

Hustling in the creative industries: Narratives and work practices of female filmmakers and fashion designers

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Abstract

This paper examines practices and narratives of hustling in the creative industries. We draw on two illustrative cases: independent female filmmakers in Nairobi, Kenya, and independent female fashion designers in Toronto, Canada, with a combined 69 interviews. Taking a comparative, intersectional approach, we explore both the practices and narratives that entrepreneurial creative workers construct. In doing so, we contribute to ongoing conceptual debates regarding the contemporary nature of work in creative industries. We define hustling in the creative industries as entrepreneurially navigating precarity to build and sustain creative businesses. We argue that hustling is not merely a “stage” of work and life to be moved past or overcome, but instead an ongoing, entrepreneurial creative practice. This fact has implications for how we think about success and creative work: hustling is not a deviation from the good life, but a way of making a good life in precarious circumstances.

KEYWORDS

creative work, fashion, film, gender, hustle

1 | INTRODUCTION

The term “hustle” has connoted income-generating practices of uncertain legality and morality since the 1960s, has described informality in post-colonial Africa since the 1970s, and has been central to the vocabulary of American

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hip-hop artists since the 1980s (Thieme, 2018, p. 538). Increasingly, it is also used to describe the conditions of contemporary work (Muthoni Mwaura, 2017; Thieme, 2013; van Doorn & Velthuis, 2018). Over the past 5 years, the term has transitioned from marginalized contexts to mainstream adoption, often used to describe the working lives of millennials (Cohen, 2019; Releford, 2020).

Championed by the self-help industry, Instagram influencers, and tech companies, a lifestyle defined by hustling is celebrated as the ultimate way to succeed in life—where anything is possible if you just work hard enough. However, hustling is not only a discourse of empowerment. Commentators have also called attention to the precarity of a life defined by hustling. For instance, a 2019 *New York Times* article, provocatively titled “Why Are Young People Pretending to Love Work?” argues hustle culture is grimly exploitative and questions how so many young people have bought into this lifestyle (Griffith, 2019).

Many of these debates relate to the contemporary nature of work in the creative economy. This link is unsurprising, given that precarity has long been seen as a defining feature of creative work (Banks & Milestone, 2011; Christopherson, 2008; Gill & Pratt, 2008; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2010; McRobbie, 2016; Ross, 2008). Yet even though the term “hustle” is now part of the common vernacular of creatives in contexts as diverse as Nairobi, Kenya, and Toronto, Canada (cf. “How She Hustles”, n.d.; Kermeliotis, 2010), less is known about how creative entrepreneurs experience and think about hustling.

To fill this gap, we explore two illustrative cases based on in-depth qualitative fieldworks: female independent filmmakers working in Nairobi, Kenya, and female independent fashion designers working in Toronto, Canada. Significantly, creatives in both these cases often used the language of hustling to describe their careers and work practices, revealing that they saw themselves within this framework. These cases provide a useful space to investigate this understudied concept and its relation to the creative industries.

Film and fashion are both highly gendered industries: the fashion industry has a well-documented glass ceiling—or glass runway (Stokes, 2015)—whereas women make up less than 10% of film directors globally (Dovey, 2012, p. 21). Yet, Nairobi and Toronto both have a large number of female creative entrepreneurs hustling to build and sustain creative businesses in film and fashion, respectively. Focusing specifically on the hustling strategies of women is essential. Scholarship has mainly investigated the experience of male creatives, particularly middle-class and White ones (Alacovska & Gill, 2019; Reimer, 2016). Despite a growing body of research that has systematically demonstrated the gendering of entrepreneurship and work in creative industries (Conor et al., 2015; Crewe & Wang, 2018; Duffy, 2017; McRobbie, 2016), a focus on men in this sector has limited scholarly understanding.

Drawing on two illustrative cases and a combined 69 interviews, we define hustling in the creative industries as entrepreneurially navigating precarity to build and sustain creative businesses. We have chosen to employ the concept of hustling because it was the vernacular of our participants. And despite the popularity of hustling in broader cultural and creative industries (CCI) research and in the media, this concept has not received a rigorous academic treatment. In this article, we take two steps to begin this investigation. First, we unpack key hustling practices undertaken by female creative entrepreneurs, and second, we present the way these women narrate their experiences of being hustlers.

2 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 | Work in the creative industries

The creative industries have become emblematic of the contemporary neoliberal economy (Bridges, 2018), defined by high levels of insecurity and low levels of pay (Gill, 2002; Oakley, 2004; Ross, 2008). As work has become increasingly individualized, so too has employment risk (Ekinsmyth, 1999). With this individualization comes the expectation that workers must be entrepreneurial in configuring new employment relationships (Hracs, 2012). For some workers, this entrepreneurial approach may involve freelance employment where they negotiate a range of contracts and/or

gigs (Christopherson, 2008; Gill, 2002). For others, this approach may entail starting a business as an independent creative and becoming an entrepreneur (Brydges & Hrac, 2019b; Luckman, 2018; Neff et al., 2005).

To stand out in a competitive contemporary marketplace (Hrac et al., 2013), many workers have found that they must create a “portfolio” of work (Duffy, 2017; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2013), a pursuit that relies increasingly on self-branding (Scolere, 2019). It is therefore not surprising that a defining feature of this work is precarity (Banks & Milestone, 2011; Christopherson, 2008; Gill & Pratt, 2008; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2010; McRobbie, 2016; Ross, 2008).

Central to this precarity is the intersectionality of workers. Much of the foundational research on the creative economy and creative industries is implicitly masculinist, conceptualizing a “disembodied” creative worker (cf. Reimer, 2016). However, this approach failed to account for gendered power dynamics. While Florida (2002) initially heralded the arrival of the “no collar workplace” as a meritocracy where difference and authenticity were celebrated and opportunities were endless, a growing body of scholarship has revealed the inequalities inherent in creative work, whether by class, age, gender, race, or other identity markers (cf. Conor et al., 2015; Crewe & Wang, 2018; Leslie & Catungal, 2012; Reimer, 2016; Warren, 2018).

Two examples (among many options) can display these inequalities. In design consultancies, teams are normalized as male with members referred to as “the guys” and “someone’s” pregnancy described as a liability (Reimer, 2016). And in the “cool, creative and egalitarian” world of new media work, companies have created new forms of gender inequality built on highly insecure low-paid jobs that place all risk on the individual (Gill, 2002).

Yet, despite high levels of precarity, workers continue to enter the creative industries. Research has identified a range of psychic rewards that lure individuals into creative work, such as the opportunity to live one’s “passion” and have autonomy (Arvidsson et al., 2010; Duffy, 2017; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2010; McRobbie, 2016). In this context, the motto “do what you love” is often seen as an important personal measure of success (Duffy, 2017). Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2010) describe this situation as a “very complicated version of freedom,” and it is one that has become a defining characteristic of creative work.

In this context, we offer a critique of the literature. We argue that the research tends to chastise workers as being unwitting participants in their own exploitation (Duffy, 2017; McRobbie, 2016). Such an approach fails to account for the agency of individuals in creative work and for how some choose to construct their own work biographies. Here, we are inspired by research that explores how, despite facing discrimination and hardship in the face of systemic inequalities, creative workers seek to negotiate their identities and carve out creative careers (Brydges & Hrac, 2019b; Ikonen, 2020; Warren, 2018). For example, Warren (2018) illustrates how, in defiance of segregation and exclusion based on their identity markers (race, sect, class, and so on), Muslim women working in digital media in the UK have constructed new spaces of belonging, support, and community. We are also inspired by scholars working on hustling because they highlight the agentic way entrepreneurs negotiate precarity, as we will see in the next section.

2.2 | Hustling

In the literature, researchers initially conceptualized hustling as a mode of survival in ghetto life composed of “informal dealing, semi-legal practices, rackets and small-time crime” that was an “*alternative* to the respectable route of hard labor and low wages” (Hall et al., 1978, pp. 350–351, emphasis in original). In the context of Nairobi—a center for research and theorizing on hustling (Farrell, 2015; Thieme, 2013, 2015, 2018)—the term “hustling” tends to be used to describe the productive and calculating ways that marginalized young people navigate Nairobi’s vast informal and insecure labor market. In all these cases, two significant factors stand out: first, hustling was a chosen occupation, and second, people working as hustlers were socioeconomically marginalized. Working in precarious circumstances, “hustlers” constructed their own occupations and futures.

More recently, scholars have used the term “side hustle” to explain the way workers create small, often informal businesses to supplement the income they gain from standard sources (Muthoni Mwaura, 2017). This definition is becoming common in North America (cf. Cohen, 2019; Dewey, 2020; Releford, 2020). However, these authors are describing longstanding conditions rather than new features of work for many people. Throughout the global South, portfolio work has long been the norm (Scully, 2016), and even in the global North, only middle-class White men have experienced the ideals of single-occupation secure employment as the norm (Cohen cited in Bridges, 2018). Thus, gender and socioeconomic position shape experiences of hustling.

Being a hustler also has attitudinal components. In his study of urban nightlife, Grazian (2008) describes hustling as a practice that individuals can employ for various sorts of gain (in his case, picking up romantic or sexual partners). The key to the hustler's success is attitude: “The hustler relies on the seasoned politician's self-confidence and golden tongue, the hungry gambler's appetite for profit and risk, and the calculated, manipulative machinations of the con artist” (Grazian, 2008, p. 13). Self-assurance, a stomach for risk, and a shrewd approach to securing personal gain are the characteristic traits of a hustler. Hustling implies “a constant pragmatic search for alternative structures of opportunity” (Thieme, 2018, p. 537). Accordingly, we must study attitudes and narratives to understand the characteristics that make a successful hustler and that make hustling a “good” mode of work for some creatives.

Workers and entrepreneurs in creative industries navigate a landscape that is increasingly defined by short-term, unstable, and precarious employment (Conor et al., 2015; Gill & Pratt, 2008; Ross, 2008). Not surprisingly, therefore, CCI research has recently begun to use the concept of hustling (Alacovska et al., 2021; Carter, 2016; Mehta, 2017; van Doorn & Velthuis, 2018). For example, Mehta (2017) shows how film students evolve over the course of their studies from idealizing the auterism of filmmaking to taking a much more pragmatic attitude. They learn they have to hustle to, for example, “be in the know” and to find collaborators for their projects (Mehta, 2017, p. 30). As hustlers, they learn to approach their work and the acquisition of new opportunities pragmatically. Similarly, in adult webcam modeling, women adopt a portfolio of strategies to cope with their modeling platform's “manufactured uncertainty” (van Doorn & Velthuis, 2018). In both cases, hustling is future-oriented: the film students and webcam models adopt their hustling strategies in order to develop creatively fulfilling and financially viable careers. Yet, hustling is also action-oriented because the students and models make calculated and pragmatic choices in the present.

Thus, in summarizing the existing literature, we argue that hustling has three key characteristics. First, to be a hustler, you must be an entrepreneur. Second, hustling is a mode of work that takes place in marginalized and precarious circumstances. Third, success as a hustler involves a specific attitude—that is, a stomach for risk, a heart for challenge, and an eye for opportunity. Hustling, therefore, is an entrepreneurial form of labor, which requires the acceptance, and often the embracement, of precarity in the pursuit of personally defined success.

We argue that these characteristics make the concept of hustling a compelling addition to the study of CCI work. Indeed, hustling has long been used to describe how marginalized people in difficult circumstances have seized control and built their own futures on their own terms. We believe that hustling not only reveals the initiative and grit of creative workers but also recognizes the challenges of insecure working conditions. Because hustling captures both the agency and precarity of creative work, we see it as a useful concept with fruitful applications. Even more, we see it as a necessary approach to CCIs.

3 | MATERIALS AND METHODS

This paper is the result of a chance encounter at the 2018 European Communication Research and Education Association conference. Talking after a panel where one author presented, we realized that even though we were studying creative industries in very different geographic contexts, the entrepreneurial experiences and working practices of the women were remarkably similar. Comparing these cases, we felt, could lead to new understandings of how women work in creative industries today.

3.1 | Illustrative cases approach

This study conceptualizes the gender dynamic of hustling in the creative industries using the approach of two illustrative cases: female filmmakers in Nairobi, Kenya, and female fashion designers in Toronto, Canada. Whereas Canada has a high-functioning welfare state and highly protected labor conditions (Canada, 2020), Nairobi has a labor market long defined by informal, precarious work (Thieme, 2018).

Yet, fashion in Toronto and film in Nairobi have some relevant and useful similarities. Neither city is a major center of production for its respective industry. Even within Africa, the output of the Kenyan film industry is small, dwarfed by Nigeria and South Africa; correspondingly, Toronto is not one of the “big four” fashion capitals of London, Paris, Milan, and New York. However, each city is a major center in its respective country—Toronto is an economic hub (City of Toronto, 2017) and Nairobi is both the political and economic capital of Kenya (Spronk, 2014). Moreover, Nairobi's film industry is by far the biggest in the country, and Toronto's fashion industry is the largest in Canada (Brydges & Hracs, 2019a).

Fashion designers in Toronto face a number of challenges, such as steep housing costs, competitive and unstable industry dynamics (including the permanent cancellation of Toronto Fashion Week), and pressures to leave the city if they wish to pursue an international career (Brydges & Hracs, 2019a; Brydges & Pugh, 2017). Likewise, Nairobi is a challenging place to establish a filmmaking career. For example, Kenya has no system for granting funding to filmmakers, and there is no clear pathway for profitable distribution in the local market (Steedman, 2019). Yet, despite these challenging conditions, we found that female creative entrepreneurs in both spaces have been developing strategies to successfully hustle and carve out careers. Significantly, they have also professed to enjoy and find meaning in their work.

3.2 | Data collection and analysis

The first author collected data in Nairobi, Kenya, from October 2014 to June 2015 as part of a larger study on the work practices of female filmmakers in Nairobi. Nairobi was chosen as the location for this study because the city has a uniquely high concentration of female filmmakers (Dovey, 2012). Field research included 31 interviews with 27 different female filmmakers as well as 8 months of observation in the industry, particularly at film forums, festivals, and events. The primary criteria for inclusion in the interview sample were being female, a filmmaker, and living and working in Nairobi. The interviews included early career filmmakers as well as those with more than 20 years of industry experience. Initially, the first author contacted four internationally known filmmakers and then built the rest of the sample through snowballing, cold contacting, and networking in Nairobi.

The semi-structured interviews followed an interview guide focusing on the opportunities and challenges of being a filmmaker in Nairobi, the women's modes of both producing and distributing their films, and their perspectives on being filmmakers. Each interview also included custom questions based on the individual filmmaker, their films, and industry experience. Each interviewee was explicitly asked if filmmaking in Nairobi was “a hustle” and if she saw herself as a hustler. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Informed consent was taken from all interviewees following the ethics procedures of the first author's institution. Interviewees were given the opportunity to be anonymous in the study, but all chose to be publicly named and hence are named in this paper.

The second author collected data in the Greater Toronto Area from 2014 to 2017 as part of a larger project on the Canadian fashion industry. In the larger study, both men and women were interviewed. This paper draws upon interviews with 19 female designers and 19 female key informants (including media, fashion buyers, and public relations executives). In terms of sampling, a wide range of sources were consulted, including media coverage, fashion week rosters, snowball sampling, and introductions from an influential industry gatekeeper. The majority of designers were “millennials” in the demographic cohort between the ages of 25 and 40. Many of these designers were

single and/or without children at the time. The relatively young age structure also reflects broader industry dynamics (Brydges & Hracs, 2019b; Brydges & Pugh, 2017).

Interviews covered a range of topics derived from the literature, including education, employment, and entrepreneurial experiences, as well as the day-to-day nature of the participants' working lives. Unlike in the Nairobi study, hustling was not a focus of the interviews but instead emerged as a category in the subsequent analysis. Interviews followed an interview guide that had a number of guiding questions to lead the discussion and ensure consistency across key themes. However, in order to account for the specificity of each designer's experience, there were also a number of customized questions at the end of each interview. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The study was conducted in accordance with the ethics procedures of the second author's institution. As such, the Toronto interviewees are not named in this paper.

In the first analytical phase, each author thematically coded the data in her own study separately, and hustling emerged as a significant theme in each case. Once this theme was identified, we embarked upon the second analytical phase, which we conducted jointly. In this phase, we compared the activities of creatives in each industry iteratively until we could distill key crosscutting practices. Then, we comparatively examined the expressions used by our participants in describing their work until key narratives emerged.

4 | FINDINGS: PRACTICES OF HUSTLING

In the words of filmmaker Dommie Yambo-Odotte, who has been working in the film industry in Nairobi since the late 1990s and runs the company Development through Media, "hustling is good because you can't just sit and wait for nothing [laughs]. You have to go out [...] seek something out." For her, hustling meant being proactive in a precarious situation and "making things happen." Her words reveal the key tension of hustling: how to negotiate precarity and benefit from it. We will now outline three key hustling practices.

4.1 | Financing

In general, it is not uncommon for creative workers to supplement their income from more stable sources (Conor et al., 2015). While a small minority of filmmakers (such as Anne Mungai and Wanjiru Kinyanjui, who both made their first feature films in the 1990s) work at local universities teaching filmmaking, the vast majority of Nairobi-based female filmmakers support themselves as creative entrepreneurs, including by running their own small production companies. For instance, Toni Kamau and her partners at On Screen Productions run a diverse business that allows them to work on creative projects—such as television shows for Zuku or the documentary *I Am Samuel*—as well as documentaries for clients, such as the M-Pesa Foundation and other corporate and NGO work. Kamau has a portfolio of strategies for coping with uncertainty (van Doorn & Velthuis, 2018), and because of this portfolio, she can take on creative projects. This strategy is "creative precarity" in action, where resourcefulness in the face of precarious conditions can both benefit the entrepreneur and foster creativity (Berg & Penley, 2016, p. 167).

Kenya has no national film-funding body, so financing films is a critical challenge. Filmmakers have to fund-raise in various ways: from a large variety of film funds outside Kenya, by creative online approaches, through investing personal resources, or in the mode of Toni Kamau. A typical example is Philippa Ndisi-Herrmann's latest film, *New Moon*, which received funding from the East African film fund Docubox, the Göteborg Film Festival, the IDFA Bertha Fund, and through a crowd-funding campaign on the film-specific crowdfunding platform CineCrowd. For filmmaker Judy Kibinge, being a "hustler" is a function of this unstable funding environment. As she says, "the minute you are chasing many different sources of unpredictable money, you are definitely a hustler." Her words chime with definitions of hustling where the precarious environment generates the *need* to undertake hustling work (Hall et al., 1978; Thieme, 2013).

Similarly, for Toronto-based female fashion designers, a critical aspect of hustling is finding ways to access capital. One designer described the need to have a “big whack of money sitting in the bank so you can get your stuff moving.” However, independent fashion designers face highly gendered barriers to accessing capital from traditional sources (such as banks) and are instead far more likely to rely on bootstrap investment strategies (such as family and friends) (Jonsson & Lindbergh, 2013). This situation is exacerbated by the fact that fashion designers are largely excluded from arts and culture as well as creative industries funding (Brydges & Pugh, 2017).

As a result, many designers rely on funneling the profits from one season into the next. This problematic approach is compounded by the industry's standard business cycle, which the majority of designers follow. Within this cycle, which is inextricably linked to fashion's dominant mechanisms, designers need investment at the start of the production cycle to design and produce a collection. Several months pass before they receive payment (by consumers and/ or retailers) and see a return on their investment.

To tackle these twin challenges, built into the fashion system, of accessing capital and surviving long lead times, fashion designers have created new practices. One strategy is to test consumer demand—without the additional investment in brand-specific infrastructure—through selling on an existing online platform. As one designer explained:

I started the whole business online using Etsy, before taking a two-year break to focus on manufacturing and wholesale opportunities. Based on that, I felt confident there really was a void in the marketplace [for my brand] and that the timing was right for a relaunch.

After this innovative approach, this designer went on to start a successful brand, which has expanded into new garment categories, while retailing through the business's own e-commerce website, Instagram, and stand-alone retail location. Here, we also wish to reiterate that this is a demonstration of this creative worker's agency in response to a precarious environment.

Related approaches include selling direct-to-consumer (particularly on online retail platforms and social media), producing on a made-to-order basis rather than producing a collection and producing collections that can be sold year round rather than seasonally. These strategies allow the designers in our study to opt out of the industry's established retail cycles (which require large investments months in advance), allowing them to be more flexible and to reduce or spread out their business costs. Designers also perceived these strategies as creating new opportunities for their businesses. By taking these innovative approaches, designers could bypass traditional—and risk averse—industry gatekeepers, such as retail buyers to access consumer markets directly (Brydges & Pugh, 2017).

Another strategy for raising capital, particularly for the launch of new products, is to start a crowdfunding campaign. Interestingly, rather than using a well-known, international platform, such as Kickstarter or Indiegogo, interviewees instead preferred to set up crowdfunding campaigns on specialized platforms that support female entrepreneurs, such as iFundWomen. This finding supports the work of Rykkja et al. (2020), who found not only that crowdfunding platforms are increasingly important to CCI workers but also that the use of these platforms is context- and industry-specific.

4.2 | Hustling in a peripheral market

Despite these challenges, Toronto is still a relatively accessible place to start a business. Compared to one of the global cities of fashion, Toronto has low barriers to entry for new designers (Brydges & Hracs, 2019a), and fashion workers still see it as a place where anyone can hustle and make it. For example, when talking about London, England, a key informant stated that “if you wanted to start a fashion label today, you need to be a [Victoria] Beckham or a [Stella] McCartney.” In this observation, the informant was referring to the immense start-up capital required to build a new brand from the ground up in an expensive and highly competitive city. According to the interviewees, it was nearly impossible for a “regular” person (i.e., someone without personal wealth or connections) to become a fashion

designer in an international fashion center; in contrast, a peripheral market, such as Toronto, was far more accessible. Many of the designers interviewed had experience working or interning for fashion brands in cities, such as London and New York, and had witnessed (and indeed, experienced) this distinction firsthand.

In Nairobi, another peripheral market, female filmmakers also saw opportunity rather than difficulty. Many filmmakers were particularly attracted to the city's precarious screen media environment. African entrepreneurs commonly express the pull of a precarious environment (a frontier) (Wahome & Graham, 2020). Filmmaker Philippa Ndisi-Herrmann, for example, chose to return to Nairobi after film school in South Africa because "it is easier to kind of climb up the ladder" in a developing industry such as Nairobi as opposed to Cape Town. Producer Dorothy Ghetuba left a career in venture capital in Canada to start a production company in Nairobi for the same reason. These filmmakers are *both* pushed and pulled into flexible work.

4.3 | Flexible work

The environment of CCI work has a set of conditions, and working within them, the hustler tries to seize their advantage. We can see this process at work in the career of filmmaker Judy Kibinge. She left a career as a creative director at the advertising agency McCann Erickson to be a filmmaker and has subsequently made a wide variety of films, including romantic comedies, dramas, social justice documentaries, and commissioned corporate work (Steedman, 2019). She now also runs the East African documentary production fund Docubox. Over the past 20 years, her ability to move flexibly between multiple modes of screen media production meant she could establish a longstanding career as a filmmaker. To succeed in Nairobi, filmmakers must create diverse screen media forms and take on multiple roles across different productions.

Just as filmmakers recognized they must be flexible and move between genres, so fashion designers felt they must be flexible in their daily working lives as they negotiate a range of creative and business tasks, from sketching their designs and sewing samples, to accounting and marketing. Because these designers rarely have a business partner, all of these tasks typically fall on one person (Brydges & Hracs, 2019b). Within this highly demanding situation, however, some opportunities emerge. Designers develop myriad skillsets that they can apply to both their own business and potential side hustles (including teaching, costume design, and private label work).

Social media offers creative workers new avenues to promote and sell their products as well as new ways to connect with potential consumers (Hracs & Leslie, 2014). However, these opportunities come with the risk of burn-out, as designers must often balance multiple and competing demands, only some of which they can outsource. As one interviewee revealed, the need to handle both branding and social media illustrates this tension:

I manage all the social media for the brand myself. It is a lot of work. It's the creation of the brand really. People approach me all the time about taking it over, but I don't feel like I can. [...] It feels like such a huge thing to delegate to an outsider.

The demands of engaging with social media also contribute to the precarity and extensification of creative work (Jarvis & Pratt, 2006). In the name of content creation, designers must continually document their personal and professional lives, an activity which relies on aesthetic labor (Brydges & Sjöholm, 2019). Because technology blurs work and personal identities, these challenges intensify, especially for female entrepreneurs who work online (Duffy & Pruchniewska, 2017).

Even as capitalizing on social media sales opportunities could intensify the work of a designer, so being flexible in filmmaking could present its own limitations. Filmmaker Isabel Munyua, who runs a production company with her husband, insisted that

the problem with us here is that we do business under the umbrella of 'I do everything.' Ok. There's no specializing. There's no say, 'you know what, I'm going to focus on foreign film productions. That's my niche. That's what I'm going to do for the rest of my life.'

Munyua believed this “do everything” practice undercut the growth of the industry as a whole. Film producer Emily Wanja echoed that, in Nairobi, it is common to jump from filmmaking department to filmmaking department “because you think that's where you got a chance of getting the next gig.” As she explained, “Here you've got no time to relax. You need that money.” In a project-based creative industry like film, filmmakers must be flexible to capture opportunities.

Being flexible also requires manifold skills. Given the difficulty of financing films, filmmaker Hawa Essuman worried about the sustainability of her career, despite winning prizes and funding at prestigious film festivals. But she had not attempted online crowdfunding, something other Nairobi-based filmmakers had tried with success, because she knew that this approach would require special abilities: “I'm not sure how I would navigate it. It's a really good idea, but there's a lot of organization that goes into that I would rather somebody else deal with, if I'm being honest.” Running a crowdfunding campaign requires particular organizational skills that differ from the creative skills she needs as a director. Clearly, being a hustler requires a particular attitude (Grazian, 2008), including a willingness and ability to change course and increase a portfolio of skills.

Through these hustling practices, the creatives in our study managed to run independent creative businesses despite operating in precarious circumstances. As hustlers, these filmmakers and designers not only overcame difficulties but seized opportunities, flexibly adapting to circumstances. How these creatives *felt* about their hustling is what we turn to in the next section. Here again, the hustling concept offers a useful framework for understanding the nature of creative work and the tensions inherent within it.

5 | FINDINGS: NARRATIVES OF HUSTLING

Scholars have emphasized the psychic rewards that draw individuals to creative work, such as the opportunity to live one's “passion” and have autonomy (Arvidsson et al., 2010; Duffy, 2017; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2010; McRobbie, 2016). However, less is known about how creative hustlers calculate trade-offs in their careers (e.g., between passion for their work and long-term stability), and in turn, how they construct narratives around those trade-offs.

5.1 | Creative flexibility: Early career perspectives

Designers often described starting their own business not only as the culmination of many years of hard work but also as the realization of childhood ambitions:

I grew up always loving fashion. From a very young age, I was one of those kids who would have like three outfits at my birthday party. I just started studying Vogue and knew every designer. [...] There's never been anything else for me.

Designers were determined to do everything they could to get their businesses off the ground. In the early career stage, particularly in the 10 years following high school graduation, designers often prioritized hustling and building their businesses through education and employment experiences. One womenswear designer, who had

completed an undergraduate degree in fine arts and post-graduate training at Central Saint Martins, described this time commitment:

For the last five years, everything has been about business. It takes a lot of time to first build your brand, establish your point of view, and then iron out the kinks. *Everything else was put on hold.*
(Emphasis ours)

By “everything,” this designer (and many others) meant that when they were starting out, their lives revolved around their businesses. In order to realize their dream of running their own brand, many designers were willing to make other sacrifices, which included living with their parents and sharing work and studio space. These decisions usually meant a designer could “afford”—or at least mitigate—some of the costs associated with building their careers and could take risks while bearing reduced financial costs. For early career designers, leisure and professional activities often blurred. For example, the designers took frequent international trips for trade fairs and fashion weeks and attended evening and weekend networking events in the local fashion scene. Our interviewees saw this pattern of work as necessary to achieve their personal and professional goals. But more significantly, the designers also saw these extra work activities as *enjoyable* at the time. Here, we wish to reiterate that experiences of work as fulfilling and enjoyable are key aspects of hustling that emerged from our analysis.

Filmmaker Philippa Ndisi-Herrmann was also at the beginning of her career, having recently completed film school, and she too was willing to do whatever it took to make her films and have a creative career. She said,

I produce by default. I also like producing, but I produce by default [...] It goes back to that hustler thing [...] where you are like, “what skills work? What resources do you have? How can I make money from it?”

She made trade-offs (such as producing alongside directing) and expressed this choice as “that hustler thing”—meaning the need to deploy her portfolio of skills so that she could continue making money and remain in the film industry. Filmmaker and animator Ng'endo Mukii said she wanted to do “artsy” work that was “different.” She recognized that Nairobi had opportunities for commercializing animation ideas, but for the time being, she said, “while I don't have children or a mortgage or any of those things, I'm focused on my artsy projects. When I'm a bit older I'll have to be more commercial.” Her statements reflect that, for her, doing something creatively fulfilling in the present was meaningful. For many creative workers, hustling offers a way of making a “good” life now.

5.2 | Flexibility according to personal needs: Establishment and motherhood

Many designers were keenly aware of the trade-offs they had to make in their working lives as they negotiated running their businesses alongside having children. Interestingly, we found limited evidence of designers being pushed out of the industry as they aged, and more evidence of designers reprioritizing and reconfiguring their work to adapt to their changed circumstances. For example, one half of a design-duo described how her priorities changed once she (and her female business/design partner) each had children. A flight to Paris for a tradeshow, for instance, was less appealing when she had a family than it was a decade earlier when she was single. This change in attitude also coincided with the decision to scale back the brand. The company had enjoyed a period of rapid expansion where the business had nearly tripled, but this development conflicted with the designers' circumstances:

An artisan mentality has always been part of the brand, but when we expanded, we went from being hands on to delegating [design work] as we spent more time in meetings, whether that be with

wholesalers or agents, or travelling for work. Over time, it was too much. And becoming Moms, you have different priorities. [...] We said never again, we are not going to get bigger.

Even when their children were older, this design-duo decided to keep the business at a smaller scale, operating a stand-alone storefront with adjacent studio space and a select handful of domestic stockists. This decision fulfilled their goal of retaining creative control while achieving their definition of work-life balance.

Another designer and new parent—whose business partner was also her husband—narrated her experience in the following way:

I'm really proud of being a mother, it's such a nice thing, but you don't always know how it's going to change you. It's meant putting the business on hold, at least for now. After nearly ten years in business, we're [my business partner and I] taking some time to re-evaluate the brand...

These words also reveal an evolution in the narrative of passionate work. The designers we interviewed described the early years of their business as a time to experiment, try out new approaches, and “find their style.” However, after five or more years in business, the designers transitioned to a new career phase, one in which they refined their business model but in ways that could accommodate their changing personal circumstances. Here, we see the necessary flexibility of hustling turned into an advantage, allowing the designers to adapt their businesses according to personal circumstances.

Filmmaker Wanuri Kahiu, who at the time of our interview had a small baby, felt the way she was hustling had changed over the course of her career from before she made her film *Pumzi* (2010) to once she became established in the industry:

I don't feel like I have to hustle as much [as before *Pumzi*]. I am hustling, in the sense that I am looking for jobs, and I'm looking for ways to kind of maintain a certain, just life, just to pay bills, and to live. [...] It's more of a balance now, and that at that time it was more tipped towards like anxiety, and heart-attacks, and not knowing where your next meal is coming from, like that kind of really basic grind.

As Kahiu made more films and gained international recognition, the intensity of her hustling changed, but her need or desire to hustle did not. Significantly, having a baby did not mark the transition in her hustling practice and the way she felt about it (from “grind” to “balance”). Instead, the catalyst was becoming more established in her field. Just like the more established fashion designers, Kahiu had built her business to the point where she could exert more control over what she did and when. Again, the ability to be flexible through hustling was a key benefit. Viewing these practices through the lens of hustling helps to illuminate the novel importance of flexibility, a hustling necessity.

5.3 | To hustle or not to hustle?

Over time, the appetite for risk and desire to hustle declined for a few designers and filmmakers in our sample. For example, a womenswear designer (who had recently relocated to Toronto from Montreal and had been in business for nearly 15 years) was wrestling with the decision of whether or not to continue her label. As she said, “I'm not interested in the fashion industry that much anymore. I don't have that passion anymore.” The relentless pace of the industry had exhausted her, and she felt especially burdened by her stockists' external demands and deadlines. In response, this designer downsized her business by severing ties with most of her stockists, transitioned to selling online, and accepted a part-time teaching position at one of the city's fashion schools. She was unsure what the

future held, saying, "I don't know where I will be in a few years," but in the meantime she was still determined to run her business on her own terms.

For filmmaker Natasha Likimani, the precarity of hustling in Nairobi's film industry had an affective toll, as she did not feel she had the option to stop:

I'm in my 30s, I'm not going to start changing careers, it's too late. [...] Now I can go back to news [she was a TV news presenter], but I've gained a lot of weight and that's not a good thing. But I've been thinking about it. Maybe I should go back to news. That's how it is [...] all of us are wondering what the future is and it's pretty unsure. So that's why I say it's a hustle, it's not a career.

Nevertheless, she had "decided to be proactive" about developing her own projects and thus had started a company and shot a pilot for a television show. Likimani wanted something less risky, but she did not feel as if she could stop hustling—it was "too late" for that. So she had to continue moving forward, making the best choices she could to proactively improve her career.

Our participants often reflected upon and understood their work experiences in film and fashion in relation to work experiences more broadly. The millennial designers in our sample had only ever worked in a precarious economy (Moos et al., 2017). Several designers compared their current situation to previous firm-based employment that they perceived as equally precarious. For example, one designer, who took time away for parental leave, was glad she could push pause on her business to spend time with her family and "pick back up" when she was ready. As she admits, the opportunity was difficult: "Running a label and being a Mom is hard, like jumping off a cliff and then building an airplane while you fall." But she also felt that the work–life "balance" she had achieved as a designer and mother would have been nearly impossible in her previous career as an engineer.

Filmmaker Jackie Lebo left a career as a business development manager at a large Internet firm to become a filmmaker, and as she said, "everybody thought I was mad." In her view, this negative reaction was based on perception. To others, the practices that make filmmaking a hustle also make it an unreliable career. Workers with regular salaries and job security, Lebo observed, "get a lot more props from the establishment." Early career filmmaker Barbara Karuana expressed a similar sentiment:

We don't exist within the structures that people have created for what normal life is supposed to look like. We exist outside that sphere. Happily, albeit. We don't have a problem with it; other people have a problem with us.

Non-filmmakers did not understand the filmmaking hustle and how it could constitute "good" work, Karuana knew, but she existed "happily" as a filmmaker. Likewise, Lebo wanted to be a filmmaker and had built a successful business focusing particularly on making sports documentaries.

Here, we wish to reemphasize the importance of agency, which the use of the concept of hustling helps us to recognize more clearly and intentionally. As workers strive to configure their working lives in ways that are meaningful and sustainable (Ikonen, 2020; Warren, 2018), they make conscious choices, weighing advantages and disadvantages. While much creative work literature sees creative workers as complicit in their own exploitation and thus unable to truly lead "good lives" (Duffy, 2017; McRobbie, 2016), we found that designers and filmmakers are acutely aware of the trade-offs that their entrepreneurial work entails. They see their work as affording them unique opportunities even while it creates challenges that sometimes make them want to leave the industry. One designer aptly captured this tension. Reflecting on her own experiences of being a parent compared to those of a friend, who had a year of work-free maternity leave, the designer still saw the benefits:

The idea of having a baby and only focusing on the baby? That would feel like being on holiday. When I had my kids, I was back on email hours later. [...] But then again, I can take holiday when I want. [...] Or

when the kids have a day off from school, taking the day to hang with them is a no brainer. You can't do that if you are working nine to five...

These creatives were not naively exploiting themselves to pursue an ideal of passionate work; where “the good life” hopefully comes later and a “bad” (exploitative) life is now. Rather, they hustled to address the very precarity that could make a creative life “bad” or exploitative in the first place, and in so doing, were continually building lives they found meaningful in the present.

6 | DISCUSSION

In this exploration of hustling in creative industries, we have argued that hustling is a defining feature of entrepreneurial work. For the female creatives in our study, their work is not a “side hustle”—an opportunity to do something fun and creative, with or without financial reward—but rather a full-time career. The logic of hustling structures their business actions.

We found that female designers and filmmakers take on multiple creative and professional roles in the running of their businesses. In both cases, entrepreneurs develop a jack-of-all-trades approach to work, potentially at the expense of developing niche expertise. This approach requires being innovative in the face of challenges, such as engaging in crowdfunding campaigns to overcome limited access to capital or harnessing new digital technologies to access new markets. While the goals, skills, and context of each hustle differ, what remains constant is that hustling is a creative practice designed to counter the effects of precarity and build a “good” life and a “good” career *now*. The creative workers we interviewed clearly revealed their agency as they navigated and built entrepreneurial careers in their chosen field.

In both cases, women entered the creative industries out of a desire to pursue their passions and to be independent creatives—a typical reason for joining these industries (Arvidsson et al., 2010; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2010). However, our findings contest the notion that female creatives have been seduced by the glamour of creative industries and enter them with a “cruel optimism” (Berlant, 2011) that is bound to be unfulfilled (Duffy, 2017; McRobbie, 2016). For the women in our study, hustling was a deliberate choice subject to ongoing calculations about whether the trade-offs were worthwhile. Interestingly, our interviewees tended to perceive of themselves as having “good” jobs, even when they compared these jobs to previous careers in other fields traditionally considered more stable, such as engineering and business development. In the Toronto case, significantly, the designers felt the fashion industry was more hospitable and less precarious for women and mothers. Because female employees in creative industries may face marginalization, particularly as mothers (Stokes, 2017), we think our participants' views likely relate to the fundamentally entrepreneurial nature of hustling. Thus, hustling is not a deviation from the good life, but a way of entrepreneurially making a good life in precarious circumstances—circumstances that are unlikely to end, whether one works in a creative occupation or not (Gill & Pratt, 2008; Ross, 2008).

Our findings also demonstrate that practices and narratives of hustling are not static. Hustling is not a stage of work to move past on the way to “making it.” We found that hustling continues, but a creative's relationship to it changes over time. Various factors shape this relationship, including age, family status, and career stage, and narratives of hustling co-evolve with life and career changes. Motherhood shaped the narratives of designers in Toronto much more than it shaped those of filmmakers in Nairobi. In Nairobi, career stage and degree of establishment were far more defining for the filmmakers in our sample, including ones who had children. Considering intersectionality is thus vital when trying to understand creative careers. Gender was a constant in our study—all our participants were women—but age and parental status, for example, changed the practice of and thinking about hustling among our participants. We would expect other factors—such as working in an industry hub rather than a peripheral market—to also shape the hustle, making accounting for place-based dynamics a vital part of intersectional analysis.

7 | CONCLUSION

Based on 69 interviews with female filmmakers and fashion designers, we have explored narratives and practices of hustling for female creatives working in film and fashion. At a first glance, our cases could hardly be more different. We planned and conducted our empirical studies separately, and we examined two different creative industries in two very different geographic locations. Yet, what we found was remarkably similar. The comparability of our findings presents a powerful story about the nature of being a woman working in the creative industries and the importance of hustling in this context.

Women are marginalized in both the film and fashion industries globally (Dovey, 2012; Stokes, 2015), and the literature offers less insight into their working practices and their own perceptions of these practices. We have contributed to filling this gap, exploring how a hustler's relationship to her work evolves and is shaped by both external factors (such as global industry dynamics) and deeply personal factors (such as age, career stage, and family status). We have shown that hustling means planning around precarity *and* seeing ways to create opportunity out of it. Thus, we define hustling in the creative industries as entrepreneurially navigating precarity to build and sustain creative businesses. As such, we argue that the concept of hustling offers a novel and compelling way to understand contemporary CCI work where the agency of creative workers is foregrounded just as the precarity of their circumstances is not brushed aside. Indeed, we see the value in a hustling approach to the CCIs precisely in the tension between agency and precarity embedded in the concept of hustling.

By offering vital new data about hustling as a mode of *creative* work, we contribute to a body of literature investigating the nature of work in creative industries. The literature tends to have masculinist norms because the subjects under investigation have tended to be male, particularly middle-class and White, creatives living in hubs in the global North (Alacovska & Gill, 2019; Reimer, 2016), a population that is distinctly not representative of the majority of the world's creative workers: by studying the work of women, we help to rectify this macro-level imbalance in the understanding of how gender operates in creative fields. Indeed, just because early CCI research was implicitly gender blind does not mean it was gender neutral (Florida, 2002). Drawing attention to the subjects who form the basis of CCI theorizing, and theorizing on the basis of different subjects—particularly women from peripheral locations—is essential for creating a more inclusive normative base for the field of CCI research.

We have been specifically concerned with the gendered nature of hustling and how female creatives practice hustling and narrate their experiences. Further research is required on how factors, such as disability, race, religious belief, and other identity markers, shape experiences and perceptions of hustling. How might these markers marginalize particular creative workers, and how might these workers in turn attempt to build “good” careers? As the COVID-19 pandemic threatens already precarious circumstances in the creative industries, studying how creative workers make good lives through hustling will become increasingly relevant.

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The authors have no conflicts of interest.

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