

PANDEMIC-DRIVEN SHIFTS IN CAREER AMBITIONS: EXPLORING THE RISE OF MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS AMONG VISUAL ART STUDENTS

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Abstract—This study examines how the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced career trajectories and mental health awareness among final-year visual art students at the Academy of Visual Arts (AVA) at Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU). A mixed-methods approach was adopted, involving a retrospective analysis of annual survey data (2021–2023) combined with qualitative reflections. Percentages of student interest in varied creative career pathways, including art therapy, were compared. Among 122, 110, and 96 final-year students surveyed in 2021, 2022, and 2023 respectively, interest in art therapy declined from 21.6% (in 2021) to 13.6% (in 2023), yet remained above pre-pandemic estimates. Overall, the results show a continuing preference for roles offering independence and flexibility, with freelance careers and entrepreneurship retaining moderate appeal. Despite a decrease in direct aspirations for art therapy, mental health awareness remains an enduring theme among visual art students. These findings highlight the need for curricular reforms integrating art-based mental health advocacy, entrepreneurial skills, and technological proficiencies to equip graduates for a post-pandemic creative ecosystem.

Index Terms—Art Therapy, Career Aspiration, Post-Pandemic Resilience, Visual Art Education.

I. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted numerous industries, necessitating rapid adaptation to remote modalities, a surge in digital platforms, and evolving market demand [1]. In the arts, especially among those on the cusp of graduation, the pandemic presented both challenges and new opportunities: galleries closed, public events were canceled, and anxiety about future job stability soared [2]. Such conditions arguably intensified the demand for flexible, socially conscious, and sometimes digitally oriented career paths.

At the Academy of Visual Art (AVA) at Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU), final-year students faced unprecedented uncertainty but also discovered alternative channels for showcasing their artistic talent, ranging from entrepreneurial ventures to therapeutic engagements. Preliminary investigations have revealed that art therapy has emerged as a viable pathway for some students, reflecting broader developments in the creative and cultural workforce toward community engagement and social well-being [3].

This study builds upon previous work by not only examining students' interest in art therapy but also comparing a wide range of job aspirations, as evidenced by data collected from 2021 to 2023. Thus, it contributes to the growing body of literature on how crises spur the re-examination of personal goals and how the arts can serve as vehicles for both self-expression and sustainable employment [4].

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

III.

A. *The Creative and Cultural Workforce Since COVID-19*

The pandemic has profoundly reshaped the creative industries worldwide. Early lockdowns and social distancing policies have led to immediate unemployment or project cancellations for many cultural workers [5]. In response, creative professionals harnessed digital technologies, such as virtual galleries and online artist cooperatives, to expand their global reach and adapt their business models [2]. Entrepreneurial resilience has become increasingly significant, reflecting a shift away from conventional institutional roles [4]. This growing emphasis on

entrepreneurial and flexible practices underscores a parallel rise in the significance of mental health considerations, particularly in creative fields where individual expression and emotional engagement are central.

B. Pandemic Impacts on Mental Health and Art Therapy

The COVID-19 pandemic underscores the importance of mental health as a critical public health concern. Mental Health, WHO issues during this period range from mild anxiety to more severe manifestations, such as behavioral and emotional abnormalities [1]. Art therapy has emerged as a valuable tool to address mental health crises in response to these challenges. Art therapy encompasses a variety of therapeutic approaches, including theatre therapy, dance movement psychotherapy, body psychotherapy, music therapy, and visual arts-based practices such as drawing, painting, and crafts [6]. By engaging individuals in creative processes, art therapy aims to improve mental health and effectively treat mental illness.

Art therapy has become an integral component of the therapeutic sector and is widely used in recovery and treatment procedures [7]. Its unique approach employs integrative techniques that engage the mind, body, and soul in ways that verbal expression alone cannot achieve [8]. This holistic engagement has contributed to the growing popularity of art therapy, especially in mental health care. It provides a recovery-oriented, person-centered approach that addresses emotional, spiritual, social, and clinical needs [8]. The foundational principle of art therapy is rooted in the belief that artistic expression facilitates healing and enhances overall well-being [9].

Scientific evidence has increasingly supported the efficacy of art therapy in managing mental health problems. Studies have indicated that art therapy can help control symptoms associated with psychosocially challenging behaviors, slow cognitive decline, and improve the quality of life of individuals with mental illnesses. Furthermore, it fosters self-expression, emotional regulation, and improved interpersonal relationships, making it a powerful therapeutic tool [10]. Within the broader spectrum of creative arts therapy, visual art therapy has gained recognition for its distinct and effective methodologies. As a complementary treatment, visual art therapy has shown significant improvements in patients' mental health [11], demonstrating its value as an adjunct to conventional mental health services.

The pandemic amplified the need for mental health interventions, particularly because it brought widespread stress, anxiety and depression to the forefront. Young adults and university students are especially vulnerable to heightened psychological distress during this period [12]. Consequently, therapeutic and well-being interventions, including art therapy, have gained substantial attention. Academic contexts have also seen a shift, with students becoming increasingly interested in leveraging creative skills for therapeutic or communal purposes. This trend reflects the growing recognition of the potential of visual art to address emotional and social challenges [6].

C. Emerging Career Pathways: Beyond Art Therapy

While mental health-oriented roles are on the rise, the creative workforce is also witnessing growth in entrepreneurship, freelancing, and technology-driven art—areas students increasingly regard as dynamic and flexible in a precarious labor market [3]. For universities, these developments raise curricular questions regarding how to incorporate business acumen, digital literacy, and community engagement into visual art programmes—in the broader context of diversified, flexible career directions that have taken root since the pandemic.

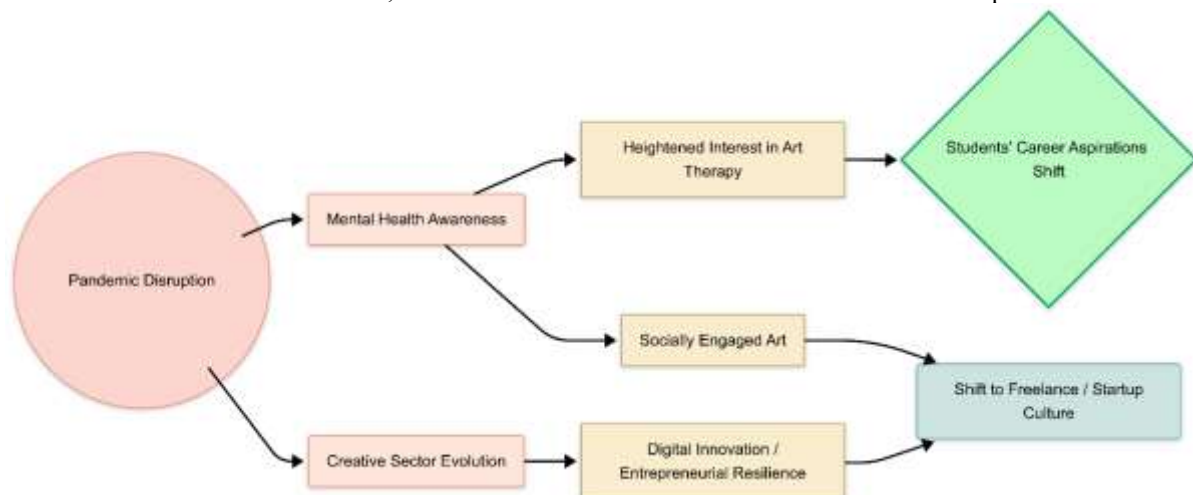


Fig. 1. Conceptual Framework of Pandemic-Influenced Career Aspirations

This study aimed to examine how COVID-19 influenced career aspirations and mental health awareness among final-year art students at AVA of HKBU as illustrated in Fig. 1, and explore the potential role of art as a medium for coping, social connection, and emotional expression during and beyond the pandemic. The null hypothesis (H_0) tested was as follows: the proportion of job aspiration responses was the same across all groups.

IV. METHODS AND MATERIALS

V.

A. Study Design and Participants

The author as major teaching staff of AVA's final year students' core course "Professional Practice for Visual Artists" conducts an annual survey to assess the career readiness of final-year students. The course is conducted in the first class during the second semester of each academic year. One of the key questions included in the survey was, **"What are your job aspirations?"** This multiple-choice question allows students to select more than one dream job from a predefined list (Table 1). Participation in the survey was restricted to final-year students at AVA of HKBU.

To examine trends in job aspirations from 2021 to 2023, a retrospective approach was adopted. This method combined the quantitative analysis of survey data with qualitative reflections on students' career preferences, providing a comprehensive understanding of their aspirations and the factors influencing their choices.

B. Data Collection Instruments

Job Aspiration Survey: A printed questionnaire was distributed to final year students in the lecture room at the end of the 2nd semester in 2021 (n = 122), 2022 (n = 110), and 2023 (n = 96). Respondents were selected from a list of established career trajectories within the creative and cultural workforce in seven categories (see Table 2). Multiple selections were allowed, and open-text fields permitted additional aspirations that were not captured by the predefined categories. Each year, the cohort received the same core questionnaire, permitting longitudinal comparisons.

C. Data Analysis

Quantitative Analysis: Percentages of student demographics and percentage of students indicating each job aspiration were computed. Chi-square analysis was used for statistical analysis. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

VI. RESULTS

VII.

A. Demographics of students who participated the survey

Table 1. Demographics of students who participated in the survey.

	2021	2022	2023
<i>Total number</i>	122	135	136
<i>Male</i>	24 (19.7%)	23 (17.0%)	26 (19.1%)
<i>Female</i>	98 (80.3%)	112 (83.0%)	110 (80.9%)

Demographics of students who participated in the survey are summarized in Table 1. The chi-square test showed no significant difference in the gender proportion across of 3-year groups ($p > 0.05$).

B. Quantitative Findings: 2021–2023 Job Aspiration Trends

From the 122 students surveyed in 2021, 110 in 2022, and 96 in 2023, Table 2 presents the percentages of students who identified each career track. Fig. 3 reflects a bar chart illustrating these year-to-year changes. Key Observations are (1) Art/Design/Creative Director remains popular; its share decreased substantially from 58.9% in 2021 to 37.3% in 2023—a drop that reflects a significant shift in career aspirations likely influenced by the pandemic's impact on the creative industries; (2) Independent Artist and Freelancer roles remain consistently high, peaking at 61.5% (Independent Artist in 2022) and 54.8% (Freelancer in 2021); (3) Entrepreneurship/Start-ups maintained moderate but steady interest, with 24.2% in 2021 and 19.1% by 2023; (4) Art Therapists showed a clear decline from 21.6% in 2021, 15.6% in 2022, and 13.6% in 2023, but these figures remained above any pre-pandemic estimates.

While several indicators (e.g., aspirations for Creative Director positions) displayed noticeable fluctuations, the Chi-Square test revealed a significant difference in the proportion of "Art Therapy" between the groups 2021 and 2022 ($p = 0.036$), 2021 and 2023 ($p = 0.036$) (Fig. 2).

Table 2. Job aspiration choices and percentage of students who identified each career track.

Frequency of Job Aspiration Choices from Final Year Visual Art Students at AVA, HKBU				
Workforce Category	Job Aspiration	Student % in Specific Data Years		
		2021 (n=122) Peak-Pandemic	2022 (n=135) Early Post-Pandemic	2023 (n=136) Post-COVID Context
Management	Art / Design / Creative Director	59.8	30.4	36.0
	Management Level of Brands	9.0	8.1	14.7
Entrepreneurship	Entrepreneurship / Start-ups	24.6	15.6	17.6
	Studio / Design House Owner	50.0	36.3	44.9
	Art Trading	9.8	8.1	8.8
	Art Consultant	6.6	3.7	5.9
	Independent Artist	54.1	36.3	48.5
	Freelancer	55.7	42.2	50.0
Heritage & Curation	Museum / Gallery Curator	34.4	23.7	30.9
Education	Visual Art Teacher	36.1	34.1	32.4
Art Therapy & Wellbeing	Art Therapist	20.5	11.1	11.0
Creative-Tech Integration	Art Tech Development	5.7	5.2	5.1
Others	Others	5.7	6.7	5.1

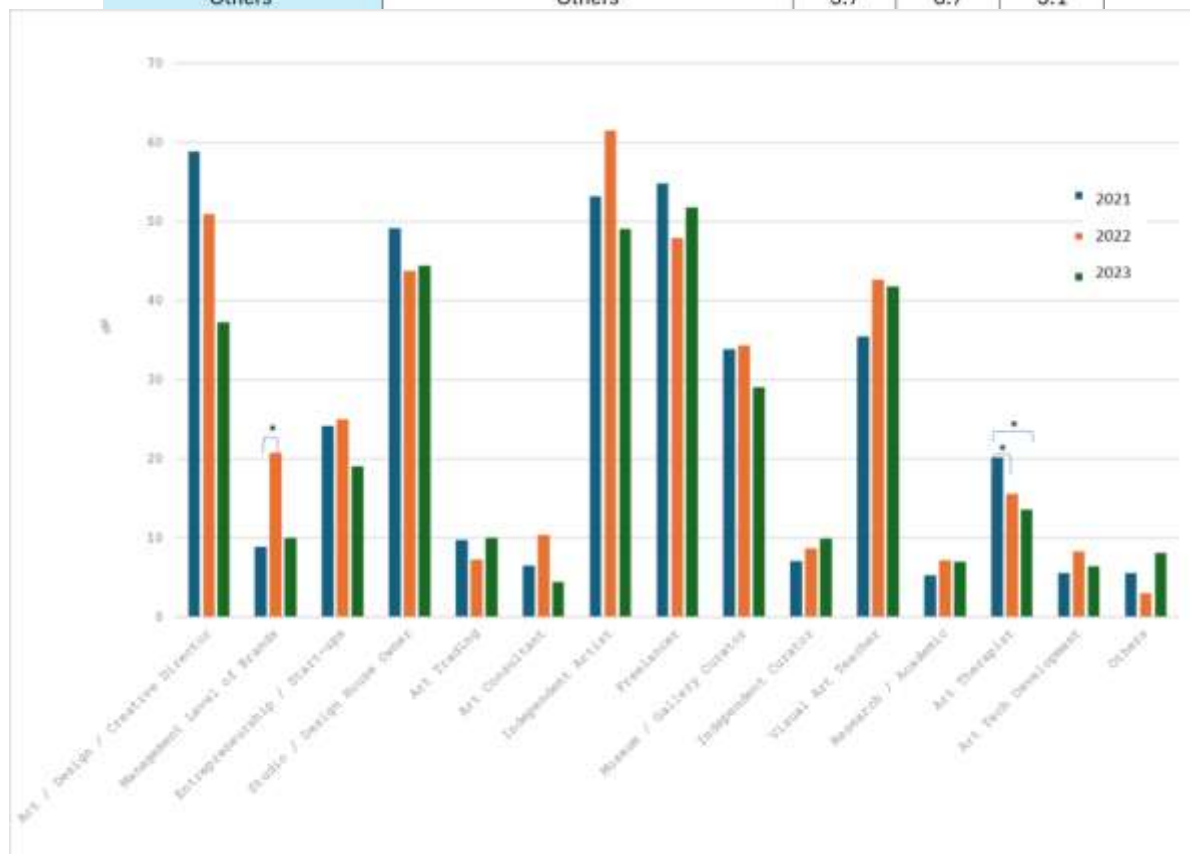


Fig.2. Proportion of job aspiration choice 2021-2023. *: $p < 0.05$.

VIII.DISCUSSION

Our analysis reveals a nuanced shift in career preferences among art students, with a discernible trend towards roles offering greater autonomy and flexibility. The three-year dataset reflects shifts in career preferences among art and design students highlighting evolving trends in the creative industry, from 2021 (peak pandemic of COVID) to 2023 (post pandemic). These trends appear to be influenced by broader societal, economic, and cultural factors, including the residual effects of the pandemic; the rise of freelancing and entrepreneurship; and changes in how creative careers are perceived. Below is a detailed discussion of key observations.

A. Consistent Preference for Independent and Flexible Roles

Roles such as Independent Artist, Freelancer, Studio/Design House Owner, and Visual Art Teacher have consistently maintained high interest, with peaks of 61.5% (Independent Artist in 2022), 54.8% (Freelancer in 2021). These roles are characterized by flexibility and autonomy that allow students to exercise creative freedom, work on diverse projects, and set their own schedules. Another factor is the rise of platforms such as Behance, Patreon, and Fiverr which have made it easier for artists to market themselves and secure freelance work.

Visual art teaching remains a stable and respected career path for students seeking to share their knowledge and skills, providing both financial security and creative fulfillment. Although the proportion of students aspiring to become Creative Directors decreased from 58.9% in 2021 to 37.3% in 2023, this decline underscores a pandemic-related recalibration, wherein students may find corporate roles less appealing amid industry uncertainties. It remains consistently desirable to those who value leadership and structured career progression.

Visual art students tend to prefer independent artists and freelance careers more often than engineering or other programme students because of the differences in the nature of their fields, personality traits, skillsets, and career opportunities. Engineering and other technical fields often prioritize structured team-based work within organizations, where creativity is channeled toward specific goals or projects rather than personal expression. By contrast, visual art careers are inherently creative and often thrive on individuality and self-expression. Freelance and independent artist roles provide freedom to create without constraints, which is highly appealing to art students. In addition, in the arts, success is often measured by the quality of one's portfolio and personal brand, which can be independently developed. Freelance allows visual artists to build their reputation and showcase their unique style. However, engineering and technical fields rely more on formal qualifications, certifications, and experience within established organizations, making freelancing less common. The Holland typology categorizes a variety of personalities [13]. Many visual art students fall under the "Artistic" personality type [14], characterized by creativity, independence, and a preference for unstructured, self-directed work. This aligns well with independent artists and their freelance careers. Engineering students are more likely to exhibit "Realistic" or "Investigative" personality traits [15], which favor structured environments, problem-solving, and technical precision—attributes better suited for roles in large organizations.

Interest in entrepreneurship/start-ups remained moderate yet steady, with 24.2% in 2021 and 19.1% in 2023. Students may view entrepreneurship as a way to combine creativity with business innovation. Starting a design studio, creative agency, or art-focused business allows them to maintain their control over their vision. Hong Kong has been actively transitioning to a knowledge-based and creative economy [16]. The rise of e-commerce and online marketplaces has lowered barriers to entry for creative entrepreneurs.

Interest in Art Therapy has dropped steadily from 21.6% in 2021 to 13.6% in 2023, although current levels remain higher than pre-pandemic estimates (assumed at or below 10%). The peak value occurred in 2021 during the COVID pandemic period. The initial surge in interest in 2021 reflected heightened awareness of mental health and the therapeutic value of visual art during the pandemic. With the receding pandemic, students may now be shifting their focus back to more traditional or lucrative creative careers. The sustained interest in art therapy, even at its reduced levels, suggests that the pandemic has permanently elevated awareness of its importance and viability as a career path.

The observed corresponds with the broader public health trajectory: 2021 was marked by acute pandemic anxiety, while 2023 saw comparatively relaxed and partial normalization of professional contexts [1]. Nonetheless, these figures remain notable as they surpass earlier baseline assumptions of interest in art therapy (<10%). This suggests a broader shift toward mental health consciousness within creative communities, whereby students increasingly assess the societal implications of their artistic practice even if they do not pursue formal therapeutic roles.

Simultaneously, while interest in art therapy declined from 20.2% to 13.6%, it continued to surpass the pre-pandemic estimates. This sustained interest suggests that mental health considerations remain embedded in students' career imagination, particularly for those seeking to bridge artistic talent with social-emotional support [17]. Qualitative data further reinforces the sense of social responsibility, underscoring the importance of integrating art-based well-being and community engagement into visual art curricula.

The sustained, above-baseline interest in art therapy, coupled with robust mental health discussions across multiple creative fields, underscores the need for institutional reforms. This will benefit curricular enhancements. Integrative modules that explore art-based interventions and psychology can serve both subsets aiming for professional therapy credentials and those seeking to underpin their artwork with mental health principles. This also suggests a flexible certification pathway. Institutions should investigate partnerships with clinical psychology or counseling programmes, allowing students to gradually obtain specialized qualifications while pursuing broader creative enterprises.

IX. CONCLUSION & FUTURE WORK

This three-year comparative study (2021–2023) reveals that while direct interest in art therapy declined from 21.6% to 13.6%, mental health awareness remained an enduring theme among final-year visual art students. Even those who choose entrepreneurial, technological, or conventional artistic paths frequently articulate the importance of emotional well-being and socially engaged creativity. These data illuminate an emerging paradigm in which “mental health in the arts” strictly transcends clinical boundaries [18, 19].

The updated data confirm pandemic-era shifts in job aspirations among final-year visual art students. While traditional pathways (e.g., Creative Director, Studio Owner) remain prominent, the clear inclination toward freelance, entrepreneurial, and well-being-oriented roles underscores evolving student priorities in a disrupted creative economy. A nuanced decline in interest in art therapy leaves it above pre-pandemic norms [20], reflecting a lingering emphasis on mental health and social impact within creative vocations.

By analyzing the career aspirations of 2021–2023 final-year visual art students, this study provides a lens for pandemic-influenced shifts within the creative ecosystem. Although conventional roles such as creative directors remain prominent, the increasing emphasis on art therapy, freelance work, and entrepreneurship illustrates a growing desire for flexible, socially relevant, and self-determined professional paths.

Further investigations could incorporate post-graduate follow-ups to ascertain how these aspirations manifest in actual careers in the long term [21]. Broader comparative studies spanning multiple art institutions and cultural contexts may elucidate the global uniformity (or contrast) of such shifts. Finally, evaluating newly instituted curricula or support mechanisms (e.g., mental health modules and digital entrepreneurship courses) would demonstrate their efficacy in empowering graduates to thrive in an increasingly dynamic creative landscape [22]. By situating these findings within the broader creative and cultural landscape, this study posits that mental health awareness remains a keystone for future art professionals, even though some pivot away from formal therapeutic titles. Whether through specialized training or a mental health-infused creative perspective, the next generation of visual artists appears poised to transcend pandemic-driven challenges by reshaping the boundaries between imagination, community engagement, and emotional care.

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