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"I feel like I slip through the cracks": governance gaps and the precarity of young filmmakers in Europe

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Although the precarious conditions of the creative industries are generally well explored, there is a lack of systematic studies on the ways in which governance gaps exacerbate the realities of young workers attempting to enter the film industry. Through in-depth interviews with 27 young filmmakers across Europe, this study argues that the industry's current governance framework which is characterised by bureaucratic funding schemes, rigid eligibility criteria, and a reliance on informal networks, actively undermines the entry of skilled individuals from diverse backgrounds. Our findings reveal that young filmmakers do not merely face economic instability, but that they systematically 'slip through the cracks' of existing support structures. Participants report that European and national funding mechanisms are often inaccessible to non-academic, low-income and intersectional identities, thereby effectively reinforcing exclusion rather than fostering diversity. This study highlights a critical disjuncture between policy intentions and lived realities: while EU initiatives aim to support emerging talent and diversity, the governance of these resources favours established players and large-scale productions, leaving newcomers to rely on personal financial capital and unpaid labour. Consequently, the lack of meritocracy is not only a cultural matter but also a structural failure of governance, where the distribution of grants and opportunities reproduces existing inequalities regarding gender, class and socioeconomic background. The paper concludes that without targeted governance reforms to simplify access and address intersectional barriers, the European film industry risks further narrowing the demographic range of professionals able to break through, ultimately limiting the diverse worldviews represented in its output.

KEYWORDS

creative industries, emerging professionals, European film industry, European funding, governance gaps

Introduction

Creative work "is understood to offer the possibility of personal fulfilment or self-actualisation, albeit in return for considerable hard work and an absence of financial security" (Conor et al., 2015: 5). While the film and television sector has historically relied on freelance and project-based labour (Atkinson and Randle, 2013; Blair, 2001), the liberalisation and restructuring of production models—even within public broadcasters—has transformed labour markets from relatively secure and organised systems into "seemingly unstructured and boundaryless external labour markets, where

the borders between “in” and “out” are ambivalent and career prospects chronically uncertain” (Baumann, 2002: 28). This shift has entrenched a culture of precarity, defined by the instability of freelance employment, the prevalence of low-pay or unpaid entry-level jobs, and a lack of social security (Grugulis and Stoyanova, 2012). These conditions disproportionately affect women, particularly mothers, due to the absence of unemployment support, pension contributions, and maternity leave (Conor et al., 2015).

However, while the general conditions of cultural labour are well-documented, existing research often treats precarity as an inevitable economic byproduct of the creative industries, overlooking the specific governance gaps that exacerbate these conditions for young professionals. This article examines the ways in which young people negotiate multiple systemic and cultural obstacles when attempting to enter the field, arguing that their exclusion is not merely a result of market forces but of a governance framework that fails to accommodate emerging, diverse, and non-traditional career pathways.

The European film industry is increasingly recognised as an exclusive environment where entry is dictated less by merit and more by access to financial capital, informal networks, and the ability to navigate complex bureaucratic systems. While EU and national policies ostensibly aim to foster diversity and support emerging talent through funding schemes like Creative Europe, our findings suggest that the governance of these resources often creates barriers rather than bridges. Strict eligibility criteria, high co-financing requirements, and opaque application processes systematically filter out young filmmakers from precarious socioeconomic backgrounds, those without academic credentials, and individuals with intersectional identities (e.g., women, neurodivergent creatives).

This study contributes to the discourse on Cultural and Creative Industries (CCI) by moving beyond a descriptive account of “hard working conditions” to a critical analysis of how governance structures reproduce inequality. By situating the concept of precarity within broader debates on the human condition under post-Fordist regimes (Curtin and Sanson, 2016; Marčeta et al., 2023) and engaging with feminist labour literature (Antcliff, 2005; Antcliff et al., 2007; Blair, 2001), we demonstrate that the “catch-22” faced by young filmmakers—needing connections to get work but needing work to build connections—is a direct consequence of policy designs that favour established players.

Through in-depth interviews with 27 young filmmakers across eight European countries, this paper reveals how participants literally “slip through the cracks” of existing support systems. It argues that without targeted governance reforms that address intersectional barriers and simplify access to resources, the European film industry risks further narrowing the demographic range of professionals able to break through, ultimately limiting the diversity of worldviews represented in its cultural output.

State of the art: young professionals and working conditions in the film industry

Studies on labour in the CCI (Banks, 2007; Mathieu, 2011; McKinlay and Smith, 2009) and the conditions of media

production (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; Mayer, 2011; Mayer et al., 2009) address the strenuous realities of working in the CCI and map out several dimensions of inequity and challenge, such as disproportionate allocation of remunerations and low diversity, especially creating gendered and ethnicity-based disparities of opportunities (Banks, 2017; Eikhof and Warhurst, 2013; Nwonka and Malik, 2018). Holt and Lapenta (2010) support the assessment of the film industry depending on roles and labour terms by pointing out that “the relation between dependence and independence for the individual creative worker is increasingly defined in relation to the market and to industrial employment conditions”. Ashton’s study of the emblematic position of the runner, an entry-level, often low- or unpaid position that is often seen as a “rite of passage” into the film and television industry, shall not go unmentioned here (Ashton, 2015). The screen industries have historically been controlled by white men with middle-class backgrounds – both in Europe (Grugulis and Stoyanova, 2012) and Hollywood (Ramon et al., 2024a; Ramon et al., 2024b). Individuals who fall outside this demographic, namely “the working class, women and people of marginalised genders, people of colour, those with disabilities and those with caring responsibilities” often face hostile conditions in entering and advancing within the film and television sector (Thomas and Einarsdóttir, 2023: 5). Female, non-white and working-class employees struggle to find secure working arrangements and frequently face limitations regarding the types of roles they could occupy. The importance of social capital and networks in the industry reproduces the hegemonic position of white, male, middle-class professionals (Grugulis and Stoyanova, 2012).

As Ross (2000) highlighted in *The Mental Labor Problem*, traditional understandings of the value of art and culture have created a labour paradox, as glorifying perceptions often encourage creatives to accept low wages or even unpaid work. Along these lines, Grenfell and Hardy (2007) argue that young creatives often justify their belief in the intrinsic value of art by denying the very existence of a financial motive behind creative art. Although film professionals have the flexibility to choose their work projects according to their preferences and what is most profitable for them, at the same time with project-based jobs they face the uncertainty of whether they will find a next job and related issues such as health insurance, proper contracts and payments (Curtin and Sanson, 2016; Suwanto and Kulau, 2022), highlighting the lack of national and international measures to ensure more sustainable working conditions for the professionals of the industry (Banks and O’Connor, 2021; Betzler and Leuschen, 2021). However, financial stability along with ensuring diversity are of high importance and even requirements to “produce culturally diverse and relevant products” (McSheaffrey, 2020: 176). The difficult working conditions in the CCI are clearly understood in academia and the ‘real world’ as precarity corresponds with “inequality, insecurity and unstable employment” (Suwanto and Kulau, 2022: 43) and has become a key concept to describe the post-Fordist shift away from standard employment conditions of full-time and security, toward short-term contracts or self-employment (Curtin and Sanson, 2016); a transition connected to financial and social insecurity. Precarious employment is increasingly seen in the contemporary labour market, particularly in CCI, where creativity and autonomy are often exploited to normalise unstable working conditions (Marčeta et al., 2023). Although we know about the general working conditions in the industry, there is a noticeable gap in existing research addressing the specific conditions of young people (Sarikakis et al., 2026). Even

fewer studies focus on capturing and representing young individuals' voices regarding their experiences, perspectives and challenges about their work conditions within the film industry. Previous research has found that young workers and newcomers in film and television are more inclined to agree to unpaid labour than more experienced professionals (Percival and Hesmondhalgh, 2014). As Campbell (2020) points out, economic data collection methods often miss contemporary labour realities of creatives – especially entry-level workers, who frequently combine multiple jobs across the same or different fields to make a living. In his research with young people making a living in the CCI, Percival (2023) found that the overwhelming majority of young creatives were working without monetary compensation, with over 80 per cent of participants performing unpaid labour in the 2-year span of the research project and a considerable amount of that lacking payment being illegal. The study by Willekens et al. (2019) shows that among the audiovisual directors in Europe aged below 35 years, less than 20% have received full remuneration for project development, less than 30% for pre-production, almost 30% for filming, almost 70% for filming for a production company, almost 45% for post-production and less than 20% for promotion. Similar findings are among screenwriters where emerging professionals who received full remuneration are almost 20% for project development, around 10% for writing with their own initiative and over 50% for writing for a production company (Willekens et al., 2019: 30). These conditions discourage young people from pursuing creative careers (McSheaffrey, 2020).

The existing literature indicates that the working conditions in the CCI, including the film industry, are described by precarity in the conditions of labour, with low remuneration, undefined working hours and short contracts. Although there are numerous studies exploring the precarity and conditions of labour in the CCI, direct studies into the experiences of young people in the film industry in Europe are limited. Additionally, while many studies examine youth in film and others focus on youth festivals, there is a significant gap in research regarding the transition to seeking employment in the sector. To address this gap, this study aims to contribute to the collection of testimonies from young professionals and examines the ways in which young people deal with multiple systemic and cultural obstacles in attempting to enter the field and to secure funding for their work. Substantiating often already existing views regarding the status of young filmmakers, which are based on anecdotal evidence and assumptions, by providing empirical data on their lived experiences, this paper seeks to offer insights that may inform policy recommendations and industry practices to better support emerging filmmakers.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore what it means to be young and engaged in creating and working within the European film industry under conditions of precarity. Following full ethical approval¹ and adherence to established ethical procedures, data was collected through focus group interviews; to

enable participation in the study for participants who were not available for focus groups, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were offered as an alternative. The main themes of the questionnaire are:

- What has been your journey entering and navigating the film industry, including the challenges, support, education?
- How do you perceive the film industry's inclusivity, fairness, and opportunities for young filmmakers?
- What changes do you think are needed to promote diversity, meritocracy and social justice?
- What are your thoughts on funding, authenticity and policies in the European film industry, and how can young professionals enhance its competitiveness and inclusivity?

The interviews involved 27 people, aged 18 to 35, who are engaged in professional activities in the field of the film industry and all are located in the European geographical region in Austria, Belgium, Estonia, Germany, Luxembourg, Netherlands, the United Kingdom and Ukraine². Participants were recruited through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling strategies. The authors drew on existing professional networks to refer potential interviewees. In parallel, film schools and alumni organisations across several European countries were contacted directly with the call for participation disseminated through official school communication channels and alumni group chats. This approach enabled the authors to access a geographically diverse sample of emerging filmmakers. Complementary to the in-depth interviews and focus groups, all interviewees participated in a short survey, including demographic data and basic questions. While the interviews and focus groups provided rich, detailed and contextual accounts of participants' experiences in the European film industry, the survey contributed a broader descriptive overview of the sample. In this sense, the survey functioned as a tool for mapping patterns across participants, whereas the interviews enabled a deeper exploration of meanings, contradictions, and lived experiences. Distinct answers were received, reflecting the variety of policies on film funding, requirements for receiving grants and different ethical and cultural peculiarities. Among the participants 14 self-identified as female, 12 as male and 1 as non-binary. Regarding the age range, 13 participants aged 18 to 24, seven respondents aged 25 to 29 and seven people aged 30 to 35. The sample is presented in detail in Table 1.

The interviews were conducted in English and German, lasted 40–60 min, resulting in 295 pages of transcription, between January 2024 and March 2025. The data analysis followed thematic analysis with an inductive approach (Bryman and Bell, 2011; Riger and Sigurvinsdottir, 2016). Topics in the analytic framework are organised by networks of interrelated phenomena within the defined thematic sections, according to Attride-Stirling (2001). Anonymity was maintained for all participants. Participation was fully voluntary and opting out was possible at every stage of the process. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, the researchers prioritised creating conditions in which participants felt comfortable

¹ Ethical clearance No. 20240510_025 from the Institutional Review Board of the Faculty of Social Sciences (IRB) at the University of Vienna.

² Although Ukraine and the United Kingdom are non-EU countries, their respective film industries receive financial support from EU, funding, for example Ukraine from the Creative Europe programme.

TABLE 1 The presentation of the study's sample according to gender, country of residence, primary occupation in the CCI and type of interview they participated in.

Interviewee	Gender	Country of residence	Primary occupation	Type of interview
1	m	Austria	Editing	Focus group
2	m	Austria	Producing, editing, acting	Focus group
3	m	Austria	Directing, screenwriting, editing, voice acting	Focus group
4	f	Austria	Directing, cinematography, editing	Focus group
5	m	Austria	Directing, editing	Focus group
6	m	Estonia	Editing	Interview
7	m	Luxembourg	Producer	Interview
8	m	Austria	Producer	Focus group
9	f	Austria	Scriptwriter	Focus group
10	m	Austria	Acting	Focus group
11	m	Austria	Director, producer	Interview
12	f	Germany	Director	Interview
13	f	Austria	Editor	Focus group
14	f	Austria	Producer	Focus group
15	f	Austria	Acting	Focus group
16	f	Austria	Acting, hair and make-up	Focus group
17	f	Austria	Acting	Focus group
18	f	Austria	Directing	Focus group
19	f	Ukraine	Film promotion	Interview
20	m	United Kingdom	Producer	Interview
21	f	Germany	Directing	Focus group
22	m	Germany	Producing	Focus group
23	nb	Netherlands	Directing, screenwriting	Interview
24	f	Austria	Producing	Focus group
25	m	Belgium	Editing	Interview
26	f	Ukraine	Screenwriting	Interview
27	f	Ukraine	Producing, editing	Interview

to speak openly. This included maintaining a non-hierarchical relationship between researchers and participants and ensuring that interviewer reactions remained non-judgmental.

Additionally, the researchers acknowledge the specific social and professional positions, which shape every level of research's conduction and interpretation. Three of the five researchers fall within the age group of the research participants of this study (18–35) and one of the authors is a young filmmaker themselves, lending a degree of familiarity to the conditions this research inquires on. At the same time, the researchers recognise that such proximity carries both advantages and risks: on one hand, it facilitated an intuitive grasp of participants, e.g. linguistic codes, subcultural references and the structural pressures they navigate; on the other, closeness to a specific social reality can lead to the naturalisation of conditions that warrant critique. The diversity

of positionalities within the team of authors, including different age groups, genders and both EU and non-EU citizens, further stimulated this reflexive practice.

Findings

"The worst fears of nobody being interested, simply came true": entering the film industry

One of the main characteristics in establishing the grounds upon which young people gain experience in the world of filmmaking has been the *point of contact* with the industry. Over half of the study respondents stated involvement in independent projects (17 responses) and on-the-job learning or apprenticeships

(16 responses) as primary experience in the film industry. For 11 participants formal education in film studies represented the point of contact, for 7 participants it was participation in some form of networking and mentorship. In this context, practical experience becomes a crucial factor in breaking into the film industry.

Interviewee 12, currently working as director, emphasised the important experience she gained working at film sets leading to work experience by the time her studies started: “During my studies I already knew every position on the set” in contrast to people from more intellectual backgrounds who were “very surprised how hard the working conditions are in reality”. Similarly, Interviewee 13, working as an editor, mentioned that the key element to enter the industry was the experience she gained during the internship she had to do for her studies, where she also produced a short film as part of the curriculum. Among the support she received was funding for young filmmakers from a regional organisation. Conversely, Interviewee 21 reported a distinct lack of support during her studies: “Nobody actually cared that we had really shitty circumstances to make our graduation films; the worst fears of nobody being interested simply came true”. Consequently, she managed to get her first work as director after almost 5 years, despite her constant efforts. As Interviewee 11, a producer, pointed out, the instability and unpredictability of the European film market create additional barriers. The uncertainty in some countries where production slowdowns and financial insecurities hinder opportunities, exacerbates the difficulties of career progression, such as the experience of Interviewee 11 in Austria: “Many producers and filmmakers are unsure about the future, which has created a temporary standstill in production”.

Regarding initial support structures, most of the participants indicated that they received support from family or friends (19 responses) and industry networking opportunities (15 responses). Three participants obtained governmental funding or grants. Also, participants stated they received alternative forms of funding: crowdfunding and local funding programmes (6 responses each), private investors (4 responses), support from industry networks and film festivals (2 responses each).

Regarding his experience in getting a position in the film industry, Interviewee 22 mentioned the challenges he faced after graduation, as he had to work in a supermarket to make a living; and because of the COVID-19 crisis he got the opportunity to enter and develop within the film industry: “I got lucky that in years 2021, 2022, when there was a lot of filming going on and a lot of people were being sought, I found a few gaps where I was able to move up relatively quickly”. Interviewee 5 chose an alternative way to entering the industry through formal education: he started filming with friends and decided he needed more knowledge so he started taking courses, using YouTube videos and books: “I have read maybe every other book about screenwriting and how it works, and just was trying to, like, bring some projects that I had in my head to life”. Interviewee 2 stated that: “I started on YouTube just for fun. At first, I would create content and share it just because I enjoyed it. Then, I received a job offer from YouTube AdSense and that’s when I started earning money from making videos on YouTube”. Also interesting was the experience of Interviewee 24 who won a youth competition from a national film institute. Interviewee 15 underlined the important role of connections to get informed about opportunities and collaborations and she emphasised the lack

of national support: “Nothing public, it’s all very private”. Finally, Interviewee 18 shared the lack of support she experienced:

“I did not really have the feeling that I was being supported. I mean, at the school I went to [...] we learnt the absolute basics. I googled what further training courses were available and I came across the Film Academy, but I heard everywhere that you cannot get in if you are not already super good and you need a good portfolio. And then, of course, you also have to make films in order to apply. And of course, you also need the necessary money and resources for that” (Interviewee 18).

Interviewee 7, who works as producer, discussing national support and funding, underlined that a key element for him to enter the film industry was that he lives in Luxembourg and the country “invests heavily into film, both financially and in terms of educational work, and networking” along with the national funding, the Luxembourg Film Fund. Conversely, Interviewee 22, living in a cross-border region spanning three European countries, faced challenges with the requirements of national funding complicating filming on international locations, and additionally he did not manage to gain any European funding. This situation highlights some of the key obstacles in the industry. The most significant challenges emerging filmmakers in this study faced were identified as financial constraints (17 responses), balancing personal life and career (13 responses), limited access to resources (11 responses), lack of connections (9 responses), and competition in the industry (8 responses). Interviewee 12 stated that the most demanding for her was the lack of resources: “time and money is getting less and less. I also noticed that shooting times are getting shorter”. She noted that “costs are exploding”. While salaries have improved over time, production companies are not necessarily granted additional funds from distributors, which ultimately reduces the number of shooting days. Interviewee 7 added to the financial challenges the case of “running out of budget, because you are on a very small budget, but have demanding ambition, and then you try to get additional funding.” Drawing upon this, Interviewee 21 mentioned that “you always have to do something else to earn money” and Interviewee 13 shared that for her university internship “many got just 420 or 450 euros, and most did not get paid at all.” Additionally, Interviewee 18 said that “it often feels like you only get funding if you’re associated with certain institutions” and Interviewee 22 shared that his bigger challenge is that he does not meet the criteria for the existing funding:

“I feel like I slip through the cracks. The criteria are so tight. For example, there is support for non-academics—that is not me. There are many programmes for women—that is not me either. Diversity and minorities are considered, and I present myself as an autistic filmmaker, but there is no lobby for that yet, at least not in my country. I honestly do not know how I can finance my work” (Interviewee 22).

Financial constraints affect not only access to the industry, but also the ongoing management of funds at the professional level. Interviewee 9, a scriptwriter, highlighted both the opportunities and limitations within the film industry for young filmmakers. On the one hand, while entering a new industry without prior connections

is challenging, she acknowledged that her country offers spaces for collaboration and support. However, on the other hand, she also pointed to a significant barrier, the lack of visibility and institutional backing for young, innovative filmmakers. Furthermore, an important barrier underlined by many female young professionals is the issue of gender. Interviewee 13 shared that: “There were a lot of men who thought very highly of themselves. I felt watched, like I was a failure, like everything was my fault. During my studies, you were not allowed to say anything to the director”. Interviewee 24 also shared that her challenge was about gender and being intimidated by the technical parts: “There were always five guys standing there, and I was next to them. Even now, I often feel insecure, especially with super-dominant or difficult directors”. Additionally, Interviewee 12 explained that her experiences in gender inequality concern budgets and projects:

“In my country sometimes you are hired because you are a woman. I experience that a lot. There are requests because I am a young woman. But if you look at who does the big budget film in this country, it is still the men. I think you get projects but not the same projects that men get” (Interviewee 12).

Young people’s experiences point to financial and networking challenges. The limited opportunities they have, mainly through personal contacts, underscore the systemic hurdles of the industry. In addition, young people face a lack of meritocracy and fairness.

“In the end, it all comes down to money”: meritocracy in the film industry

The notion of meritocracy in the film industry is often challenged by the reality that factors, such as socioeconomic background, connections and access to financial support play a crucial role in career progression. Discussing the topic of meritocracy³ with the study’s participants, 14 of the 27 respondents noted that the industry does not value meritocracy but that other factors, such as connections or socioeconomic background, are playing a bigger role in career progression. Over two-thirds of the young filmmakers in this study (19 participants) stated that unpaid internships or low-pay opportunities are necessary stepping stones for career progression, while 8 participants explicitly identified this requirement as a prohibitive barrier to entry or career development. This demonstrates participants’ high level of acceptance of unpaid or low-pay opportunities at the early stages of their careers, perceiving such conditions as a naturalised, unquestionable and necessary component of learning, development and progression within the industry. At the same time, they express dissatisfaction with this reality, naming financial constraints as the biggest challenge they face in the industry. While the relevant skillset and education is essential, many young filmmakers struggle to break into the industry without the necessary financial means or an academic background in film. While talent and hard work are essential, the ability to work unpaid

for months, pay for film courses or gain experience on set depends on one’s socioeconomic background. As interviewee 9 stated “In the end, it all comes down to money”. This reality creates a system where “those with financial support or family connections in the industry have a much smoother entry, while others face systemic barriers” expressed Interviewee 8. Interviewee 5 stated that “I cannot say that it [the film industry] is exclusively a merit-oriented industry. Connections and, unfortunately, all the backgrounds and gender also are too important for it to be merit” (Interviewee 5). Adding on the topic of meritocracy, Interviewee 20 noted:

“If you’re a woman, you probably will struggle because most of the executives are old white men. And it’s very hard to fight with stereotypes about certain genders in their mind. If you’re poor, you will struggle because you won’t be able to support yourself while you’re building your career” (Interviewee 20).

The importance of connections was underlined also by Interviewee 6 who said “most of the jobs I found so far are by people who knew me, or their friends, or the people they know. So yes, networking is probably the most important thing.” Interviewee 3 stated his need for better networking opportunities in the industry:

“I would like to have easier networking opportunities, more of that, so we can voice our opinions. Institutions with local initiatives, such as “Cinema house,” could invite young people to open days, to activate, to ignite passions in people, show what can be done, teach the job to people, because I feel like it’s kind of restricted.” (Interviewee 3).

Moreover, Interviewee 16 stated that “if you have connections or money, you get further than just working hard”. Interviewee 15 added on this the perspective of socioeconomic differences: “In the lower class, there are hardly any people who make films that can earn money”. Interviewee 12 also referred to people who “do not work as much as they should but still get the projects,” while Interviewee 7 said that “on one hand, there is a certain meritocracy as if you manage to do films that captivate audiences, that will be honoured. [...] On the other hand, I have been confronted with a lot of instances of nepotism or established production companies having certain favours.”

Interviewee 6 described working long hours, often 16 per day, without proper compensation. Despite being passionate about the film, the pay never covered his basic living expenses. He acknowledges that, even for directors, the drive to create something authentic is important, but financial support is still essential for survival. Very long working hours were also shared by Interviewee 20:

“I struggled a lot, because usually I worked very long hours, from like 10 hours per day to 14-15 hours per day as a video editor, and people on set, my friends worked even more, but it established a good base and a fair amount of experience that helped me to switch from a job of video editor to visual effects coordinator” (Interviewee 20).

Young filmmakers underlined the need for more equal work conditions in the film industry and highlighted the key elements for

3 The term meritocracy, understood in the context of personal, professional and social development based on the quality of work of the individual, without negative consequences of their nationality and socioeconomic background (O’Neill and Wayne, 2022: 2).

better support of emerging professionals. Interviewee 12 claimed that more time would “allow more groups to participate in things” and more diverse stories to be heard and she underlined the need for regular working hours and space for people who have children. Interviewee 23 underlined the important role of stated-funded mentoring programmes for young people, while Interviewee 13 emphasised regulations which could “break the circle in the private sector because there are no regulations and no requirements for the people on set.” Adding to this, Interviewee 20 argued that more equal working conditions can be supported through “grants for people with diverse backgrounds, for women, for transgender people, for people from poor countries” to increase the visibility of professionals from different backgrounds. Interviewee 5 expressed his concerns that many European grants are allocated only for local citizens, without including migrants. Moreover, Interviewee 21 highlighted the importance of young people’s inclusion in committees where decisions are actually made. Finally, Interviewee 18 called for a broader need for social awareness underlining that a good film is not only the quality of the final product, but should be also connected to fairness, equality and inclusion through the process of film’s production. Interviewee 19 emphasised the important role that more experienced professionals have:

“Young people have new viewpoints on things, and they are more open to this world, most of them, I hope. So, more experienced people have to let the young filmmakers become someone. To offer them opportunities and possibilities on their way” (Interviewee 19).

“Make the industry more life-friendly”: policy responses and shortcomings

To explore industry’s working and payment conditions, the European Audiovisual Observatory, IRIS Plus (Lacourt et al., 2023) published a report that examines how the European Directive 2019/790 on Copyright and Related Rights in the Digital Single Market (CDSM Directive) aims to strengthen the position of audiovisual professionals regarding their rights for the use of their works, including also considerations about fair remuneration for creators in the audiovisual sector, without specifically addressing young or emerging professionals.

In an attempt to address these inequalities, the European Union has developed a set of concrete regulatory and funding instruments targeting the audiovisual sector. Most prominently, the Creative Europe Programme and particularly its MEDIA strand provides targeted support for emerging filmmakers through schemes such as training and talent labs (European Commission, 2020). In parallel, the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (Directive, 2018) requires on-demand services to ensure at least 30% European works in their catalogues, indirectly creating demand for new and diverse productions, including those by early-career creators. Furthermore, state aid to the film sector is governed by the Cinema Communication, which explicitly allows Member States to fund culturally significant audiovisual works and support talent development under cultural objectives (European Commission, 2013). Additionally, the European Union financially supports national film industries as both cultural and economic sectors. Through the Recovery and

Resilience Facility, the EU has allocated over €15 million to fund project in Spain with significant cinematographic, cultural or social value (European Commission, 2020). This funding specifically targets documentary projects and those involving young filmmakers, offering them a platform to showcase their work and contribute to the industry’s development (European Commission, 2020). Thus, the EU’s strategic commitment is further reflected in the Media and Audiovisual Action Plan (MAAP), introduced in December 2020, and in specific funding criteria under the Creative Europe MEDIA Programme, where support for emerging talent is included as an assessment criterion in film slate development (European Commission, 2026).

Additionally, the EU approved the “Creative Europe” programme, which aims to support the cultural and creative fields for 2021–2027, and in the year 2023, it allocated €5.5 million for distribution and €16 million for the “Films on the Move” programme, which encourages film distribution companies to invest in pan-European movie promotion (Pasikowska-Schnass, 2021).

In addition to these policies, the EU supports the film industry through public funding. Between 2016 and 2019, the average budget of European films consisted of 26.3% direct public funding, with a total 91.7% of films having some form of direct public sponsorship. The average investment in small-market films per movie climbed by more than 50% from 2016 to 2020, from around €580,000 to €870,000, due to both higher direct state funding and production incentives (Fioroni, 2023).

Regarding the young film professionals, the European Commission under the Creative Europe programme for 2021–2023 has co-funded 16 platforms that highlight European emerging artists, including filmmakers, and their work throughout Europe and around the world. These platforms aim to influence artists’ futures, including their recognition, professional growth and artistic ability (European Commission, 2023). Between 2017 and 2020, this programme paid over 1,000 artists for around 7,000 days of work and more than 6,000 emerging artists gained recognition and won awards in their fields (UNESCO, 2024). Although EU policies establish a framework for supporting young filmmakers, the role of individual member states remains vital. The success of emerging filmmakers often depends on how states implement complementary strategies and localised action plans. By aligning national efforts with EU initiatives, member states create an enabling environment that nurtures talent and innovation.

The interviewees shared their experiences about the sources of funding for emerging moviemakers in Europe. Interviewee 7 explained that his work is financed mainly by Luxembourg Film Fund which is partly funded through Creative Europe. He noted that even though Luxembourg Film Fund is easily accessible, funding through Creative Europe is less accessible and perceived to be intended for bigger productions. Interviewee 7 highlighted the need for grants dedicated to emerging filmmakers: “I would love to see smaller grants coming from Creative Europe, because that would be really for emerging filmmakers”. He further underlined the importance of less complicated bureaucracy: “I would love to see 50 K grants that are less bureaucratic and easy to access”. Interviewee 3 highlighted the challenging system that creates considerable barriers for young filmmakers to receive any funding:

“The requirements are crazy, and it’s scary, so it repels people from attempting to get those funding. As a young producer, all I want is just a place where I can go, I say, this is what I have, this is the message I want to show, how can you help?” (Interviewee 3).

Another important point Interviewee 7 made is the difficulty of finding grants in cooperation with production companies in other EU countries and he suggested the establishment of “smaller grants for pan-European productions.” Adding to this discussion, Interviewee 14 shared the complexity of navigating through the process to receive funding and to gain relevant information: “It is very confusing to look at the website and get information. I knew that I had to go through a thousand steps until I could find it.” Interviewee 1 argued that “if the budget was there, I think way more young people would be able to contribute to the landscape of content and filming.” Interviewee 24 confirmed the demanding procedure and pointed out that an application can only be successful with the support of people who have grant writing experience and already have gone through these application processes.

Interviewee 20 shared that with the funding from the EU-funded cultural programme implemented in Ukraine, House of Europe, his team had an opportunity to shoot a short film about “an invisible group” of minors in Ukraine “to highlight their presence in the society.” He underlined that in contrast to commercial projects, in this project there are no “creative limitations” and the payments were in time. Additionally, Interviewee 23 mentioned the financial support they received on a national level, from an EU country, to shoot a film along with a funded mentorship programme called Video Power, as well as on European level from ARTE, the German-French public broadcaster, which funded another film of theirs. Interviewee 6 explained though, that even if a student “gets lucky” and receives 10K, “it is not going to be enough, because normally you need more and every director always invests his own money.” As part of his own experience, he mentioned small university funding he received, 2 K Euro support, additionally to free access to high-quality equipment. However, many participants mentioned they manage all the costs by themselves and they never secured any national or European funding, despite multiple attempts.

Participants underlined the need for diversity and equality in the industry. Interviewee 7 argued for EU regulations for funding which “exceed the national borders and expand to the EU borders,” which supports collaboration among professionals from different EU countries. “I am a director and it was a production in my country but it was shot in another EU city, because there the state supports filmmaking,” explained Interviewee 12. Additionally, young people argued for “more diverse team constellations” as Interviewee 4 stated. Interviewee 1 highlighted that young people have a very important role in the industry as creators and culture actors:

“I feel like in many cases that the industry is trying not to leave a lot of the share of the revenue with the young creators. I don’t feel like this is how it should be, because young people should also see the worth of what they’re doing, because actually this is the art that is part of the culture we were creating and developing, and what people enjoy. The creation is the art, and the industry, I feel like it’s having too much of the share” (Interviewee 1).

To promote young people, the EU should not only provide “European funding especially for small projects,” stated Interviewee 23, but also “for people with less experience,” noted Interviewee 17. Interviewee 5 emphasised that the EU should offer “more opportunities for young people and effectively inform people” referring to the communication of existing fundings that can be incomprehensible for first-time applicants. Finally, to promote diversity, Interviewee 20 suggested that the EU should “support professionals from different backgrounds” and Interviewee 15 argued for implementation of diversity quotas in film production: “major organisations should be required to hire a certain percentage of diverse individuals, including directors, to ensure fair representation”. Additionally, young people called to “more efficiently equip young filmmakers to respond to the demands of the industry” (Interviewee 6), such as “more mentorship programmes” (Interviewee 23) and “implementation of film education to schools to inspire people of young ages” (Interviewee 5).

Moreover, participants placed emphasis on EU funding that fosters “artistic innovation, rather than wide audiences and profit-oriented productions” (Interviewee 17) and argued for “more experimental projects and inclusion of young people at the funding bodies” (Interviewee 14). Another important issue raised is the improvement of working conditions in the industry. Finally, Interviewee 22 argued for the need to make the industry more life-friendly and to prevent precarious working conditions: “There is a need for social security and long-term career perspectives, necessary for family and personal planning. If the film industry does not offer this, talented individuals will leave the industry” (Interviewee 22).

Discussion

The interviewees’ emphasis on unpaid practical experience to succeed in the film industry is largely based on the necessity of building credibility as young professionals. This view is so widely accepted and normalised that it is listed almost unquestioned as one of the conditions to accept. The catch-22 is glaring obvious, yet, largely unquestioned: without connections, entry is almost impossible, which means proving one’s reliability and skills is more difficult without access to projects, which in turn is extremely difficult without connections. Furthermore, an additional systemic question to be addressed is also the one on the value and recognition of Higher education in the sector: not only technical skills are necessary, but also a deeper and broader understanding of storytelling approaches and the role of film in human cultures, which both are important elements in the education of future film professionals. Yet, this potential on behalf of institutions and young people remains largely untapped and uncredited.

Young filmmakers describe conditions of insecurity and instability in regard to employment in the film industry, also reported by Suwanto and Kulau (2022). They highlight the challenge and importance of *connections* as a requirement to enter the industry; pointing at the same time to the crucial role of participating in independent projects and practical experience, they are aware that academic qualifications are not valued highly enough in the sector.

The experience is very similar across all interviewees' testimonies, pointing to the fact that the film industry has established ways of "doing things", that is, established cultures with inherent acute and chronic problems. The challenges discussed in this study, together with those in existing studies (Curtin and Sanson, 2016; Suwanto and Kulau, 2022) of established or experienced workers, leave no doubt that structurally, the industry relies not only on personal unpaid labour overall, but also systems of self-subsidising and sponsoring, systems of self-exploitation under conditions of very little choice.

The findings of this study demand a critical engagement with the intersectional nature of precarity in cultural work. While the general conditions of insecure employment are well-documented, our data reveals how these conditions are disproportionately exacerbated by gender and class, aligning with the theoretical frameworks of Antcliff (2005) and Blair (2001). Antcliff's work on broadcasting highlights how informal recruitment practices and the reliance on "who you know" systematically exclude women and working-class individuals, a dynamic clearly mirrored in our participants' accounts of networking as a primary barrier. The "catch-22" described by our respondents—where one cannot gain experience without connections, yet cannot build connections without experience—is not merely a logistical hurdle but a structural mechanism of exclusion that reproduces the hegemony of white, middle-class males, as theorised by Grugulis and Stoyanova (2012).

Furthermore, the concept of "precarity" in our findings extends beyond economic instability to encompass what Curtin and Sanson (2016) describe as the "human condition under post-Fordist regimes," where the burden of risk is shifted entirely onto the individual worker. Our participants' narratives of self-funding projects and working 16-h days without compensation illustrate Blair's (2001) argument regarding project-based labour: the "freedom" of freelance work is often a euphemism for the absence of social protection. Crucially, this precarity is gendered. As Conor et al. (2015) argue, the lack of maternity leave and social security in the creative industries acts as a specific filter against women, particularly mothers. Our data supports this, with female participants explicitly linking their insecurity to gendered power dynamics on set and the allocation of lower-budget projects to women. The "meritocracy" claimed by the industry is thus revealed to be a myth that masks the operation of class and gender privileges; as Banks (2017) suggests, "creative justice" remains elusive when the entry costs of the industry are so high that they preclude participation from all but the economically privileged.

Finally, the discussion on funding reveals a disconnect between policy intentions and lived realities. While EU regulations aim to foster diversity, our participants perceive these mechanisms as bureaucratic barriers that favour established players. This aligns with Marčeta et al. (2023) recent analysis of labour in the cultural sector, which suggests that without targeted, accessible interventions, structural inequalities will persist. The frustration expressed by Interviewee 22, who feels he "slips through the cracks" of diversity criteria, indicates that current policy frameworks lack the nuance to address intersectional identities (e.g., autism combined with non-academic status). Therefore, the industry's reliance on "passion" and "self-exploitation" is not an

accidental byproduct but a functional requirement of its current economic model, one that systematically filters out diverse voices.

Many interviewees described working long hours, often 16 per day, without proper compensation and unable to cover their basic living expenses, underlining the need for more regular working hours and tolerance for individual situations, such as parenting. The studies by Percival and Hesmondhalgh (2014) and Percival (2023) similarly present young film professionals vulnerable to illegal unpaid labour, a finding which is strongly corroborated by our data. Campbell (2020) also pointed out that entry-level workers combine multiple jobs to make a living, a strategy our participants described not as a choice but as a necessity for survival.

Discussing the topic of *meritocracy* with the study's participants, half of the respondents noted that industry does not value meritocracy but that other factors, such as connections or socioeconomic background play a bigger role in career progression. As industry connections significantly impact access to opportunities, these conditions discourage young people to pursue creative careers, as confirmed by McSheaffrey (2020). Participants observed that young people with financial support or family connections in the industry have a much smoother entry, while others face systemic barriers. This leads to concerns with regard to *socioeconomic* differences participants pointed to the fact that people from lower socioeconomic classes bear a double burden, given that few professionals can earn a living in this field. This observation aligns with Grugulis and Stoyanova (2012), who confirmed the important role of the social capital that reproduces the dominant male positions and roles in the industry.

Young people underlined the need for *diversity* and *equality* in the industry. Among other discriminative factors, many professionals emphasised challenges regarding gender. Female professionals expressed feeling insecure with dominant male directors, facing challenges in technical roles, being hired to cover gender quotas. In this picture, men still receive higher budgets and better projects. Many female professionals reported experiences of sexism, confirming that they noticed men receive better opportunities than female professionals. This finding aligns with the Conor et al. (2015) study, confirming women's underrepresentation among cultural workers as well as Thomas and Einarsdóttir's (2023) study on the impact of diversity schemes: they emphasised the challenges faced by female professionals when entering and developing in the film industry.

Another topic highlighted by the participants is that on a national level they do not receive *visibility* and institutional backing for innovative production by young filmmakers. Young people resent the lack of space for weird, new and different productions. These limitations in terms of openness and creative experimentation restrict clear career pathways for emerging filmmakers, leaving them without role models or established routes to success. Finally, young filmmakers reported that national funds are more accessible compared to European funds, as the latter were meant for bigger productions, and highlighted the need for grants dedicated to emerging filmmakers with less experience and small projects, with less complicated bureaucracy.

More specifically, the findings align with broader concerns about the structural challenges, meritocracy, barriers, favouritism and selective processes that young filmmakers face when entering the

industry. The study clearly shows that precarity, the additional labour of networking and connections start from entry level and accompany creative labourers also at later stages in their careers, as emphasised also by [Grugulis and Stoyanova \(2012\)](#).

Conclusion

Young professionals' experiences in the European film industry echo the conditions of labour in the CCI overall: they deal with poor working conditions, as they receive short-term contracts with undefined working hours. Unpaid internships or low-pay opportunities force them to seek additional jobs to earn a living. As a result, many young professionals struggle to balance their personal life and career, underlining the need for better working conditions that promote regular working hours and support for parental roles and care. While hands-on training and participation in productions are essential, they do not fully shield young filmmakers from the systemic barriers of uncertainty, financial constraints and selective funding structures.

Career progression is strongly influenced by factors such as socioeconomic background, gender, networking opportunities and access to financial support. The lack of meritocracy in the industry is reflected not only in the working opportunities, but also in the process of awarding grants and scholarships, both as means of support and as symbols of esteem that would further their legitimacy in the industry and hence open up further opportunities.

Young filmmakers further reflect on challenges to navigate within the industry, primarily financial barriers. The EU funding mechanisms are often demanding in terms of meeting requirements as well as complicated to navigate administratively. An additional barrier young filmmakers in this study perceived is that they feel like most funding schemes do not apply to early-career professionals involving multiple EU countries, as the EU imposes strict national restrictions and requirements for co-productions. Even though a few young people received EU funding, still they have to rely on their own resources to make a film because of the low support, meanwhile the majority of young people have never received support from the EU and they mainly seek financial support among their networks such as family and friends. In this sense, many young filmmakers are "slipping through the cracks" of funding schemes, complicating European collaboration on a small scale with European funds often inaccessible for young filmmakers and national or smaller funds creating funding disparities between European countries through citizenship or residency requirements and in many cases including restrictions on collaboration beyond national borders. In navigating these schemes, it is understandable that young filmmakers express a desire for low-threshold, accessible funds that allow for easy European cooperation. It is another question though, how realistic it is that these wishes will actually be fulfilled, especially regarding the seemingly low priority of (independent) film funding in the 2028–2034 European Union budget as perceived by industry representatives ([Dams, 2026](#); [SAA, 2026](#)).

This raises a bigger question of private and public responsibility: While more funds would naturally be a relief for the industry at large, meritocracy in the audiovisual sector is an issue of industry practice and as such regulatory solutions will

reach their limitations. Ultimately, responsibility lies with the sector to change practices towards a more open and diverse environment, as leaving these issues unaddressed could lead to fatal repercussions for the industry itself. Industry elitism and gate-keeping represents the risk of limiting socioeconomic and creative diversity in the industry and of the sector growing detached from audiences. Research suggests that especially young audiences prefer specific and authentic storytelling that showcase a diverse set of voices ([Sarikakis et al., 2025](#)).

We argue that the film industry should conceptualise emerging talents as the future leaders of the film industry, particularly given the advancement into senior roles should not follow a strictly linear "working your way up" pathway, based on age and experience, but rather be guided by creative vision. The industry itself bears the responsibility to create sustainable career pathways for emerging talents. If (unfair) barriers and working conditions that are not considered "life-friendly", as reported by the participants of this study, persist, it is likely that more young people will leave the film industry – at least those that suffer from its often unmeritocratic barriers or cannot "afford" its precarious conditions – and with them, their diverse voices and embodied knowledges.

Emerging professionals themselves highlight that, as both young individuals and creators, they play a vital role in shaping the creative and cultural heritage of the film industry. They need the support of more experienced professionals, financial support and a constructive environment to develop their skills and gain confidence in their place as they contribute to build a sustainable and competitive European film industry.

This study's participants expressed a sense of frustration as they are left navigating a highly exclusive industry, pointing out the pivotal role of industry connections, the lack of institutional backing for young filmmakers and further structural barriers that disproportionately disadvantage those without inherited social and economic capital. Public policy and funding mechanisms alone will not suffice to address these conditions, given both the scale of need and limited capacities of existing support structures. A concerted effort to cultivate meritocratic, "life-friendly" conditions from the industry itself would appear essential to addressing these dynamics. In case of absence of such structural reforms, the sector is essentially risking putting its own sustainability in jeopardy – both in regard to what audiences want to see and to what degree a largely homogenous industry can meet these expectations, as well as young people potentially leaving the industry or not pursuing a career in the audiovisual sector at all. It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide for concrete solutions for policymakers and the industry. Rather, we wanted to open up renewed discussion on the chronically unaddressed labour conditions of young filmmakers that are persistent and worth addressing. [Sarikakis et al. \(2024\)](#) have addressed this topic concretely from a policy recommendation perspective, proposing, among other things, a youth-centric industry policy and the institutionalisation of youth development in the form of funding, educational access and distribution.

This study points to several areas that warrant further scholarly attention: More systematic cross-national research in Europe among this demographic is needed to explore how these conditions shape their motivation, as well as the content of their work, ideally complemented by large-scale quantitative work on the position of young workers in the sectors. The impact of artificial intelligence on

the working conditions on specifically emerging filmmakers with low to no industry standing represents an urgent and largely unexamined issue. Finally, while public policy has long been a concern of social science research, the self-governance of the audiovisual industry remains underresearched and undertheorised. To comprehensively understand the governance of the sector, future work should examine what the industry does and could do to support young filmmakers, as well as how regulatory frameworks might be implemented not only as top-down mechanisms but as instruments for systemic change.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because the informed consent signed by the research participants does not provide for open share data. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to Katharine Sarikakis, katharine.sarikakis@univie.ac.at.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Institutional Review Board Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Vienna Rathausstraße 19/2/3-4 1010 Vienna. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

KS led the research design and review of the manuscript. AC, SH, GR, and MY have done the literature review, conducted the

interviews and wrote the draft of the manuscript. AC and SH conducted the data analysis.

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Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The author(s) declared that generative AI was not used in the creation of this manuscript.

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