortable. I believe that as a community art and design in higher education urgently needs to actively consider these issues. As well as indicating the necessity for further research, I argue that conversations are needed to devise and advocate for more inclusive and culturally responsive doctoral education specific to the needs of practice research in art and design.

## Keywords

doctoral belonging, practice research, privilege, PhD resources

## Introduction and context

Across the world, doctoral education continues to expand and universities are awarding increasing numbers of PhDs. This is accompanied by growing recognition in academia of the different forms that knowledge generation and articulation can

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take in different disciplines and that creative practice can be the mode, method, tool, object, subject and/or embodiment of research in the doctorate (Vaughan 2021a). Practice research is therefore also growing in prevalence at doctoral level (Vear *et al.* 2021) leading Wilson and van Ruiten to claim that there has been a massification of doctoral education in the arts (Wilson & Van Ruiten 2014). The growth in doctoral education, while welcome, has increased attention to some of its challenges. The benefits of community are widely acknowledged in the literature on doctoral education (Wisker *et al.* 2007; McAlpine & Amundsen 2009; Mantai 2019) and it is increasingly recognised that there are specific nuances to the needs of practice research doctoral communities (Batty *et al.* 2020; Vaughan 2021b). The disciplinary context for the challenges of doctoral provision in relation to mental health (Levecque *et al.* 2017; Mackie & Bates 2019) has been acknowledged, noting that many doctoral researchers in art and design are facing the axiological and ontological challenges of becoming a researcher in the academy alongside maintaining an established identity as an artist or designer (Collinson 2005; Hockey 2008; Ings 2022).

The growth in doctoral education has also highlighted systemic barriers in the higher education sector. The *Broken Pipeline* report (Williams *et al.* 2019) challenged doctoral education in the United Kingdom (UK) to reflect and act on issues of equity specifically in relation to race, with a particular focus on strengthening the academic pipeline for Black students from African Caribbean backgrounds and access to funding for doctoral study from the national research councils forming UKRI (UK Research and Innovation). Tate and Bagguley introduced a special issue of the journal *Race Ethnicity and Education* on 'Building the Antiracist University' (Tate & Bagguley 2017) to reinforce the point out not all students are equally served by the education system in the United Kingdom. They highlighted how the persistence of racism and discrimination as well as the unbalanced allocation of resources and opportunities in schools that perpetuate class distinctions both disproportionately impact on students from low-income backgrounds and from racialised minorities in terms of access and achievement. In this paper, I demonstrate how the specific requirements of a practice research doctorate in art and design exemplify, and arguably amplify, the challenges that unequal access to opportunities and resources pose to equitable, culturally responsive doctoral education.

My interest in viewing doctoral education in art and design through a lens of inclusivity, equity and diversity was prompted by insights from interviews I carried out with practice researchers studying for art and design doctorates. It is important to acknowledge the specific context of these interviews. I undertook a small-scale qualitative research project investigating the experiences of practice-based doctoral researchers in trying to maintain their research during the COVID-19 global pandemic and lockdowns in the United Kingdom (Vaughan 2021c). Semi-structured interviews were carried out in autumn 2021 with doctoral researchers in art and design in one university in the United Kingdom ( $n < 10$ ). Participants were self-selecting following an open call. As the initial research focus was on the experiential with a practical aim to enhance future provision, questions centred on the topics of online supervision, professional development activity and changes in their creative practice resulting from lack of access to campus. Participants included EU, home and overseas doctoral researchers and there was also diversity in their modes and stage of study: with those studying full-time and part-time; those self-funding and those on funded studentships; those in the first year, middle and final years of doctoral projects when the pandemic hit in 2020. First

familiarising myself with the data through the process of verbatim transcription, I then used an inductive approach to reflexive thematic analysis that adopted a realist, semantic view (Braun & Clarke 2006) of their responses as reflecting the reality of their pandemic experiences. I generated themes around ingenuity and resilience in adapting creative practice, problematical relationships with the online spaces, and the importance of the spaces and language of practice (Vaughan 2021c).

While the initial research focused on lived experience of doctoral study remotely in a situation of extremis, participant responses from such a range of doctoral researchers repeatedly drew my attention to broader issues in art and design doctoral education. Recognising these as latent themes (Braun & Clarke 2006), I revisited the interview data undertaking a further reflexive thematic analysis from a more critical interpretivist perspective (Braun & Clarke 2021) to recode their responses around costs, care responsibilities and belonging to generate themes around challenging the norms of a doctoral researcher, financial opportunity and privilege. A limitation of the interview data is that participants had not been purposefully sampled and no data had been collected around their gender, age, ethnicity or social-economic background. Nonetheless, the results of my analysis of the interview data served as a jumping-off point and lens through which to revisit the literature and theory around doctoral education and practice research.

In this paper, I examine the available data on doctoral research in art and design in the United Kingdom, and then draw from the interview data using extracts as illustrative prompts in conjunction with the literature on doctoral education and practice research. My paper should not be considered as a traditional report of a research project, but instead as a provocation, with extracts serving as prompts for reflection and catalysts for further thinking and literature threaded throughout. My aim is to highlight some uncomfortable trends and concerns relating to privilege and belonging in art and design doctorates and to prompt further research and discussion.

## Understanding the UK's art and design doctoral population

To consider questions of diversity, equity and belonging in doctoral education in art and design, it is necessary to examine what we know about our doctoral population. In the UK statistical and demographic data on all students in higher education is collected and published annually by HESA, the Higher Education Statistics Agency. For consistency, I have used the published data from 2020/21 academic year (HESA 2022), the same year in which I undertook my interviews. Analysis of student data in relation to doctoral education is complicated by the fact that there are different categorisations used for different HESA datasets, while some do disaggregate doctoral enrolments most use a broader category of postgraduate researchers which includes those on research masters' programmes. It has not therefore been possible for me to focus specifically on enrolled doctoral researchers in using the HESA data to try to understand the art and design doctoral population in the United Kingdom and inferences have to be drawn from the results for the broader category of postgraduate researchers.

Analysis is further complicated by the fact that while there is a single level two subject category of creative arts and design (25-01) in the CAH (Common Aggregation Hierarchy) used in the Higher Education Classification of Subjects adopted by HESA from 2019/20 onwards, the online data can only be filtered by level one or level three categories. The level one CAH25 category of design, and creative and performing arts is much broader including music, dance, drama and performing arts as well as art and design subjects. So, I have combined four level three categories (25.01.01 Creative Arts and Design, 25.01.02 Art, 25.01.03 Design Studies, 25.01.04 Cinematics and Photography) to create my own art and design category (see Table 1). There was no data reported for 2020/21 in the final relevant level 3 sub-category of others in creative arts and design (25-01-05).

So, what can we tell about our art and design postgraduate research population from the HESA data? Generally, the non-science postgraduate research population has a much higher percentage of those over 30 years old at 62 per cent than in the sciences where only a third are aged over 30. In our art and design postgraduate research population over 70 per cent are aged over 30. At 22.2 per cent, nearly a quarter of art and design postgraduate researchers have a known disability, substantially more than the 14 per cent of all postgraduate researchers enrolled in the United Kingdom with known disabled status. There are some significant differences in the data that we do have across the sub-level disciplinary categories that I have grouped together as art and design. Nearly two thirds of postgraduate researchers in art are female, over half are part-time and 83 per cent are aged over 30. While in cinematics and photography on the other hand, the percentage identifying as female drops to just over half, only 28 per cent are part-time and just over half are aged over 30.

The numbers of annual HE qualifiers (awarded students) is published at subject CAH level three and with the specific doctorate research qualification category which shows that a total of 275 doctorates were awarded in art and design in 2020/21 in the United Kingdom. However, data about qualifiers' personal

**TABLE 1** Analysis of HESA personal characteristics data on postgraduate research students enrolled in the art and design subject categories in 2020/21, data source HESA (2022)

	Creative arts & design (25-01-01)	Art (25-01-02)	Design Studies (25-01-03)	Cinematics & photography (25-01-04)	Combined art & design category
Number of pgrs	775	495	490	125	1885
UK domiciled pgrs	72.9%	75.7%	59%	68%	69.7%
Female pgrs	67.7%	64.4%	58.3%	52%	61.9%
Age 30 and over	74.1%	83%	67.3%	56%	73.7%
Part-time pgrs	51.6%	53.4%	36.7%	28%	46.6%
With a known disability	23.2%	23%	19.3%	28%	22.5%

characteristics cannot be filtered online at subject CAH level three to enable analysis of awarded doctorates by ethnicity, gender, age or known disabled status within our subject of art and design. HESA itself may of course have this data, but it is not in the public domain. There is no published HESA data at postgraduate research level that enables any analysis by socio-economic background or more intersectional analysis.

HESA does collect some ethnicity data but only for home-domiciled students, so it is not possible to analyse the ethnicity of the postgraduate research population as a whole. Out of the 1310 home-domiciled postgraduate research enrolments in my art and design group, 82 per cent are recorded as white, more than the 78 per cent average for postgraduate researcher in the non-science subject groupings as a whole. In terms of pipeline, it is 82 per cent white at postgraduate taught and 81 per cent white at undergraduate. Considering the percentage of postgraduate researchers recorded as having a Black ethnic origin, the specific focus of the *Broken Pipeline* report, the 5 per cent at undergraduate level does drop to 3 per cent at postgraduate taught and then rises slightly again to 4 per cent at postgraduate research level. Interestingly the small decreases between undergraduate and postgraduate research level per cents of those recorded as having non-white ethnicities is matched by a corresponding increase in those for whom the data is not known, presumably as they have chosen not to declare it. So the HESA data does not reveal an obvious substantial 'leak' at postgraduate research level in art and design which would be seen as an increase in the percentage of white postgraduate research enrolments, and at 82 per cent white our postgraduate research population is roughly comparable to the government's 2021 census data which shows that 81.7 per cent (48.7 million) of usual residents in England and Wales identified their ethnic group within the high-level 'White' category (OFNS 2022).

Although obviously these are crude statistics, and in many cases an 82 per cent white postgraduate research cohort would not reflect a university's local or regional population. It is not possible to combine HESA with UKRI data sufficiently to enable conclusions about non-white pgrs access to funded studentships, completion or withdrawal rates. The UK Council for Graduate Education did produce a policy briefing in 2020 which showed the correlation between funded PhDs and ethnicity, or rather the per cent of doctoral researchers having no award or financial backing for tuition fees broken down by ethnicity (UKCGE 2020). This shows distinct differences, with white students much less likely to be without funding support than those with Black, Asian or Chinese ethnicities. However, this was not a subject-specific analysis and does not tell us specifically about the nature of financial support for art and design doctoral researchers.

Hancock et al remarked that in UK 'the doctoral data landscape is a mess' in arguing the need for better methods of tracking doctoral access, experiences, and outcomes (Hancock *et al.* 2019, 6). I would agree. It seems notable that in contrast to wealth of data and metrics on undergraduate education there is a lack of robust data on the characteristics, progression and outcomes of doctoral researchers. I find this lack of data both frustrating and concerning. It is frustrating because the provocation of my paper is to focus attention on two issues in relation to art and design doctoral study in which there multiple and intersectional concerns around diversity, equity and belonging. These two issues are doctoral community and doctoral expectations, both of which are underpinned by concerns of privilege.

Concerning, because without inclusion in the data issues of equity and privilege can remain less visible and go unaddressed.

## Being part of doctoral communities

A doctorate entails a contribution to knowledge, and I argue that by default this implies a community. A contribution to knowledge is a contribution to discourse and a community engaging in that discourse. Doctoral researchers are learning how to join and belong to those discourse communities as they are learning how to undertake research. Doctoral researchers need: 'a growing sense of belonging to a scholarly, academic, or research community' (Mantai 2019, 368). In previous research into the effects of the pandemic on practice-based doctorates in creative disciplines (Vaughan 2021c) the interviewees commented on missing out on this sense of belonging and being part of a community while off campus during pandemic lockdowns in the United Kingdom. They identified what they felt that they missed:

I think it's the peer learning that happens informally, and outside the, you know, around the edges of spaces

I think maybe I missed out on is, like, you know, conversations in a corridor or in the PhD room where you can ask an easy question

It's even like seeing another PhD's like practice. I don't think I've actually seen that other than like Instagram (interview participants)

Frick has described doing a doctorate as a process of doctoral becoming that is 'an ontological, epistemological, methodological and axiological concern' (Frick 2011, 127). In art and design, doctoral researchers engaging in practice research are grappling with the epistemology of practice as a form of knowledge and of the inter-relationship of engagements with theory, practice and text as methods in a practice-based methodological approach (Manghani 2021). Seeing examples of how their peers' practice is important for this. They are learning how to frame their creative and research interests in relation to the values and ethics of academic disciplines, frequently challenging the axiology of one or more disciplines through their research. As the interview responses suggest, much of this learning is informal, in the discussions between peers. Often however, the most challenging aspect for our doctoral researchers is the ontology of becoming a researcher in the academy alongside maintaining an established identity as a creative or professional practitioner (Collinson 2005; Hockey 2008; Wisker & Robinson 2014). For doctoral researchers engaging in practice research understanding the relevance of doctoral processes and the requirements of academic research can be particularly challenging and a source of stress precisely because of this ontological challenge. Belonging can be difficult where university systems and processes do not seem to be designed to accommodate practice research (Vaughan 2021a). Peers in the community can answer 'quick questions' and provide reassurance, and often these conversations take place informally and spontaneously around the edges of the more formal doctoral curricula of supervisions,

seminars and presentations. As Newbury has highlighted in arguing for research training specific to doctoral researchers in the creative arts and design, it is imperative that 'the development of research skills takes place as part of an active research culture' (2010, 377). As part of such an active research culture, doctoral researchers engaging in practice research can share experiences, collectively negotiating ontological challenges alongside developing their understandings of the epistemological, methodological and axiological positioning of practice research. To put it more simply, feeling part of a community can provide reassurance as well as opportunities to test out ideas and learn from others.

There are clearly significant benefits to building and supporting community among doctoral researchers as part of a practice research community. However, reflecting on the pandemic with art and design doctoral researchers highlighted for me some of the normative assumptions that underpin these arguments for community in the doctoral experience. These normative assumptions are being challenged in relation to the doctoral experiences of those studying remotely in distance learning modes where it is increasingly recognised that there is a need to:

Question some of the norms that surround the 'doctoral researcher'. Lots of these norms function to reproduce a 'young, independent, mobile, unencumbered' ideal of the doctoral student. Many of our doctoral cohorts are much more diverse than this. This means students cannot necessarily attend events or meetings during school-pick up time or spend long periods of time away from those for whom they care. (Burford 2021)

Remembering the HESA data, significant proportions of our art and design postgraduate researchers are aged over 30, female, part-time and/or have disabilities—all factors that correlate with increased likelihoods of care responsibilities or lives outside university that limit their ability to come onto campus. Digital online or hybrid provision for doctoral communities can be one way to be more inclusive but is not a panacea. To return to my interview data, one comment in particular suggests that online is not accessible for all in ways that might not be immediately apparent:

The problem I have with the online things, it's okay one to one, but I have unilateral deafness. It's completely deaf in one ear. So, although I have some hearing in this ear, I find it very, very hard to judge direction of sound. And I rely quite heavily on lip reading. So, if somebody is in a mask face to face to me, I find that really difficult and didn't realise how much I relied on it until that point. But when things are online, if people haven't got the camera on, or more than one person is talking at once, I just find it really, really tiring and difficult. (interview participant)

While presuming accessibility for those not on campus, online provision can also blur the boundaries of home and doctoral space in ways that are challenging for those with disabilities and care responsibilities. Burford urges academics to: 'think about how you can include remote doctoral candidates in the intellectual climate at all levels' (2021). As well as considering the challenges alongside the benefits of online or hybrid doctoral provision, I argue that for art and design doctoral

communities the intellectual climate is not just one of thoughts and words, we must include the spaces of practice as part of our intellectual climate. How do we enable inclusive access to the messiness and serendipity of environments of creative practice in practice research at doctoral level?

## A costly practice

Comments from my interviews with doctoral researchers about their experience of the pandemic prompted me to reflect on inequalities in access to space and resources for practice research:

I was living with my nan through the pandemic, which meant that space was just not even limited. It just didn't exist. Like, there was, nowhere for me to make things really also no desk space. So, it's kind of operating from a double bed

Even though I am lucky, in that I have a computer that is good enough to power most of what I try and do, and I have some bits of kit, and I have you know, I have space at home, and I have a studio, but neither my space at home or my studio are particularly big

I had my own studio space ... In the shared space I was, it's 85 pounds a month  
(interview participant)

These comments from three different doctoral researchers suggest differing levels of opportunity to personally finance equipment and space to support their practice research. Financial barriers to doctoral study are increasingly recognised in literature on doctoral education:

Prospective students from less privileged socio-economic backgrounds and/or graduating from low-tariff institutions may have found themselves priced out of pursuing a PhD. Particularly in times of austerity, the opportunity costs of a relatively long time to degree could be unaffordable for many, given an increasingly competitive job market with no guarantee of securing an academic job upon completion.  
(Pásztor & Wakeling 2018, 983)

In the United Kingdom, financial barriers to doctoral study have only been further compounded by the burden of accrued loan debt for undergraduate and postgraduate taught study that self-funded students from disadvantaged backgrounds accrue before they even get to PhD. However, unlike Pásztor and Wakeling it is not the opportunity costs of doing a doctorate, the income otherwise earned in years spent pursuing a qualification that no longer guarantees an academic job, that are particularly concerning to me in relation to art and design doctorates. It is the actual costs of living and doing a PhD during the period of study, including the costs of making and practice. As the interview responses suggest, those doing a doctorate in art and design often need to resource studio space, materials and equipment for practice. The pandemic lockdowns were a situation *in extremis*, however my analysis of the interviews also demonstrated that



not all doctoral researchers have access to the same level of financial resources. This led me to actively consider socio-economic background and the privilege that may entail to more easily enable private access to the resources to support creative practice.

## Privilege and doctoral expectations

Privilege takes many forms. Discourse around working-class identities in academia is growing (Crew 2020; Burnell Reilly 2022) and the social inequities inherent in the creative industries in the United Kingdom is receiving robust attention (Brook *et al.* 2020). bell hooks reflected on her own experience of university as not only as an African American Woman but as one from a working-class background:

Class differences were boundaries no one wanted to face or talk about. It was easier to downplay them, to act as though we were all from privileged backgrounds, to work around them, to confront them privately ... Yet these class realities separated me from fellow students. (hooks 1989, 75)

As hooks described, class is not an issue that has often been openly discussed in doctoral education. Increasingly though, we have to acknowledge how issues of class impact in particular ways on the opportunity to undertake practice research in art and design doctorates, with socio-economic background often correlating with access to finance to support practice as a form of privilege.

A much-publicised (Inge 2020) open letter in 2020 to the national research funding body UKRI about access to PhD studentships that was signed by over 400 academics and doctoral researchers pertinently summarises some of the barriers and challenges:

whether a candidate has research experience, academic publications or conference attendance also largely captures access to opportunity and discriminates against candidates who have been unable to participate in these activities (for example because of financial reasons or due to caring responsibilities). (Giles *et al.* 2020)

The open letter was about the criteria for recruitment and applications for PhD funding. However, the same indicators of excellence and achievement persist throughout the period of study and are reinforced through the professional development agendas of institutions and funding bodies (Vitae 2011; AHRC 2014) as part of the expanded expectations on doctoral programmes to provide preparation for both an increasingly competitive academic job market as well as non-academic work (Sharmini & Spronken-Smith 2020). I am not arguing here against the growth in doctoral expectations and opportunities—I am a firm advocate for doctoral community, and experiences of teaching, conference presentation, public engagement, publication and dissemination are undoubtedly beneficial for personal as well as professional development. My concern is particularly about how these impact on those doing doctorates in Art and Design.

Rebecca Kill noted back in 2012 that in our discipline there was the danger that doctoral researchers will 'produce a whole PhD's worth of practice plus half a PhD of text, hence doing about 150 percent of a PhD!' (Kill 2012, 320).

Extrapolating from this, the growth of doctoral expectations is in some ways a financial double-bind for those in art and design undertaking practice research. My concern is that art and design doctoral researchers often have to fund materials and space for their practice alongside and on top of funding the other professional development activities increasingly expected of all doctoral researchers:

there was an exhibition, I did a conference paper. And then that paper was developed and published (interview participant)

This comment from one of my interviewees illustrates how the outcomes of practice can be alongside rather than instead of other doctoral professional development activities.

Not all higher education institutions by any means have the financial resources or willingness to support their doctoral researchers in art and design with studio space, materials, venue hire, participant expenses, conference fees, travel costs, funds for dissemination and impact activities. The list could go on. This increasing financial burden is likely to be least feasible for those from less-privileged socio-economic backgrounds, those with care responsibilities or health concerns.

There are also significant intersectional impacts for the many facets of privilege, as noted in University College London Doctoral School's *Barriers to Doctoral Education* report in 2021: 'The intersectional impacts for students who experience more than one factor of systemic disadvantage, discrimination, or differential need, are even more acute and complex' (Linder 2020, 15). The HESA data, as silent as it is on socio-economic backgrounds, shows that our art and design postgraduate research community includes significant proportions of those aged over 30, identifying as female, studying part-time and or having a known disability, many of whom are likely to find the financial burden of practice research and professional development activity in a doctorate a challenge. The implications are far-reaching:

Unequal access to doctoral education has consequences beyond individual chances for social mobility and career progression. Lack of diversity among the doctoral student body may have serious long-term consequences through leaving segments of society without a voice in scholarship or representation among future HE faculty, thus reserving key positions in society for the already privileged. (Pásztor & Wakeling 2018, 983)

If our doctoral education in art and design is not more diverse, inclusive, and culturally responsive, then there is less likelihood that our future academic workforce in art and design will be diverse. As Burford has argued in relation to rethinking doctoral education for those with caring responsibilities: 'Doing this 're-imagining' work is important for equity reasons. It's also important for knowledge. We need the diverse experiences of all kinds of knowers in universities' (Burford 2021). We need diversity in the academic community of researchers, practitioners, teachers and knowers in art and design in higher education.

## Conclusions

Practice research in art and design has particular spatial, material and financial needs alongside and in addition to those of other forms of doctoral research in the

arts and humanities. It is important to acknowledge how socio-economic background and the privileges it can both impart and withhold are compounding other intersectional concerns around care responsibilities, disability and racial discrimination as barriers to doctoral education and full participation in doctoral communities. Privilege tends towards self-perpetuation. Access to doctoral community, access to opportunities for professional development and for practice development are increasingly dependent on access to finance and those assumed norms of the doctoral researcher. My increasing concern and my provocation here is that issues of finance and class are growing in doctoral education in art and design alongside doctoral expectations and that we need to talk about them.

Drawing on themes that emerged from my analysis of interviews with doctoral researchers, I revisited literature on doctoral education to focus attention on the multiple and intersectional concerns around diversity, equity and belonging. The lack of consistent and detailed data, at least in the United Kingdom, on the doctoral research population in terms of characteristics, progression and outcomes of doctoral researchers is in itself a significant gap in our knowledge. It hampers the possibility of analysis in terms of socio-economic background, ethnicity, care responsibilities, known disabled status, age or any form of intersectional analysis. It is concerning because without visibility in the data, issues of equity and privilege can remain anecdotal, viewed as individual challenges rather than systemic issues.

Using illustrative extracts from my analysis of interviews with doctoral researchers as provocations to reflect on how there might be specific challenges in the context of practice research in art and design doctoral study, I conclude that such challenges are increasingly underpinned by issues of privilege. This prompts concerns for equity and inclusivity in doctoral education in art and design, and by implication in the future of our discipline inside, and outside higher education. I argue that we need to acknowledge these issues, we need to talk about them. Further research is urgently needed, both into specific aspects of identity impacting on opportunities for belonging, and into the intersectional realities and barriers to inclusive doctoral communities in art and design. There is also an imperative for us to work together as academics, researchers, practitioners, policy makers and managers to reimagine other possibilities for doctoral education in art and design.

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