

Access power and privilege in the Cultural and Creative Industries: Internship problematics.

Naomi Wells, Ian Clark, and Maranda Ridgway.

Work Informalization and Place Research Centre, Nottingham Business School, Nottingham Trent University, UK.

Abstract:

A conceptual and developmental paper submitted for consideration to the Cultural and Creative Industries Track in the BAM 2024 main conference proceedings. This developmental paper aims to problematize unpaid work in the Cultural and Creative Industry (CCI) in the post COVID-19 pandemic and *cost-of-living* crises, whilst considering the implications of continued Internship use as CCIs are forecast to grow in economic significance by 2030. The paper questions how CCIs can become more inclusive and accessible for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds and considers the growing societal pressure lobbying unpaid work in the UK, with specific reference to the Labour Party's 2024 manifesto.

Keywords: Internships; social class; diversity; gentrification.

Word count: 1986

Introduction

This paper problematizes unpaid Internships in the Cultural and Creatives Industries (CCIs) and question if the low-cost employment model that some CCI employers utilise is sustainable as the UK moves forward through multi-crises. The true extent of unpaid Internships in the UK is unknown; the UK government estimated in 2018 that there were 70,000 Internships (CIPD, 2022; McDonald and Grant-Smith, 2020), with 70% of these estimated as unpaid (The Sutton Trust, 2022). However, the average cost of an unpaid Internship to the individual pre-pandemic was £1,100 in London and £850 in Manchester, creating barriers to access for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Montacute, 2020). This figure is likely to have grown during the *cost-of-living crisis* as organisations try to reduce labour costs and when more students are compelled to move into paid part-time work to support themselves during study.

The call for papers highlights how the UK Government (2023) set a vision for a ‘50% growth in value’ in CCIs by 2030 to provide ‘new career opportunities for young people.’ However, this is counterbalanced by ‘10 million jobs lost’ in 2020 at the start of the pandemic (UNESCO, 2022). This disparity in the message has stimulated the research applied in the paper, which questions how rapid growth can occur in a post-pandemic world. Are the job roles created going to be paid or unpaid? Could it be that the lost jobs will be replaced by unpaid workers to help the sector grow, and if so, at what cost to the individual?

Although this paper problematizes unpaid work, CCI organisations offer diverse individuals the opportunity to express and foster connections. Work experiences are the ‘leg up’ for many students to gain entry-level roles (Brook, O’Brien and Taylor, 2020). However, these opportunities may be dependent on their ability to sustain the duration and intensity of unpaid work that is integral to gain access to certain highly competitive organisations (Jaffe, 2021). Due to the expansive nature of unpaid work in the arts, this paper uses the Internship lens to discuss graduate access into highly competitive careers. However, the author acknowledges that internships are only a small proportion of un- or under-remunerated work in the arts. Brook et al. (2020), question what constitutes paid work in the arts with subgroups such as fashion bloggers, musicians, photographers and artists contributing their time without remuneration. This paper recognise their contribution and the precarity of long-term unpaid work.

The paper conceptualises three important research questions:

RQ1: What socio-economic demographic will make up the future face of CCIs and will the current recruitment model mirroring Bourdieu’s (1973) social reproduction continue?

RQ2: How can actors within CCIs meet ambitious growth targets and provide more jobs for young people without moving away from the low-cost employment model of unpaid work?

RQ3: Is either option (continue recruiting unpaid Interns or moving towards paid workers) sustainable in the current *cost-of-living crisis* and post-pandemic world?

Defining unpaid Internships within CCI

The definition of an ‘Internship’ is ambiguous and used interchangeably for sandwich courses, degree placements or volunteering. However, Internships were officially defined by the then BEIS, and now Department of Business and Trade (2013), as opportunities outside of academic credit that typically last between six weeks and one year in duration and are often completed over an academic break or around studies. Unpaid Internships are largely gained through informal connections and used to build a ‘graduate identity’ by securing symbolic experience and human capital in preparation for a full-time paid role (Holmes, 2013). This paper will use Internships and work experience interchangeably and relate to the unpaid and unregulated, non-

credit-based route to improving an individual's 'employability'. The magnitude of Intern usage is unknown as Internships are unregulated in the UK, nor is it possible to know how Internships are being used to help the CCIs expand. Recently, there has been growing societal pressure on informal work regulation in all sectors of the UK. The Labour Party announced on the 1 January 2024 that, if elected, they will make unlawful all unpaid Internships that are not formally part of education (The Labour Party 2024, pp.4).

Evidence suggests that unpaid work has been a major contributor to sector growth in CCIs over the past decade, with sectors such as Fashion and Media using students to operate a lean employee framework (Figiel, 2018). Despite providing exposure to networks and cultural capital, these opportunities are a development that replaces entry-level roles with cyclical employee substitutions fraught with ambiguities and loopholes leading to exploitation and coercion (Jaffe, 2021; McDonald and Grant-Smith 2020; Siebert and Wilson, 2013). Internships may reduce the need for freelance paid workers and remove the wage floor of the business. However, the use of Interns and commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) are divergent by sector and largely dependent on the funding model of each institution. As Montacute (2018) identified 86% of Internships in CCIs are unpaid, practitioners need to consider the implications for the Industry if Labour's Manifesto is enacted.

COVID-19 re-calibrated the meaning of 'work' to blur digital and physical spaces through remote work and consumer experience. Khlystova et al. (2020) outline how many CCI had to create a "digital safety net" pp.1200, during the pandemic, transferring exhibitions online and using social media as a vessel to corral public support and funding to survive the period of closure and beyond. Although the move to digitalisation was not easily accessible for all subsectors such as museums and libraries. Some unpaid work experience opportunities also migrated online, providing access to CCIs that were previously only open to those who were city-based and privileged (Bell et al., 2022).

Class Barriers

As the Institute for Fiscal Studies report that social mobility is at its slowest point in 50 years, it is important to consider the impact unpaid work experience has on upward social mobility (Van de Erve et al., 2023).

The UK Government (2023) set out a vision for CCI growth and increased career opportunities for young people. However, this vision does not specify whether these opportunities will be paid or unpaid. If these opportunities are paid, prior evidence suggests the availability of work experience will be reduced and hires still be selected through social capital and familiarity biases in recruitment (Freidman and Laurison, 2019). Implicitly, there is a hierarchy of Internships with paid individuals gaining more prestigious opportunities post-graduation as these Internships are associated with impactful tasks in comparison to admin-based roles (Rogers et al., 2021; Perlin, 2011). Therefore, this paper questions how growth through unpaid work may, indirectly, reproduce existing class barriers to access and increase the power and privilege of those who possess the economic and social capital necessary to succeed.

Gentrification of expectation and coercive pressure is one factor reinforcing barriers to access for disadvantaged socio-economic students. Societal and industry expectations, through neoliberal and meritocratic narratives, suggest that students should work unpaid to gain 'enough' symbolic capital to get a paid role potentially due to the highly competitive nature of CCIs (Siebert and Wilson, 2013; Bloodworth, 2016). Brook et al. (2020) capture the cyclical nature of internships with some students completing two or three consecutive internships in CCI's. This paper questions when do students gain 'enough' symbolic capital to obtain a paid role if multiple internships are normalised in CCIs? The issue with multiple internships is that

disadvantaged students may have to generate their own paid income to support themselves or their families during their degree, work unpaid for experience, and achieve high academic grades leading to burnout and mental health decline (Social Mobility Commission, 2020; Cunningham, 2021). Unpaid work can also lead to an additional debt-making process as low-income students may need to relocate to the city for opportunities, take out personal loans to allow them time to work unpaid, or to purchase physical artefacts needed to undertake opportunities such as a laptop, camera, or car (Gollmitzer, 2021).

University widening-participation programmes aim to create change by challenging structural inequality, power and privilege. However, this paper questions how other CCI organisations may react following the fast fashion giant ASOS' recent removal of diversity targets from their board's priorities (Butt, 2023). When applying the principles of Bourdieu's social reproduction theory (1973), it could be argued that management actors within CCIs may choose to remove diversity targets as a way to indirectly protect elite hierarchies and habitus. This removal would implicitly preserve the arts for those who 'fit'. Could elitism be plausible and, if so, how would it impact the future of CCIs? However, this paper also considers the dichotomy of pressure in CCI's and recognises that cuts to arts funding can result in EDI initiatives to dissipate due to a need to survive, manage 'risk' and recover from crisis (Khlystova et al. 2020). The Labour Party, in their 2024 manifesto, pledged to "address socio-economic inequalities in the workplace by enacting the socio-economic duty in the Equality Act 2010" (The Labour Party 2024, pp.13). Consequently, management actors must consider how to comply with potential future policy and create change rather than allowing social class to become a 'tick-box' exercise.

Meritocratic Gentrification

Why do students work unpaid if they cannot afford to do so and why do they want to put themselves in precarious 'employment'? Employability narratives, associated societal norms and higher education institution performance criteria, suggest that a degree is no longer 'enough' to gain a graduate-level role (Lehmann, 2015; Cifor and Watson, 2020). This gentrified narrative may force students to consider the risk of both completing and not completing work experience. However, Mackenzie and McKinlay (2021) highlight how this coercive narrative of employability is not directly placed on students through actors but rather placed on individuals by themselves. Kuehn and Corrigan, (2013) previously defined this as 'hope labour', whereby an individual seeks unpaid work in the 'hope' that they build 'enough' human, symbolic, cultural and social capital to be offered a paid role. Hope labour is said to lie in the liminal space thus being "exploited and enjoyed...voluntary and unwanted" pp.1842 (Mackenzie and McKinlay, 2021). This leads this paper to recognise the disparity of student experiences both between each other and within themselves.

If working-class students choose to move against societal norms, they would be arguably rendering their education obsolete if they do not have 'enough' capital to gain a graduate-level role and are 'compelled' to accept a non-graduate role with fewer entry requirements. A resistance would also impact the graduate outcomes of the higher education provider (Watt and Costea, 2020) and have a detrimental effect on an individual's career. McRobbie (2016) highlight how students have to 'self-preserve' and show a passion for the arts through voluntary work as a marker of reputation. The idea of work as a 'joyful hobby' (Jaffe, 2021) leads this paper to consider if students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are coerced into working unpaid.

Conclusion

This paper outlines important research questions which must be considered if CCIs are to be sustainable and meet UK growth and career forecasts by 2030. However, researchers should also recognise the holistic pressures facing actors within CCI's which impact funding, available resource and public pressure on EDI initiatives.

This paper theorises how the meritocratic narrative of 'access' to paid and unpaid work may inhibit diversity in CCIs. If unpaid work is essential to CCI success, researchers must consider how the industry can be sustainable if government and societal pressure start to lobby against unpaid Internships. With Labour's *'New Deal for Working People'* pledge to make unpaid Internships unlawful unless part of education and enact the socio-economic duty (The Labour Party 2024), then management actors within CCI's must consider how to navigate and economically grow during change.

Finally, this paper questions how CCIs can move away from social capital and informal networking as markers of 'fit'. This shift would arguably defer from what Bourdieu called a 'habitus', wherein young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds may have historically felt like an outsider within, due to more representation in industry.

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