Navigating Creative City: Art students' perception and professional integration in Paris

Student Name: Zi Shuyun
Student Number: 744679

Supervisor: Léonor Graser

MA Managing Art and Cultural Heritage in Global Markets
Erasmus University Rotterdam
IESA Arts & Culture
University of Glasgow
ISCTE Lisboa

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the concept of "creative city" through the experiences of art students in Paris, acting as both cultural consumers and active contributors to the urban creative ecosystem. It explores how urban environments foster creativity through cultural infrastructure, "creative buzz", utilitarian and symbolic values of place. The research investigates students' perceptions of creative locations in Paris, the specific attributes inspiring their creativity, and the challenges they face in professional development within the city's creative scenes. The study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining surveys and semi-structured interviews with art students, to understand their interpretations and navigation of Paris's creative geographies.

KEYWORDS: creative city, creative class, art students, creative labour, creative career, urban environments, creativity

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Introduction

Over the past two decades, the concept of the "creative city" has become a central paradigm in urban development, shaping how cities position themselves in the global economy, globalization, technological change, and social inclusion. Creative cities are characterised by their investment in cultural infrastructure, support for creative industries and innovation, and cultivation of vibrant creative ecosystems that attract talent and drive economic growth (Bianchini, 2017; G. Evans, 2003). From London, Paris, Berlin to Tokyo, Guangzhou, and São Paulo, leading cities worldwide are repurposing spaces, supporting creative workers, and developing policies to nurture creativity as a core urban asset (World Cities Culture Forum, 2024).

The concept of 'creative city', at the very beginning, entails a paradigm where arts, culture and creativity function as a strategic factor in urban regeneration and development. The phenomenon started in the 1960s and 1970s with western industrial cities mobilising cultural heritage and high-profile arts and cultural institutions to reposition themselves in the post-industrial economies. Cities such as Glasgow, Melbourne, and Manchester exemplify how cultural infrastructure, heritage and art festivals, and cultural industries can attract tourism and investments, and create new images of the city (G. Evans, 2003; Goldsmith & O'Regan, 2004; Plaza, 1999). At the turn of the century, the 'creative turn' in the global economies have created new meanings for creative cities, where supporting creative production and industries had become a focal point for urban policy.

A defining feature of successful creative cities is their ability to attract and retain creative talent. Creative city planners often place imagination and creative talent at the heart of strategies for local economic and social development, recognising that creative professionals, entrepreneurs, and artists are vital to urban growth, competitiveness, and cultural vibrancy. Richard Florida's theory of the 'creative class' states that artistic talent and intellectual capital have become driving force for economic growth and urban development. His theory suggests that urban environments with certain qualities or characteristics can attract creative professionals(Florida, 2002b, 2004).

Within this context, the role of art students and graduates has become prominent. These students with degrees in creative disciplines such as arts, design, media, and architecture, capture the intersection of creative class theory and urban development (Comunian & Faggian, 2013). Many of them are drawn by the cities' cultural life vibrancy, large presence of creative people and dynamic networks, diverse job opportunities, and their reputation and image. The World Cities Culture Report 2018 shows that cities such as London, Paris, Sydney and Berlin have become hubs that concentrate art students and graduates because of these urban qualities. These students are increasingly becoming an important force in cities' creative ecosystems, not only as passive consumers of culture but active contributors to urban creativity. Their

engagement with the city's cultural and creative environments adds dynamism and depth to local creative ecosystems. Through activities such as visiting museums, cafés, libraries, and arts centres; participating in exhibitions, workshops, and arts events, and collaborating with peers and institutions, art students help generate values that animates urban neighborhoods and fosters cultural vitality.

In addition, their need for varied and often avant-garde cultural experiences supports independent creative enterprises, experimental art venues, and grassroots projects, which typically operate beyond the scope of established institutions. In this sense, art students are not only future creative workers but also co-creators of the creative city, contributing symbolically, socially, and economically to its cultural life.

Nonetheless, while these students demonstrate strong attraction to creative cities and interests to engage in the urban creative environments, significant mismatches exist between students' expectations and experiences in the city, especially regarding navigating the urban creative environments and career development (Brook & Comunian, 2018; Comunian & Faggian, 2013; Taylor & Luckman, 2020a).

One of the premises of a creative city is that the urban environment should be able to provide conditions for fostering creativity. Empirical research showed that certain physical, cultural and social qualities of places can indeed stimulate collective and individual creativity (Markusen, 2006; Heebels & Van Aalst, 2010; Markusen & Gadwa, 2010). However, these studies primarily based on industries, companies or creative professionals, while the creative perception and experiences of art students within a city context are rarely captured. Additionally, many art students and graduates face systemic barriers in establishing careers in the creative city. These include financial precarity, project-based or freelance work structures, and intense competition, often compounded by the need for strong social networks and emotional connections that imbued their creative practices (Gilmore & Comunian, 2016).

As cities continue to invest in creative infrastructure and policies, understanding how art students and graduates navigate these landscapes, and how urban environments can better support their aspirations, remains a critical area for research and policy innovation. Accordingly, this thesis aims to address two interrelated gaps. First, it explores how art students conceive of and interact with the creative city, i.e., how they perceive, navigate and make sense of the urban environments that are said to foster creativity. Second, it investigates whether and how creative urban environments, particularly beyond the boundaries of education, inspire them and support their integration into local creative networks. This research positions art students not only as participants in, but also as co-authors and critical indicators of the creative city, whose lived experiences reveal both its promises and its limitations.

This study chose Paris as the stage for the research. Paris stands as a global benchmark for creative cities, renowned for its rich artistic heritage, vibrant cultural life,

and enduring appeal to art students. For centuries, Paris has been a magnet for artists, writers, and innovators, offering an environment where creative expression flourishes across disciplines, from fine arts and fashion to cinema, music, and design. At the same time, the city boasts robust creative industries, which are a strategic driver of both the regional and national economy (World Cities Culture Forum, 2024).

A key feature of Paris's creative appeal is its attractiveness to the next generation of creative talent. The city is home to prestigious art schools such as the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, ENSAD, Parsons Paris, and ENSAPC, which offer internationally recognised programs. According to The World Cities Culture Report 2018, over 29,000 students are enrolled in art and design programmes in public specialist institutions and generalist universities in 2018. Meanwhile, the city's cosmopolitan atmosphere, diverse cultural and entertainment offerings, and a reputation for providing free and equitable access to culture and artistic practice for young people have further enhanced its appeal (Lo et al., 2018).

This thesis leverages the intricate cultural and creative landscape of Paris and its strong pull for art students to examine their' viewpoints about the urban creative environments. The overarching research question this study attempts to answer is: **How do art students interpret and navigate creative environments in Paris in relation to personal inspiration and professional development?**

The thesis is organised into four chapters. Chapter 1 reviews the relevant literature, establishes the theoretical framework, and formulates the research aims and questions. Chapter 2 sets out the methodological framework, justifies the chosen research design, and details the procedures for data collection and analysis. Chapter 3 presents the empirical findings and situates them within the broader scholarly debate. Finally, Chapter 4 conclude the study's key insights, reflects on their wider implications, and proposes new directions for future research.

Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework

This theoretical framework draws on literature of creative city, creative labour , and relevant literature on urban environments and creativity. The literature review is categorised into three perspectives: (1) the conceptual variations of creative cities and the concept of creative class; (2) the creative attributes of urban environments, focusing on the creative cluster theory and the utilitarian and symbolic values of places; and (3) the precarious nature of creative labour and challenges in creative cities. These perspectives lay the groundwork for understanding what factors contribute to a creative city, how creative cities could nurture creativity through its urban environments and what challenges or barriers art students might face in navigating creative careers in creative cities. Together, they form a framework to examine how do art students perceive and make meaning of different creative attributes of the urban environments, and how do they gain inspirations, and tackle the challenges in engaging with these creative environments for professional development.

The Creative City Concept and The Creative Class Theory

In the past two decades, the concept of 'creative city' has gained global prominence. The phenomenon emerged as a response to the transition from industrial to post-industrial economies in the mid-to-late 20th century, and cities sought new development paradigms (G. Evans, 2003; Landry, 2000). Increasingly, cities begin to leverage on art and culture, and, later on, creative industries and knowledge economy as the new catalyst of progress and economic development (Pratt et al., 2016). This has proved appealing for policy makers because of its connection to urban regeneration and growth, and the pursuit of this idea has significantly affected the transformation of urban landscape.

The 'creative city' idea began with a focus on cultural and arts industries, closely linked with the economic restructuring and urban policy of the late 1980s and early 1990s in cities in Europe, North America and Australia. Many cities invested in flagship cultural venues (such as museums, concert halls, and exhibition centre) and hosted major exhibitions and cultural programmes to tackle problems of urban decay and unemployment (Bianchini, 2017; G. Evans, 2003). For example, cities such as Glasgow and Bilbao had transformed and repositioned themselves through arts festivals and signature museum that attracted tourism and boosted local economies (Plaza, 1999). 'Creative cities' thus have the association with a strong presence of arts and cultural institutions, infrastructure and cultural-entertainment offerings that revitalise urban environment.

The Creative City as a coherent concept was formulated by Charles Landry and Franco Bianchini, and later on expanded and populated by Charles Landry (2000) through his book *The Creative City: A Toolkit for Urban Innovators.* According to him, in contemporary cities, creativity serves as a substitute for conventional resources and

has the potential to aid in urban renewal, which should be integrated as a guiding principle across all policy areas. He broadened 'creative city' to encompass social innovation, business creativity, and bureaucratic reform, but he also maintained that arts and culture are fundamental drivers in the transformation and vitality of cities, which can support diverse and adaptive urban systems (Landry, 2000).

A central idea that Landry proposed is 'creative milieux'. The term capsulates cities as ecosystems which, through the synergy of hard infrastructure (e.g. institutions, facilities, transport) and soft infrastructure (e.g. networks, cultural atmosphere, openness), flows of ideas and inventions were enabled though face to face interactions and formation of kinship that encourages collaborative risk-taking (Landry, 2000; Landry & Hyams, 2012).

Landry's work inspired cities to leverage their cultural resources and creative potential to address social and economic challenges, and influenced urban planning practices, such as the conversion of old industrial sites into cultural centres, creative hubs, and incubators, which became global models for urban renewal (Matovic & San Salvador Del Valle, 2020).

Until the late 20th century, creative cities have mostly been associated with culture and arts. However, with the rise of creative industries at the turn of the century, a 'creative turn' has emerged in the city discourse, largely driven by the UK(Boix et al., 2011, 2012, 2015; Chapain & Stryjakiewicz, 2017a) . In 1998, the British Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) published a document on 'creative industries', which links creativity with specific sectors and economic activities. DCMS listed a broad range of sectors as creative industries, which include traditional cultural sectors such as publishing; museums, galleries and libraries; music, performing and visual arts; and sectors that leverage new technology and use creativity as an input to produce goods and services with commercial purposes, including advertising and marketing, architecture, crafts; design and designer fashion, film, TV and radio, photography, IT, software and video games (DCMS, 2001: 5).

This viewpoint redirects the emphasis of the creative city discourse from cultural infrastructures and the consumption of cultural goods to creative production, resulting in a novel interpretation of the creative city as a locale where the labour and output of creative industries are concentrated and nurtured. (Comunian, 2011a; Montgomery, 2005; Pratt, 2008). The production perspective emphasises understanding and developing the productive dimensions of the cultural and creative industries. In the creative industries literature, Creative production is understood as being produced in particular places and times, and it is a "socialized concept" with a "firm basis in production" (Pratt, 2008, p. 115). The later means that it is not an individualistic endeavour but involves collaboration, infrastructure, tools, institutions, and networks among collective enterprises, which depends on shared environments and systems (Comunian, 2011b; Pratt, 2008). Studies have shown that place plays a significant role

in this process, and urban environments are considered to be able to provide favourable conditions for creative production and stimulation (Bradley, 2012; Clare, 2013; Drake, 2003). This will be further discussed in the next chapter (See *Creative cluster and creative buzz*).

This shift of focus to industry practice also influenced how creative workers were conceptualised within urban contexts. Richard Florida's Creative Class theory came up under this backdrop and caught a lot of attention as well as debates.

The urban theorist draws the connection between creative professionals and the creative city. He suggests that the economic success of a city is determined by the presence of the creative class, which encompasses a wide range of high-skills labour. According to Florida, creative workers such as artists, designers, scientists and engineers from the core of this population, but it also includes other knowledge-based-work professionals, such as university professors and business managers (Florida, 2002b). As such, the term 'creative city' is also often interpreted as a city with a high presence of the creative class, or potential to attract them.

Florida argues that qualities of place are crucial in attracting and retaining creative talent. These include a cultural environment that not only offer diverse cultural amenities and entertainment but also promotes authentic experiences and self-expression, a business and technology friendly environment that provides new opportunities, and a social climate that invites diversity and openness that creates numerous, flexible social connections (Florida, 2002a, 2004). The qualities of place show some similarities with the qualities of creative milieux in Landry's idea; however, Landry's approach is broader and more institutional, seeking to create the conditions for creativity in the city, while Florida's is more targeted toward the preferences and experiences that draw creative individuals to particular places.

Florida's theory has gained a huge popularity in urban policy making, but it is also criticised heavily for playing a role in driving inequality and gentrification, wherein the influx of 'creative' individuals can drive up living costs and displace original artists and local cultural producers in a given locale (Edensor et al., 2009; Markusen, 2006).

These literatures provide an overall understanding of different perspectives and interpretations of the 'creative city' concept. In an overview, a creative city can be analysed from three interrelated perspectives: cultural consumption, creative production, and creative labour. While each perspective has different focuses, they all point to the importance of the urban environment in shaping creative practices, which will be explored in the next chapter.

Creativity and Urban Environments

Concepts such as Landry's 'creative milieux' and Florida's emphasis on the 'quality of place' suggest that specific urban attributes, such as the spatial concentration of

cultural facilities for consumption, high density of creative production enterprises, diverse social flows, and rapid exchange of information create conditions for creativity to thrive. These ideas underscore the role of urban form in enhancing creativity generation.

Before delving into these aspects, some words on the definition of creativity are needed. Creativity is a fuzzy concept that is difficult to grasp and has no singular definition. At its core, creativity is broadly defined as the ability to generate novel and valuable ideas, products, or processes (Borup Jensen et al., 2020; Ford, 1996; Runco & Jaeger, 2012). Artistic creativity complicates the definition issue further, as it often relies on intuition, emotion, feelings and tacit knowledge, which is difficult to verbalise and often blur the line between the conscious and subconscious (Borup Jensen et al., 2020). Despite the widely accepted view that creativity is shaped by individual traits such as divergent thinking and openness to experience (Feist, 1998), research have shown that it is a situated process that is as much so moulded by external forces, like physical environments, social dynamics, cultural norms and institutional systems (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014; Grabher, 2001; Kristensen, 2004). Interviews with artists, for example, reveal that their work is deeply rooted in spatial experiences and absorbing external influences, from historical events to contemporary social contexts, and transmitting them into personal narratives (Borup Jensen et al., 2020).

This study does not aim to define or provide a comprehensive overview of the literature on (artistic) creativity, as this is a broad and extensively theorised field that lies beyond the scope of this research. Instead, the focus is on how creativity is *perceived* and *experienced* by creative actors (i.e., art students) *in relation to the urban environment*. Creativity is approached here not as a fixed or universal concept, but as something that is interpreted and articulated through individual experiences. Specifically, the study explores how creativity is associated with particular places and how these associations are shaped by the physical, symbolic, and social dimensions of the urban environments.

Infrastructures for Creativity

Many studies have stressed the importance of the access to various spaces that facilitate the production, circulation, and consumption of cultural goods and creativity. Cultural venues, such as museums, galleries and theatres, are central to cultural consumption, which can inspire creative ideas and create emotional stimuli through exposure to artistic expression(Ferru et al., 2022; Markusen, 2006). Parallel to these are creative spaces, such as studios, art centres, and artist residences, etc., which support artistic experimentation, skill development, and professional collaboration. These spaces usually provide shared resources such as tools, co-working facilities, mentorship, and workshops (Markusen, 2006).

Third places also play a crucial role in fostering creativity. The concept refers to public gathering spaces outside the domains of home and work that serve as neutral,

inclusive, and socially generative environments, such as cafés, libraries, bookstores, community centres, and parks. These places provide low-barrier settings for conversation, idea exchange, and informal socialization, which encourage mingle and mix of people and thus offer opportunities for forming new perspectives and constructing new identities (Oldenburg,1989).

While creative infrastructures and third places provide the material and social conditions necessary for individual and collective creativity, the spatial concentration of these infrastructures often gives rise to more complex urban formations, which can produce a dynamic ecosystem where creative activity is amplified.

Creative Cluster and Creative Buzz

Urban creativity is prominently observed in certain geographical locations where cultural activities and creative businesses agglomerate. These areas described variously as 'cultural quarters/districts'(Luciana, 2004; Montgomery, 2003), 'cultural/ creative clusters' (Boix et al., 2011; Cooke & Lazzeretti, 2008a), or 'creative fields' (Scott, 2010), demonstrate certain characteristics.

Creative clusters typically feature a mix of large cultural institutions, small exhibition spaces, artist studios, coworking spaces, business premises, incubators, and sometimes universities or specialised schools (Markusen & Gadwa, 2010; Nesta, 2010); and they bring together a diverse community of individuals: artists, designers, creators, entrepreneurs, who share an interest in novelty, experimentation, and creative expression, even if their specific disciplines different (Montgomery, 2003).

A significant body of literature has examined this 'cluster' effects in certain areas in different cities (Bathelt et al., 2004; Boix et al., 2015; Chapain & Stryjakiewicz, 2017b; Cooke & Lazzeretti, 2008b; Durmaz, 2015; Dursun, 2018; Heebels & Van Aalst, 2010; Markusen & Gadwa, 2010). The studies point out what is central to the functioning of such clusters is the concept of 'creative buzz'. This term refers to a unique, often intangible and atmospheric quality that emerges from dense social interaction, aesthetic diversity, and the concentration of creative events and spaces.

Within these walkable, mixed-use neighbourhoods, artists, creatives, and cultural workers not only generate ideas through professional collaborations and business transactions, but also through informal face-to-face interactions in meeting places like cafes, bars, restaurants, clubs, and public squares, where the transfer of tacit knowledge – insights and techniques that are difficult to formalise – during everyday encounters can give rise to inspiration. These elements, according to Stockley (2019), enables both productivity and serendipity in creativity. Importantly, these places also serve professional purposes, where information about job opportunities or new projects circulates and where informal networking, collaborations, and chance encounters can initiate career advancements or creative partnerships (Chapain & Stryjakiewicz, 2017b; Currid & Williams, 2010a).

The concept of creative buzz highlights how dense social interaction and informal exchanges foster creative energy in certain urban settings. These qualities reflect what Heebels and Van Aalst (2010) describe as the utilitarian values of place that are central to how creative clusters support individual creative practices. The next section builds on this by examining the symbolic values that shape creative engagement with place.

Utilitarian and Symbolic Values of Places

In empirical research about creative entrepreneurs in creative clusters in Berlin, Heebels and Van Aalst (2010) distinguished between the utilitarian values and symbolic values of places in shaping place perception and creative practices of creative professionals. Utilitarian values refer to the practical access to resources, networks, and facilities; and symbolic values include the emotional, aesthetic, and cultural meanings associated with places. The study, based on interviews with entrepreneurs, offers a framework to understand how location attributes offer inspirations for creatives and contribute to the creative reputation that affect individual perceptions of locations.

The utilitarian values of cultural and creative spaces and creative clusters in providing access to workspace, ideas, networks, peer support, and professional opportunities are evident through the discussions in previous chapters. This chapter will elaborate more on the symbolic values.

Symbolic value can arise from the visual, historical, and social qualities of a place – what Heebels and Van Aalst (2010) call its "look and feel". The physical characteristics of a neighbourhood, from architecture, textures to cultural and social ambience can act as creative attributes and direct stimuli for creative expression. This is seen in diverse creative contexts: Berlin-based artists draw inspiration from the historical façades of Prenzlauer Berg (Heebels & Van Aalst, 2010), craft and design professionals engage with material environments as "aesthetic raw materials" (Drake, 2003), and musicians in Perth imbue their work with emotional energy drawn from the city's oceanfront and built landscape (Ballico, 2017).

Additionally, studies have shown that places offering diversity in terms of people, activities, and physical environment can stimulate creativity (Heebels & Van Aalst, 2010; Khoo et al., 2017; Scott, 2010). Contrast and diversity, such as the tension between rich and poor or the combination of old and new buildings, are perceived as important features that can be inspiring (Heebels & Van Aalst, 2010).

Beyond the physical landscape and social ambiance, the historical and reputational layer of place also contributes to its symbolic appeal (Currid & Williams, 2010b; Durmaz, 2015). For example, studies of film clusters in London's Soho and Istanbul's Beyoğlu show that the long history and reputation of these places as film centres attract production companies and talents (Durmaz, 2015).

Furthermore, the buzz generated in a cluser can contribute to the reputation and attractiveness of the place. The reputation and distinctive lifestyle of the cluster can project an appealing image to the outside world. This image-making becomes essential for attracting inward investment and new talent, further reinforcing the cluster's creative reputation and attraction(Durmaz, 2015). However, while the buzz draws people in, overstimulated buzz can also cause burn out. An excess of social encounters, proposals, and performative visibility, which sometimes is tied to the romanticized bohemian lifestyle, can overwhelm artists and hinder the creative process. Too much buzz can also lead to closed circuits of bonding capital, where overly familiar networks stifle innovation by limiting exposure to new perspectives (Landry & Hyams, 2012; Murzyn-Kupisz & Działek, 2021).

On the other hand, history and traditions of places also shape creativity and artist identity, as a source of thematic content and narrative substance for artistic work, an inspiration influencing creative standards, authenticity, approach, or even aspired identity (Bradley, 2012; Drake, 2003; Staber, 2012). The former centres on using the specific stories, historical events, conditions, folklore, or imaginative heritage of a place as the actual subject matter or themes for artistic creation (Staber, 2012); the later stresses established character, reputation, or atmosphere of a place, forged by its history and traditions, influences the artist's creative process itself, from how the art is made and perceived, and the artist's stance in relation to their craft and locality (Bradley, 2012; Drake, 2003).

Emotional connections with places and sense of community are another factor that contribute to creative practices (Bradley, 2012; Durmaz, 2015; Gilmore et al., 2016). Bradley (2012) believes that imagination, which is fundamental to creativity, is rooted in identity, memory, tradition, belonging, and trust, all linked to place and its history and community. A deep sense of place is rooted in a shared experience of history and community that informs people's "sense of who they are", and this rootedness in culture and tradition is considered an "ideal base for innovation" (Bradley, 2012, p. 145).

This chapter discussed how creativity is situated and stimulated in different urban settings and through utilitarian and symbolic values of places. From access to infrastructure and informal networks, to emotional connection, atmospheric aesthetics, and history and image of a place, the urban landscape can create dynamic assemblage for creative practices. Understanding these spatial attributes helps examine how cities like Paris host not just the production of creative work, but the evolving identities and imaginative worlds of those who inhabit them.

Critique of the 'Creative City'

While the preceding discussions have illustrated how certain urban attributes can inspire artistes and creative professionals and contribute to the formation of collective

creativity, scholarship has increasingly questioned the creative city model, which tends to emphasise cultural and creative industries in relation to economic development, such as building flagship cultural projects or high-value land use, aimed at wealth creation and attracting high-income individuals, rather than fostering diverse, local, and accessible creative spaces needed for genuine creativity and urbanity (Baum, 2020; O'Connor & Shaw, 2014; Shaw, 2010).

As scholars such as Markusen (2014) and O'Connor & Shaw (2014) argue, such economic framings risk reducing the value of culture to its market functions, while overlooking its intrinsic contributions to well-being, public life, social cohesion, and personal growth. O'Connor & Shaw (2014) notably call for a reorientation of creative city thinking toward broader ideals of urban flourishing. They describe the ideal creative city as one animated by aspiring encounters, intellectual exchange, and community values. In this vision, universities, art schools, and cultural and art institutions are not only knowledge factories or talent pipelines, but spaces of public imagination, personal development, and collective meaning-making.

The vision of the city as a generator of economic creativity often ignores the complex lived realities of those inhabiting the city. This critique is particularly relevant to Richard Florida's creative class theory, which envisions cities as magnets for talent, innovation, and cultural capital driven by a concentration of highly skilled professionals, which has been widely critiqued for downplaying the exclusionary consequences of such strategies(Baum, 2020; Eckardt, 2017; Edensor et al., 2009; Markusen, 2014; Markusen & Schrock, 2006; Montgomery, 2005). A major consequence highlighted is that these strategies contribute to and exacerbate social inequality, fragmentation, segregation, and displacement within cities. They are often described as gentrification strategies that, if successful, paradoxically diminish diversity and creativity rather than fostering them (Eckardt, 2017). These critiques also raise important questions about who is empowered to participate in, benefit from and shape the creative city. While policy makers, businesses, and institutions frequently dominate the conversation, the voices of art students – those on the verge of entering the industry – are conspicuously absent. Despite their active engagement in urban cultural life and dual roles as cultural consumers and creators, their viewpoints are rarely recognized in the creative city discourse.

Precarious Labour, Creative Career and Creative Cities

Creative cities are often magnets for creative labour, especially for emerging creatives like art students and graduates. The urban environment, described as having a 'buzz', offers a wider cultural infrastructure, creative networks, informal learning opportunities, and a broader range of job opportunities and potential contracts that graduates can use to develop their portfolios and make a living. Talent attraction and attainment play an important role in creating a self-reinforcing cycle of creative cities, where creative human capital contributes to the city's profile as a creative city, making it more attractive for both creative businesses seeking skilled workers and future aspiring

creative practitioners (Comunian & Faggian, 2013). However, art students and alike don't necessarily benefit from the process.

Students particularly face vulnerabilities tied to economic marginality and the consequences of gentrification. Research points out that many students, especially those living on poorly paid casual work or government grants, are economically marginal. This disconnection between cultural capital and financial security renders them largely invisible in economic metrics that shape urban planning and cultural policy (Shaw, 2010).

At the same time, while the creative strategies promote cultural vibrancy and urban regeneration, they frequently contribute to rising living costs and housing difficulties, pricing out those with limited economic means. Students are often one of the primary victims of rent increases and speculative property development, similar to the way that artists' presence is used to market neighbourhoods as "up-and-coming" creative zones (Markusen & Schrock, 2006), students may also paradoxically serve as both agents and casualties of gentrification.

The broader labour conditions within the creative sector further complicate their ability to integrate and thrive in the cities. The nature of creative work is often characterised by precarity, stemming from a combination of insecure and low-paying employment, systemic informal practices that can lead to exploitation and inequality, the demanding and unprotected nature of self-employment, challenging transitions into the workforce, and obstacles related to location and identity (Brook & Comunian, 2018; Comunian & Faggian, 2013; Taylor & Luckman, 2020a).

The literature pointed out that even though creative work is often related to autonomy, many creative workers face low and inconsistent earnings, with long hours and little capacity to balance professional and personal life. The challenges are particularly acute for the self-employed creatives, whose income is typically below that of employees (Feder & Woronkowicz, 2023; Woronkowicz & Noonan, 2019). These employment conditions expose them to further precarity, including lack of institutional protections such as sick leave, paid holidays, or union representation. (Taylor & Luckman, 2020a). Moreover, as many creative practitioners cannot earn a living through their primary discipline, they are often forced into supplementary or adjacent work, referred to as "side hustles" or "shovel work", which supports others' creativity rather than their own (Taylor & Luckman, 2020a).

Even though higher education serves as a key entry point into creative work, it still fails to guarantee secure work (Brook & Comunian, 2018; Taylor & Luckman, 2020b). Many feel that formal qualifications do not align with the practical skills demanded by the field, and they face the same precarious employment, need to rely on supplementary work or become 'creatives' in non-creative sectors, which brings less satisfaction despite increased security(Taylor & Luckman, 2020b, 2020a).

Researchers have documented how Unpaid work experience and internships have become normalized strategies for obtaining a foot in the door in the cultural and creative sectors, despite widespread criticism as exploitative (Oakley & O'Brien, 2016; Skujiņa & Loots, 2020). The sector exploits the "passion" narrative and position the opportunity as a stepping stone. Researchers have noted that this lead to potential for self-exploitation, where many creative aspirants willingly contribute unpaid aspirational labour in hopes of a final pay-off (Oakley & O'Brien, 2016).

Closely tied to this issue is the reliance on informal hiring practices, which further limits equitable access. The creative sector functions through informal networks, where few jobs are advertised and work is primarily gained through contacts built on social capital (Oakley & O'Brien, 2016; Taylor & Luckman, 2020a). The practice of "homophily" (hiring people like themselves) poses danger to perpetuate inequality and damage work environment diversity, as it replicates the demographic profile of existing insiders, thereby marginalising those without elite social ties (Skujiņa & Loots, 2020; Wreyford, 2015).

Another barrier is the locational inequality. Location-based advantage, like living with family in London, serve as a "safety blanket" that, combined with social ties, enables individuals to pursue creative careers despite precarity (Brook & Comunian, 2018). In contrast, for people who move to a creative city, it involves extra costs and potential obstacles such as social prejudice. Workers who move may be seen as desirable "new blood" or undesirable "outsiders", and can be exploited due to a lack of local ties or understanding of local work practices (Taylor & Luckman, 2020a).

Moreover, for mobile students, the lack of sense of belonging can be another challenge for creative aspirations. a sense of belonging is cultivated through social relationships and engagement within a place, forms the basis of social capital, which is critical for individuals in creative and innovative environments. These affective and social ties do not merely support wellbeing, they also shape the ways individuals imagine and enact their creative futures (Gilmore et al., 2016). For university students and recent graduates, establishing a sense of connection and identity within a city can be essential for grounding their practice, building networks, and navigating their place in the broader cultural economy.

Research Aims and Research Question

The literature review has traced the evolution of the 'creative city' concept from its early associations with cultural regeneration to its contemporary framing as an ecosystem that nurtures creative industries, production, and talent. This has been examined across three intersecting lenses: the spatial characteristics and dynamics of urban environments that foster creativity, the utilitarian and symbolic dimensions of creative attributions of place, and the precarious working conditions that characterise the experiences of creative labour. Taken together, these perspectives build a theoretical

framework that foregrounds the opportunities and constraints embedded in creative urbanism. However, the literature identifies a notable absence, which is the perspectives of art students on this subject. To address this gap, this research explores how art students interpret and engage with the creative geographies of Paris.

The framework supports an exploratory approach to understanding how do art students perceive creative locations based on spatial characteristics and dynamics, how do they draw on symbolic attributes and utilitarian functions of places for creative inspirations and how do they navigate the challenges in the broader creative environment in Paris for professional development. Focusing on art students' perspectives and experiences, the aim of this study is to uncover how they make sense of and act within their environments, and how spatial conditions shape their creative and professional development. The overarching Research Question guiding this research is: **How do art students interpret and experience the creative geographies of Paris in relation to their personal creative inspiration and professional development.**

The following sub questions are developed to answer the research question:
1. Which neighbourhoods do art students most strongly associate with creativity in Paris, and why?
2. What are the spatial attributes or values (e.g., cluster and buzz, symbolic, utilitarian) of these places inspire the students creatively?
3. How do students navigate and engage with the creative environments of Paris in relation to their professional development, and what challenges or barriers do they encounter?

Based on the theoretical framework and sub-questions, the following hypotheses are proposed to guide the research process:
1) Art students' perceptions of creative locations in Paris are shaped by the clustering of cultural infrastructure, artistic activity, and the presence of other creative individuals.

2) The places that art students consider most creative are supposed to provide strong creative inspiration and stimulation; and art students are more likely to prioritise utilitarian values (such as access to resources and informal networks) over symbolic values (such as atmosphere, aesthetics, and emotional resonance) when drawing creative inspirations from these places.

Drawing on Heebels & Van Aalst (2010), while symbolic values of places are recognised among creative professionals, utilitarian attributes are expected to play a larger role in experimenters and emergent creatives' creative inspiration.

3) Despite feeling creatively inspired by certain places, art students may experience challenges in integrating into local creative networks or leveraging these

environments for professional development due to social and systematic barriers.

Case Justification: Why Paris?

Paris is selected as the case study site for this research due to its status as both a globally recognised creative city and a vibrant student hub, as well as the researcher's personal connection to the city.

As one of the most prominent destinations for art students, Paris offers a rich academic and cultural ecosystem. According to the World Cities Culture Report 2018, over 29,000 students were enrolled in art and design programmes across public specialist institutions and comprehensive universities. Renowned institutions such as the École des Beaux-Arts, the École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs (ENSAD), and the École du Louvre continue to attract students from across the world. Beyond formal education, students are drawn to Paris for its culturally dense environment, including bookshops, independent galleries, artist-run spaces, cafés, and other informal venues that support creative and intellectual exchange(Lo et al., 2018).

Moreover, Paris holds a unique symbolic place in the global cultural imagination. Historically regarded as a haven for artistic freedom and experimentation, the city has long served as a magnet for generations of writers, artists, and cultural innovators. According to *The Cultural adn Creative Citiess Monitor 2019,* the city also performs well on metrics of creative economy performance, such as employment in cultural and creative industries, design and ICT innovation(European Commission, 2019). While cities like London, New York and Tokyo often dominate discourse on the global creative economy, Paris offers a distinctive case through its fusion of historical legacy and contemporary cultural innovation. The city's dense cultural infrastructure, diverse creative scenes, and proactive cultural policies provide a compelling context in which to investigate how art students experience and navigate urban creative environments.

Chapter 2: Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodological framework employed in this study, which adopts a qualitative-led mixed-methods approach. The research combines methods of a survey and semi-structured interviews. These methods are chosen because the exploratory and interpretive nature of this research.

Survey is ideal as it can generate quantitative data that establishes a baseline for qualitative inquiry, and also allows comparison of different variants which can open up new areas of inquiry of the topic (Creswell, 2018; Fowler, 2014). The survey is employed in the beginning stage of the research to establish a foundational understanding of students' opinions, by identifying patterns and themes related to the key aspects of 'creative city' theory and urban creative attributes. A main purpose of using survey is to confirm or challenge hypotheses derived from the literature review. The survey findings inform the design and focus of the subsequent qualitative interviews, ensuring that they address areas of important themes, ambiguity, or contradiction.

Following the survey, semi-structured interviews were conducted. Semi-structured format is chosen because they combine the consistency of a thematic framework with the flexibility to follow participants' trains of thought. A pre-determined set of open-ended questions was developed to cover key conceptual areas while leaving room to explore emerging themes in greater depth (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). This approach allows participants to express their experiences in their own terms, which is especially valuable when studying complex and affectively charged subjects such as creativity and place.

Data Collection

The data collection consists mainly two stages: survey dissemination and interview conductions. Additionally, throughout the research, intuitive exploratory observation in different neighbourhoods and spaces in Paris was also conducted by the researcher, in order to gain a sense of the qualities of places.

Survey

The survey was designed using the online platform SurveyMonkey and distributed in a period of one month, first via online dissemination in the researcher's academic and social networks, such as Instagram and LinkedIn, and then through outreach to administrations of the art school IESA Arts & Culture in Paris to disseminate the survey among students. The target of survey responses was 150. By the end of the survey period, 101 responses were received, with 92 valid responses. The survey targeted art students in Paris. In the context of this research, art students refer to individuals currently enrolled in higher education institutions in Paris, ranging from undergraduate to postgraduate levels, who are pursuing formal training in a broad spectrum of artistic

and creative disciplines. This includes traditional fine arts (e.g., painting, sculpture), applied arts (e.g., fashion, design), media arts (e.g., film, photography, digital art), performing arts (e.g., theatre, dance, music), literary arts, architecture, and arts-related professional fields such as art management and the art market.

a preliminary pilot survey was distributed to a sample of 34 art students. The pilot aimed to assess whether the wording of questions was comprehensible, whether key thematic areas (e.g., representation of creative neighbourhoods and cultural spaces) were adequately covered, and whether the structure allowed for meaningful responses. Feedback from this initial group informed several modifications, including adjustments to question phrasing, the inclusion of additional neighbourhood examples, and improved clarity in scale-based and open-ended items.

In an overview, the questionnaire focuses on gaining a general understanding of the creative geographies perceived by art students and explore what creative and inspirational attributes do art students value in places. Secondly, this survey examines what challenges and barriers students have in integrating into the creative environments professionally. The questionnaire included a mix of multiple choices, open-ended questions and Likert-scale items, allowing for both trends observation and comparative insights across respondents *(see questionnaire)*.

There were three main sections in the questionnaire. The first section enquired on the 'demographic and personal details' of the respondents, which include age, gender, nationality, time living in Paris, artistic disciplines and current stage of education.

The second section was framed to understand art students' perception of creative geographies in Paris. The dimensions in the questions are derived after reviewing related literature on cultural consumption and production, creative class, creative buzz and the values of places attributed to creativity (Comunian & Faggian, 2013; Cooke & Lazzeretti, 2008b; Florida, 2004; Heebels & Van Aalst, 2010; Scott, 2006; Stockley, 2019). This section explores whether respondents associate specific neighbourhoods and spaces with creativity, and identifies the types of places they are likely to frequent when seeking inspiration. The neighbourhood options provided are based on the spatial distribution of Paris's cultural and creative sectors, while the selection of spaces draws from reports by the Institut d'Aménagement et d'Urbanisme (IAU) and the Institut Paris Région (Albe-Tersiguel et al., 2018; Jacques et al., 2020). These sources ensure a representative and balanced mix of venue types, including formal and informal, public and private, as well as institutional and grassroots or alternative sites. The respondents can also provide their own example of places for each question.

This section also investigates the extent to which students perceive Paris as a creative city and explores the underlying reasons for their evaluations. Respondents were first asked to rate Paris's creativity on a 1–5 Likert scale. This was followed by multiple-choice questions that identified the key factors contributing to this perception, as well

as the qualities considered important in shaping urban creativity more generally.

The third section includes multiple choices and open-ended questions. These questions attempted to tease out to what extent the students engage with different creative environments and what challenges they face in their professional development in the arts and creative sector. Additionally, the students are also asked about whether they plan to stay in Paris after graduate and what are the reasons for the location choice.

Semi-structured Interviews

Eight arts students were selected among survey respondents who indicated their willingness to participate further in the study to conduct the interview. The initial recruitment of participants was based on the demographic data gathered through the survey and intended to include both international and French students and ensure a mix of students that have different resident duration in Paris. However, given the limited responses despite the researcher's efforts to recruit French students through personal and academic connections, the final sample is dominantly international students who have lived in Paris for less than one year. While this may limit the representation of findings across all student groups, it offers a focused lens on the and creative experiences of international students and short-term residents.

The participants were contacted either via email or phone. Interviews were conducted either in person or online via Zoom or Microsoft Teams, depending on participant preference and availability. Each session lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' informed consent and transcribed for subsequent thematic analysis. Participants' identities were anonymised during the transcription process to ensure confidentiality.

The interview aims to gain a fuller picture of students' perspectives, building on themes raised in the questionnaire, and filling the gaps that left unanswered: 1) Why do art students associate some neighbourhoods and spaces more with creativity than others? 2) What spatial attributes or values (e.g., cluster and buzz, symbolic, utilitarian) do students consider important for fostering creativity? 3) In what ways do these creative environments shape students' creative inspiration and professional development?

The interview guide covered three main thematic areas (see interview guide):
- Reasons behind creative geography associations in Paris
- Spatial attributes for creative inspirations
- Navigation and barriers to professional development in the Parisian creative environments

Guiding questions are designed to prompt description of the types of places that art students associate with creativity, the factors that shape these associations, and whether they feel creatively or professionally supported in those spaces.

The mixed-methods and combination of survey and semi-structured interviews construct a valid and strong analytical framework to answer the research question while ensuring the reliability and feasibility of the research. The following table summarises how different methods and data sources are connected to sub questions and hypotheses.

Main Research Question:
How do art students interpret and experience creative geographies in Paris in relation to personal inspiration and professional development?

Table 1 Research design metric

Sub-Questions	Corresponding Hypothesis	Method(s)	Data Source(s)
Which neibourhood and spaces do art students associate most with creativity in Paris, and why?	Art students' perceptions of creative locations in Paris are shaped by the clustering of cultural infrastructure, artistic activity, and the presence of other creative individuals.	Survey; Interviews	Survey responses on creative places identification; Interview narratives on the reasoning behind the associations and perception
What spatial attributes or values (e.g., cluster and buzz, symbolic, utilitarian) do students consider important for fostering creativity?	The places that art students consider most creative are supposed to provide strong creative inspiration and stimulation; and art students are more likely to prioritise utilitarian over symbolic values.	Survey; Interviews	survey responses on spatial values; Interviews discussing what makes inspires art students in a creative place
How do students navigate and engage with the creative environments of Paris in relation to their professional development, and what challenges or barriers do they encounter?	Despite finding certain places creatively inspiring, arts students may feel limited in leveraging these environments for professional development due to social/systematic barriers.	Survey; Interviews	Survey questions on identifying challenges and barriers; Interview reflections on navigation of places and barriers to integration

Data Analysis

The survey data were analysed using a combination of descriptive statistical analysis and qualitative thematic coding. Closed-ended questions were examined using descriptive statistics to identify general trends in art students' perceptions of spatial attributes related to creativity. Frequency distributions, such as tables and charts, were used to visualize trends, understand the overall structure of the data, and to spot outliers. Cross-tabulations were used to compare engagement patterns across different types of urban spaces and student demographics.

Open-ended responses were analysed using inductive thematic coding, guided by principles of qualitative content analysis. Responses were first read holistically to gain an overall sense of emerging patterns, then coded manually to identify recurring themes, keywords, and spatial references, informed by key concepts from the literature. The semi-structured interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis to compare with the survey findings and to uncover emerging insights.

The key analytical foci included how students articulated their perceptions of creative places in Paris, how they experienced creative stimulation in different settings, and the barriers they faced in fully participating in the local creative scene. Special attention was given to the way they articulated feelings of attachment, belonging, or exclusion in relation to specific neighbourhoods and venues, and how these emotional and spatial dynamics intersected with their creative identities and practices. This allowed for a nuanced understanding of how urban environments both enable and constrain students' creative engagement and sense of inclusion within the broader creative city framework.

Ethical Considerations

This research was conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines to ensure the protection, dignity, and rights of all participants. All survey respondents and interview participants were informed about the aims, methods, and potential uses of the research before participating. For the interviews, participants signed a written consent form before the conversation commenced. In the case of the online survey, participants gave consent by agreeing to a consent form presented at the beginning of the questionnaire.

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any point without any negative consequences. Given the nature of the study, the risks associated with participation were minimal. The main potential discomfort was related to discussing personal challenges regarding their creative practices or career aspirations. To mitigate this, the interviews were conducted in an non-intrusive environment, and participants were assured that they could pause or terminate the interview at any time. No sensitive personal data, such as financial information or medical history, were collected.

In terms of confidentiality, all data were anonymised. Survey responses were stored without any identifying information, and interview transcripts were coded with numbers (participant 1,2, etc.). In the event that any unintended or incidental findings of a sensitive nature had arisen, participants would have been informed appropriately and offered referrals to institutional support services if necessary. However, no such incidents occurred during the study.

Chapter 3: Findings and Discussions

This chapter presents and discusses findings from both the survey (n=92) and semi-structured interviews (n=8). First, a demographic overview of survey respondents and interview participants is provided, which is necessary for contextualising the interpretation and analysis of the data, especially in qualitative analysis. Then, the findings are organised into 3 themes based on the hypotheses: perceptions of creative geographies and spatial attributes; inspirational attributes; integration and professional development in creative environments. Some relevant themes emerged through the data but are not within the scope of this research are presented in Other findings.

Demographic Overview

A total of 92 art students responded to the online survey conducted between April and May 2024. The demographic composition of respondents reflects the diversity and international character of Paris's arts education environment. A significant majority of respondents identified as female (76%, $n = 70$), with male students representing 22% ($n = 20$) and non-binary students accounting for 2% ($n = 2$). This gender distribution indicates a degree of biasness towards female students' perspectives in this research.

In terms of age, the sample is predominantly composed of young adults in the early stages of their creative and professional development. Approximately 70% of respondents were aged between 18–24 years, while the remaining 30% fell within the 25–34 age bracket.

Educationally, the majority of participants (72%, $n = 66$) were enrolled in master's level programmes, with undergraduate students making up around 20% ($n = 18$). The remainder included recent graduates. The distribution of disciplines was varied, with art management and art markets representing the largest group (37%, $n = 34$), followed by music (29%, $n = 26$), film and photography (14%, $n = 13$), and other fields such as theatre, dance, and visual arts (graph1).
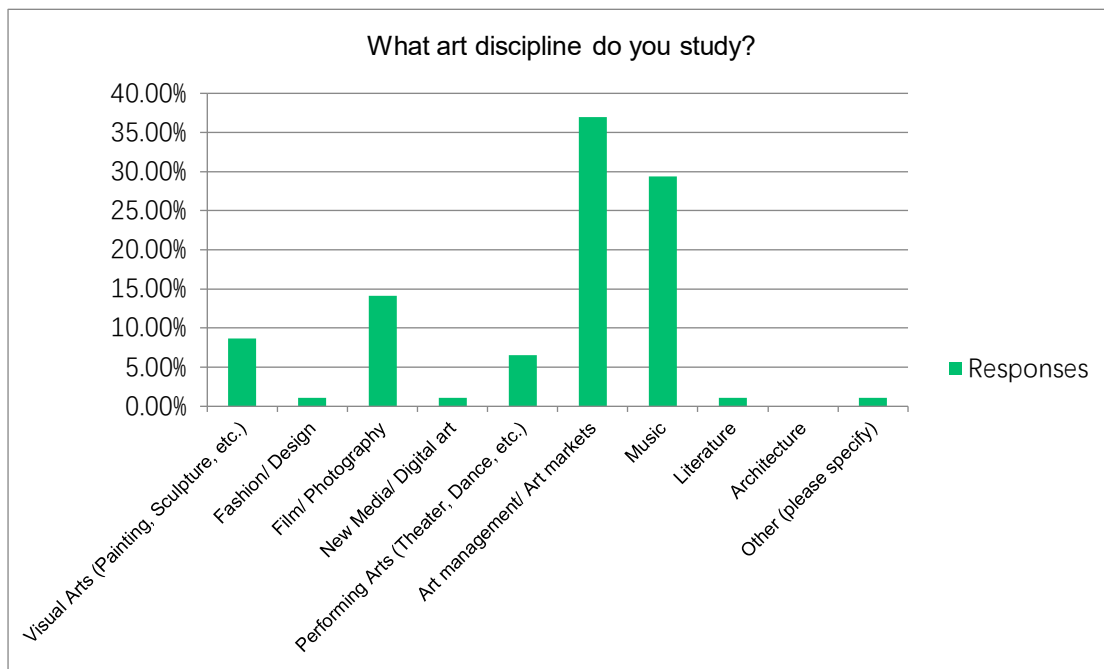
graph 1: art disciplines of respondents

In terms of national background, the survey included both French nationals (68%, *n* = 63) and international students (32%, *n* = 29) from diverse countries including Italy, Germany, Brazil, the United States, India, China, and Russia. It is worth noting that many French respondents identified themselves as coming from regions outside of Paris, which reflects an internal migration toward the capital for educational and cultural opportunities.

Finally, the duration of residence in Paris showed a relatively balanced distribution. Approximately 39% (*n* = 36) of respondents had lived in the city for less than one year, 21% (*n* = 19) has been living in Paris for 1-3 years, while 40% (*n* = 37) had resided there for more than three years. This variation in residency duration provides a valuable comparative lens to examine how levels of integration and familiarity with the city might influence students' perceptions and experiences of urban creativity.

Table 2 Overview of survey respondents' demographic (see full demographic information)

Category	Subgroup	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	70	76%
Gender	Male	20	22%
Gender	Non-binary	2	2%
Age Group	18–24	64	70%
Age Group	25–34	28	30%
Level of Study	Undergraduate	18	20%
Level of Study	Postgraduate	66	72%

Nationality	French	63	68%
Nationality	International	29	32%
Time in Paris	Less than 1 year	36	39%
Time in Paris	More than 3 years	37	40%

The interview participants' background will be introduced during the course of discussion. It is important to note that the survey and interview profile characteristics are different. There are more long-term residents and French students in the survey, but the interview participants are dominantly short-term and international students (see interview participants' profile).

Themes

Perceptions of Creative Geographies and Spatial Attributes

Hypothesis 1 posits that Art students' perceptions of creative locations in Paris are shaped by the clustering of cultural infrastructure, artistic activity, and the presence of other creative individuals. Analysis of both survey and interview data supports this hypothesis. However, other factors are also highlighted by the interview participants, including the 'look and feel' of a place and the history and image of a place.

The survey reveals that, among the listed neighborhoods, Le Marais was most frequently identified as the city's creative epicentre, followed by Montmartre and the Oberkampf–Parmentier–Ménilmontant area (or 11th arrondissement) [1]. Other notable areas include Quartier Latin, La Villette, and Belleville–Buttes Chaumont (see table). These results underscore the prominence of both historically established and emerging creative areas in art students' perceptions.

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[1] The **Oberkampf–Parmentier–Ménilmontant area** is located in the **11th arrondissement** of Paris, extending slightly into the **20th arrondissement**. Many interview participants refer to this area directly as the 11th.

Which of the following areas that you associate most with creativity?
(Select up to 3)
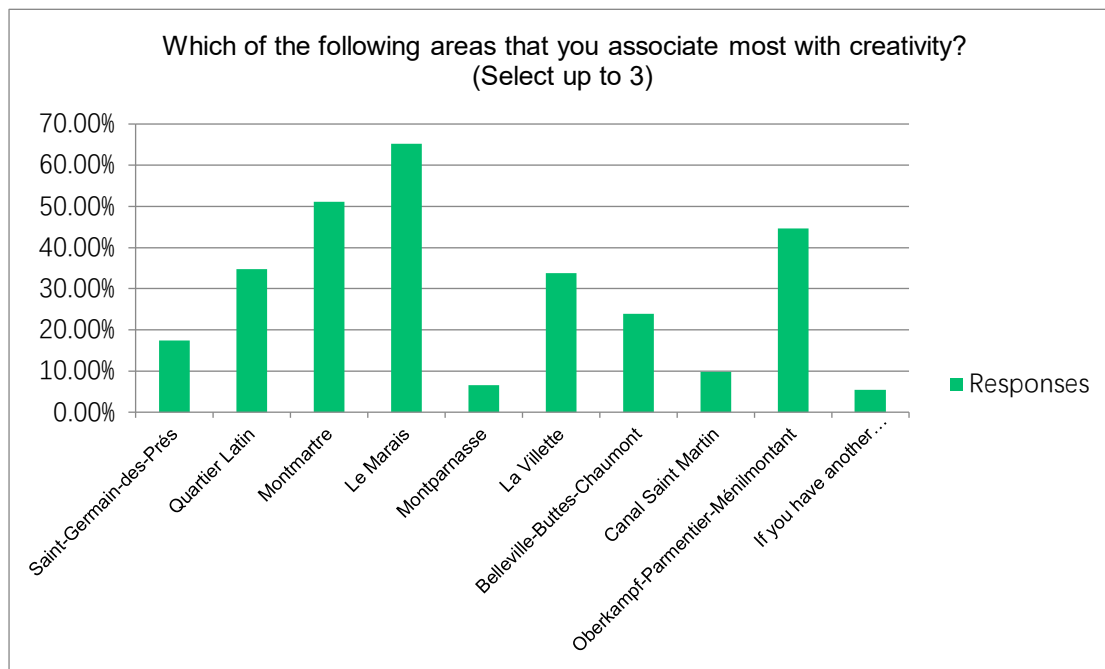
graph 2: Creative neighbourhoods

Creative Infrastructure Clustering and Creative Buzz

Consistent with the theoretical frameworks of the creative city and cluster theory, 7 out of 8 interview participants explicitly link creativity with areas characterised by high concentrations of cultural institutions and creative infrastructure. Central Paris, especially around the Louvre and Le Marais, was frequently cited due to the dense array of museums and galleries:

> "I would think about where all the arts are centralized. So maybe like the museums, mostly in the centre or a bit towards the west. And also like where the galleries are, so like Le Marais. There are other areas with galleries as well, but I think the most famous contemporary art galleries are in le Marais, and also because Pompidou[2] is close by."
> *(PT2, Female, German, 23, Art History)*

Another participant added: "I don't know the exact name of the area, but it's like the city center of Paris, because there are a lot of museums... Louvre, Musée d'Orsay..." (*PT7, Female, Chinese, 27, Museology and Cultural Heritage Management*).

Tellingly, six out of the eight participants referenced the Louvre or the Musée d'Orsay, and two mentioned the Centre Pompidou when attempting to define the geographic location or neighbourhood. This suggests how prestige, institutional credibility, and cultural reputation may also affect how creative places are recognised.

2

Open-ended survey responses further highlighted how discipline-specific associations contribute to identifying creative geographies, affirming the importance of cultural institutions and infrastructure on creative place association. Film and photography students highlighted the Latin Quarter for its concentration of photography galleries and the 13th arrondissement for institutions like the Cinémathèque Française. Music students often cited Pigalle and Bercy, renowned for their performance venues. Visual arts and art management students predominantly identified areas like Le Marais and Saint-Germain-des-Prés, due to the presence of major museums and art galleries. These responses underscore how clusters of infrastructure and the presence of prestigious institutions significantly shape perceptions of creative areas among art students, with differentiated locations based on artistic disciplines.

Alternative Spaces, Third Places, Creative Communities and Creative Buzz

Beyond established institutional clusters, several interview participants emphasised the importance of alternative and independent spaces, particularly in neighbourhoods like the 11th arrondissement and Belleville. These areas were valued for their young creative communities and experimental atmospheres, which are qualities that align with the concept of 'creative buzz' discussed in the literature. Participant 5 captured this energy succinctly by describing the 11th and Belleville as places where "everything is boiling":

> "I have friends, from fashion, from photography, from art. And we hang out in the 11th, more precisely Belleville. And, we went to this place, it's a venue where usually creative people are hanging out and discussing a creativity-related project. (…) and there are many venues like that (…) that area feels like, where everything is boiling." (*PT 5, female, Latvian, 25, Classical Philology and Cultural Heritage Management*)

Other participants echoed similar sentiments: one student shared her experiences engaging with young artists and attending experimental events, while another described feeling inspired by the creative energy of seeing art students painting murals in the neighbourhood.

> "I associate the 11th with young people who organise events with music, fashion, art. Every event that I was interested in, it was in the 11th. I went to this event where there were a lot of artist designers, who made very cool clothes with recycled materials. And there was a DJ, doing music in a very original way." (*PT8, female, Italian, 22, Finance/Art Market*).

> "I can spot art students doing the graffiti on the walls, sometimes, I could see a lot of people with these big bags for their paintings. I don't know, it's a vibe for me, and you can tell that this is a place where

some creative people are active." (*PT6, female, Russian, 31, Art and Cultural Heritage Management*)

These perspectives highlight how the convergence of alternative venues, emerging creatives, and an atmosphere of experimentation, contributes to a dynamic social and creative buzz that participants find particularly appealing. Compared to how the participants describe the institutional clusters, the underground venues and young artist communities appear to generate a more palpable 'buzz'. This distinction reflects Ferru et al.'s (2022) findings that non-institutional places are often seen as more open and affectively resonant for emerging creatives.

Histories and Identities of Places

In addition to the spatial clustering effects, students also reflected on how historical associations influence their perceived creative geographies. Participants referenced historical narratives and cultural symbolism in some places as indicators of creative associations of places, particularly highlighting Montmartre and Montparnasse.

> "First neighborhood that comes to my mind is, of course, Montmartre, because of famous early 20th-century artists living there, like Picasso, Modigliani, Renoir…" (*PT6, female, Russian, 31, Art and Cultural Heritage Management*)

> "Montparnasse is very important for me, as a person who knows and loves Russian Literature. (…) Because it was the center of Russian creative immigration of the early 20th century... (there are) many legends about the writers and poets sitting in the cafes, living in Chambres du Bonnes…" (*PT 5, Latvian, 25, Classical Philology and Cultural Heritage Management*)

The descriptions of Montmartre and Montparnasse showed the creative pull of these places as cradles of artists. The aura of a neighbourhood built up over time through representation, reputation, and memory, can act as a strong symbolic force (Currid & Williams, 2010b; Durmaz, 2015).

The findings of the interviews demonstrate that spatial clustering of cultural institutions, young and diverse creative scenes, and the historical representation and association of places are critical in shaping creative associations with places. These interpretations also align with the wider perception of Paris as a creative city, demonstrated in survey results. When asked to identify factors contributing to Paris's creative reputation, the most selected reasons are "great cultural entertainment offerings and infrastructure", followed by "rich artistic and cultural heritage" (graph 3).

What main factors do you think contribute to Paris's reputation as a creative city? (Select up to 3)
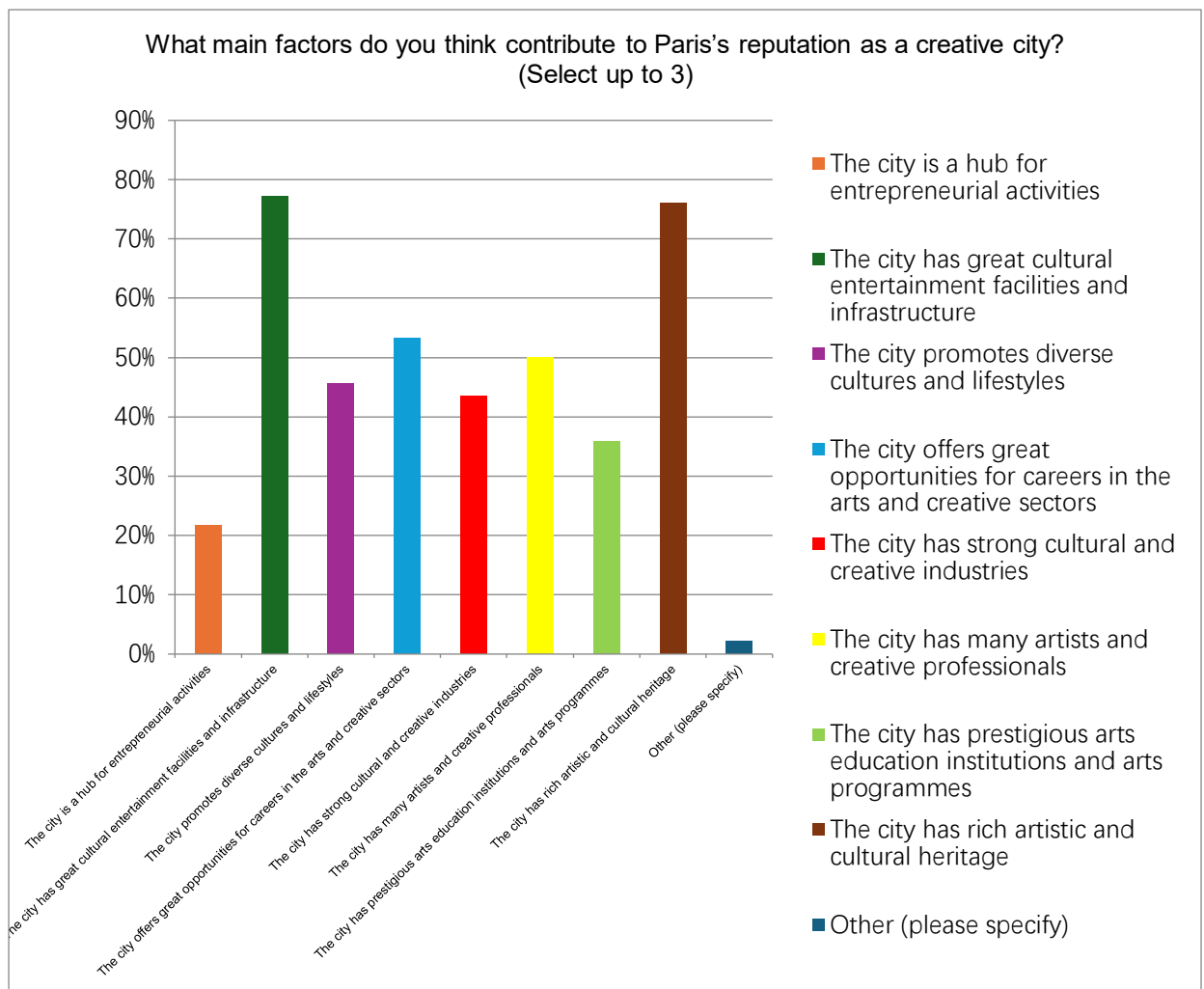

graph 3: Perceptions of Paris as a creative city

Inspirational Attributes

This theme responds to Hypothesis 2, which posits that creative places are supposed to provide strong creative inspiration and stimulation; and art students are more likely to prioritise utilitarian values (such as access to resources and informal networks) over symbolic values (such as atmosphere, aesthetics, historical and emotional resonance) when drawing creative inspirations from these places. The findings offer a more complex picture than the hypothesis suggests. While some students do draw inspiration from the cited creative areas and places, many cite everyday spaces and informal interactions outside these perceived creative geographies as more creatively stimulating. Although utilitarian elements are acknowledged, symbolic values emerge more frequently are described in richer, more affective details. This indicates that rather than prioritising functionality, students often find inspiration in the symbolic, atmospheric, and affective dimensions of space, thereby challenging the utilitarian emphasis assumed by the hypothesis.

Survey responses provide initial evidence for this valuation. In the survey question concerning the spatial attributes that foster creativity, three options emerged most

frequently: "atmosphere and dynamics", "access to ideas, skills and networks", and "emotional connection". The prominence of these selections indicates a blend of symbolic and utilitarian factors at play, with symbolic dimensions slightly more dominant (graph 4).
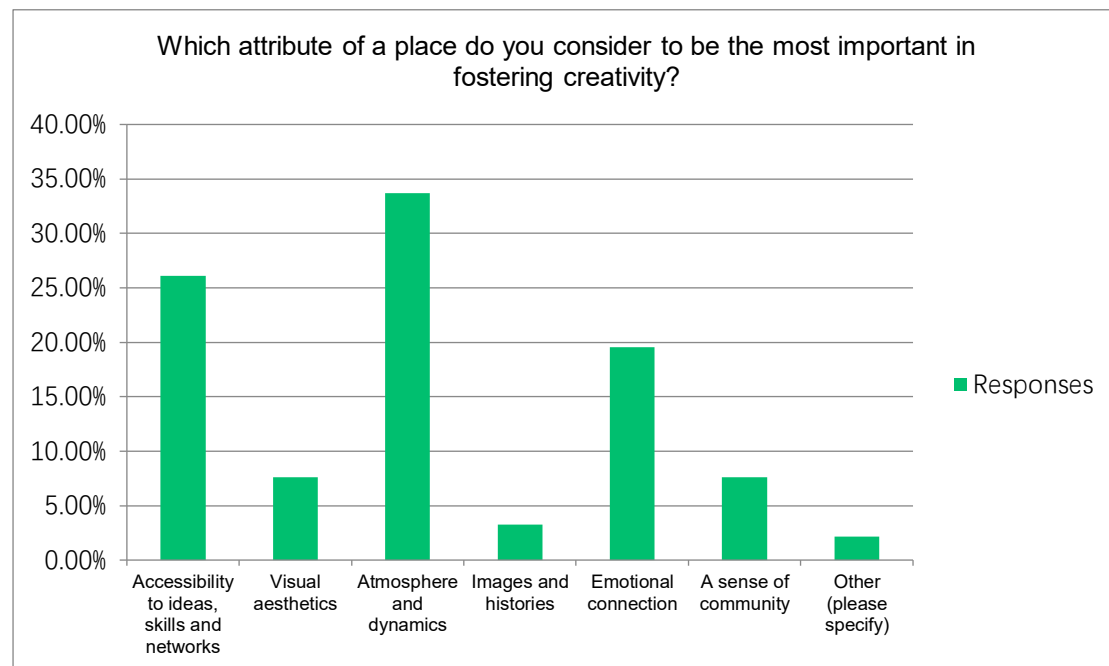
graph 4: Inspirational attributes

Symbolic Values: Visual Qualities, Atmosphere, and Emotional Resonance

Qualitative interview data reinforces the salience of symbolic values. Echoing literature on the symbolic 'look and feel' of place (Drake, 2003; Heebels & Van Aalst, 2010), many students described visual characteristics, histories, atmospheres and dynamics as major sources of creative inspiration. For example, Participant 1, a student of Communications in Art and photographer, spoke of the poetic visual of the Jardin des Tuileries: "I love the Jardin des Tuileries. That's one of my favourite spots to take pictures (…) When you see the sun go down on the river, and seeing how the city view changes under the lights… it's really magic." *(PT1, female, 29, Guadeloupean, Communications in Arts)*

For Participant 3 (*female, 25, American, History and Art Management*), Montmartre serves as a source of inspiration not only because of its unique ambiance and distinct visual character, but also due to its rich historical resonance, which she feels a personal connection to:

> "It looks very different from the rest of the Paris, and it feels different.
> You have the winding streets, hidden gardens, little vineyard, and you
> see the whole Paris from the top, it is just beautiful and peaceful for me.
> I go there to write in the early mornings sometimes, that's when I feel

most connected to that place. (…) I often think the artists who lived here, and about this idea of universal experience when I am in Montmartre. I think that's an incredible thing, that somebody two centuries ago had similar experience to me, similar emotions regarding to the place."

The emotional connection Participant 3 forms with Montmartre and its artistic history resonates with Bradley's (2012) argument that imagination is rooted in a deep sense of place. And the participant's accounts show how her feelings and understanding of the place work together to support her personal sense of creativity. Additionally, this connection to the history and tradition of a place could play a formative role in shaping one's aspirational identity. As noted in previous studies (Bradley, 2012; Drake, 2003; Staber, 2012), engaging with the historical trajectories of a field within a specific locale not only deepens contextual understanding but also informs how individuals envision their professional identity and approach.

Participant 1 also showed emotional resonance with the place and an informal community as inspirational sources:

"I love going near the quai of the Seine in the 13th arrondissement… there is a spot where many dancers, painters, photographers are, sometimes they interact with each other, sometimes they are just doing their own things, and I feel simply being among them makes me inspired." *(PT1, female, 29, Guadeloupean, Communications in Arts)*

Her account illustrates how public and everyday environments outside the creative buzz can generate a sense of inclusion, energy, and shared dreams, despite the absence of formal collaboration. This can be considered as a form of everyday activity, which refers to the wide spectrum of creative acts and expressions that occur as part of daily life, in ordinary activities and self-initiated practices outside of professional or elite artistic contexts (Glăveanu, 2010) Public spaces with a socially open environment can often foster this kind of creativity because they allow for self-expressions and spontaneous interactions (Jeffcutt and Pratt, 2002), which can generate inspirations, and even subtle forms of identification and mutual recognition, as experienced by participant 1.

Participant 8 described similar experiences. She expressed how the "wild and free" spirit in Montmartre inspires her, referring to the spontaneity and intuitive interactions between people she saw in Montmartre:

"People sitting in the stairs in front of Sacré Coeur sometimes go down next to the musician and they start dancing. They look so free and not afraid of judgment, they sing as they want, they dance as they want, this energy is so wild and free and very inspiring." (*PT8, female, Italian,*

22, Finance/Art Market)

Another recurring theme in the interviews was the contrast and diversity in urban environments as a source for creative inspiration, which aligns with the literature's observations that urban contrasts and juxtapositions of different qualities can create dynamic atmospheres that stimulate aesthetic reflection and creative thinking (Heebels & Van Aalst, 2010; Khoo et al., 2017; Scott, 2010).

This is reflected in Participant 7's description of Le Marais, which she described as a "place where things converge," noting the coexistence of historical architecture with contemporary culture and fashion gives her inspiration:

> "Le Marais is a place where things converge, (…), like there is history, many old buildings, but also, it's a place for contemporary art and fashion, and trends. Also you can see all kinds of people here, and I can feel inspired by just and walking on the streets, looking at how people dress." *(PT7, Female, Chinese, 27, Museology and Cultural Heritage Management)*

Her account captures how diversity of physical environments and social diversity can spark inspiration (Heebels & Van Aalst, 2010; Khoo et al., 2017; Scott, 2010). Similarly, participant 2 expressed a broader inspiration she felt in Paris's creative landscape, reflecting the contrast between traditional imagery and creative scenes led by younger demographics:

> "I feel some parts of Paris is becoming experimental and underground like Berlin, but also the city maintains its reputation of having top museums and high-quality exhibitions, (…) and you would feel this physically in places as well, like the images and feelings of different creative neighbourhoods are quite different. I think this is inspiring in a way." *(PT2, female, German, 23, Art history and Art Management)*

She noted that different creative neighbourhoods in the city evoke distinct atmospheres and emotional registers, and that the "images and feelings" evoked by these environments are inspiring in their divergence. This reinforces the idea that urban heterogeneity, not just in visual form but in creative energy and subcultural expression are important spatial qualities for creative inspiration.

Utilitarian Values

While symbolic attributes appeared to be dominant sources of inspiration, several interviewees also highlighted utilitarian values such as access to cultural and arts, and peer networks. Participant 7 *(Female, Chinese, 27, Museology and Cultural Heritage Management)* described Le Marais as a place rich in inspiration due to the dense presence of various creative businesses: "Because there are many creative

businesses there: galleries, bookstores, cafés, artisan stores and workshops. (…) You can get so many inspirations just by visiting these places." This experience aligns with Markusen and Gadwa's (2010) conceptualisation of creative clusters as multifunctional environments that integrate production, exhibition, and social interaction. These spaces provide both utilitarian infrastructure for cultural transmission and creative stimulation.

Participants also highlighted third places such as cafés as vital spaces of networking and forming new ideas. Participant 2 *(female, German, 23, Art history and Art Management)* noted how Café Populaire in the 11th offered social connections and inspiration for her: "You can meet many other art students there… it's a good way to network and get inspired, just by talking to people." Participant 6 (*female, Russian, 31, Art and Cultural Heritage Management*) echoed this view: "I love going to the coffee shops in my neighborhood (*the 11th*). (…) good music, creative people around you… many are artists or designers. You can have a small talk and get interesting ideas."

In these cases, creative inspiration stems from proximity to a concentration of creative production and consumption venues, and informal spaces where creative people gather, aligning with the literature on clustering and creative buzz (Bathelt et al., 2004; Currid & Williams, 2010; Scott, 2006; Landry, 2012).

The students mainly experience this "buzz" through consumption behaviour or socialising occasions, and everyday encounters of spontaneous conversations. Even though some of the students don't consider themselves as part of the local creative scene, they still feel the inspirations are there. For example, participant 6 made the following comment:

> "I don't' think I identify myself as part of the creative community here, even though I live in this neighbourhood, and my university is here, but I am not really involved in anything outside of my work and my studies. (…) but I can still feel inspired by people around me and things going on around here, by just observing and conversations." (*PT6, female, Russian, 31, Art and Cultural Heritage Management*)

From her experiences, it appears that by simply being in a creative cluster and in the middle of the buzz, inspirations can be formed. This can be understood through the lens of spillover effects of creative clusters, meaning that activity within creative clusters or areas of high "creative buzz" (intense social and creative interaction) can have broader effects on their surrounding economy, society, and urban environment. These effects go beyond the immediate outputs of the creative industries themselves and can be economic, social, cultural, or even psychological(Chapain & Stryjakiewicz, 2017b; Vang & Chaminade, 2007). What the participant experiences could be the spillover of ideas and skills that boost innovation and creativity beyond the creative community.

Institutional and independent spaces are also important sites of inspiration for some students. Participant 4 *(23, female, Italian, Art and Cultural Heritage Management),* for instance, described an unconventional exhibition at the Musée du Quai Branly as "mind-blowing", and note that the innovative use of VR in curatorial design is inspiring for curation practices in cultural heritage narratives. This aligns with literature that positions cultural venues as crucial spaces for cultural consumption and creative ignition, where exposure to artistic expression can provoke emotional and cognitive stimuli that feed the creative process (Markusen, 2006).

Participant 2's *(female, German, 23, Art history and Art Management)* preference for smaller, independent galleries over more established institutions further highlights the importance of diversity in creative infrastructures and offerings. She noted that such venues offered "more diverse and niche ideas," reflecting a value for spaces that depart from traditional hierarchies of taste and foreground experimentation, inclusivity, and emergent voices. This perspective is consistent with literature that a diverse cultural infrastructure is important in nurturing creative plurality, ((Gilmore et al., 2016)).

These responses suggest that utilitarian values of places for creative inspiration are predominantly manifested through access to ideas and networks, in which institutions and creative clusters play an important role. It also shows how utilitarian values are often interwoven with symbolic perception. The participants demonstrated that they experience creative inspiration through environments that blend tangible affordances with intangible, social qualities.

Integration and Professional Development in Creative Environments

This section addresses Hypothesis 3, which posits that despite finding creative inspiration in Paris's creative environments, art students may encounter difficulties integrating into the city's professional creative networks due to a series of barriers. These challenges affect their ability to fully leverage the city's creative resources and values for their professional development.

While 80% of survey respondents responded affirmatively that they felt creatively stimulated by their surroundings, the data suggests a disjunction between creative inspiration and professional integration. When asked about their current engagement with the city's creative scenes, over half (51%, $n = 47$) characterised themselves primarily as cultural consumers without active involvement in creative production. Only two students (approximately 2%) felt they were deeply embedded in Paris's creative networks. Even though a sizeable portion (35%, $n = 32$) reported internships or part-time work in the sector (graph 5), these findings confirm that for many, the transition from students to professional career in the cultural economy remains uncertain and challenging.
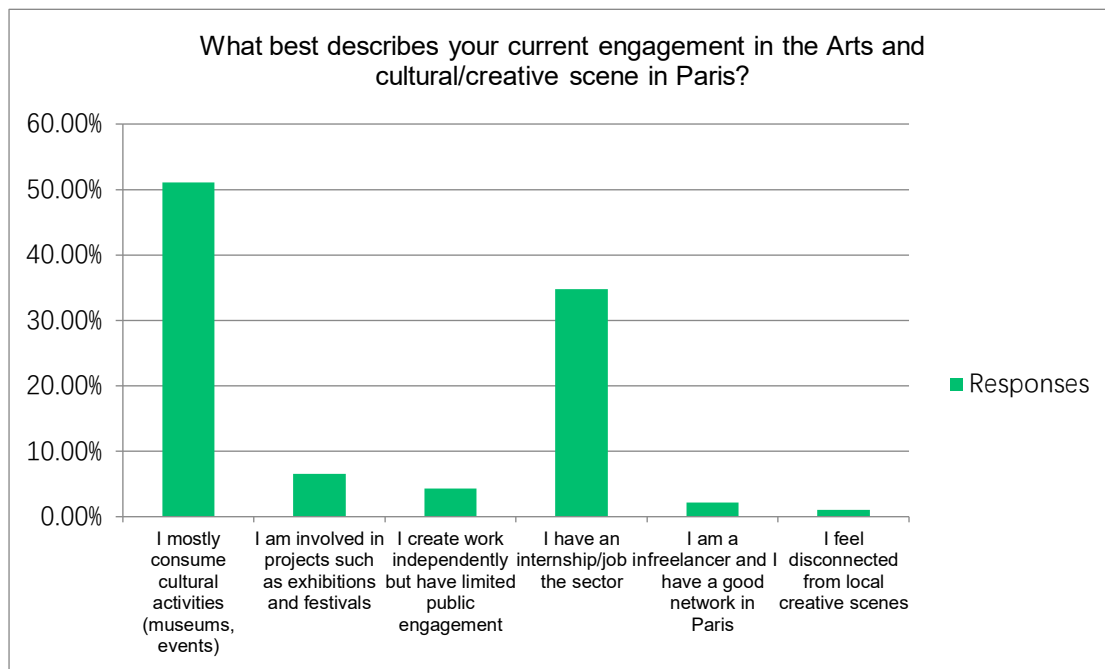
graph 5: Engagement with creative scenes in Paris

Systematic Barriers

Both survey responses and interviews revealed persistent inequalities that hinder students' access to professional opportunities, especially within the cultural sector. A major concern was the prevalence of unpaid or underpaid work, which favours students from more privileged backgrounds. As Participant 6 reflected:

"All the people I talked to who managed to break into the art world in Paris started with unpaid internships… And when you hear their background, most come from well-off families. For students like me, who don't have that support, it's very discouraging." *(PT6, female, Russian, 31, Art and Cultural Heritage Management)*

This perspective demonstrates the academic criticism of unpaid work in the cultural and creative industries, and how the participants are aware that this is a mechanism that reinforces inequalities by privileging people with economic capital and marginalising others (Oakley & O'Brien, 2016; Skujiṇa & Loots, 2020).

Participant 7's *(female, Chinese, 27, Museology and Cultural Heritage Management)* account further reflects the location-based inequality (Brook & Comunian, 2018), who recounted seeing an unpaid internship opportunity at UNESCO's Paris office that offers even no transport or accommodation support. Such opportunities, she noted, are accessible only to those who are from Paris and can afford to work for free.

Her comments also illustrate how elite institutions may inadvertently uphold

exclusionary structures; rather than meritocracy, what is sustained here is more a form of cultural elitism. This gatekeeping function of institutions and credentialism also emerged in other students' reflections.

Participant 3 *(female, American, 25, History and Cultural Heritage Management)* described difficulties in applying for museum roles due to institutional expectations around language proficiency, French educational backgrounds, and prior experience in national institutions: "They require experience in the French system, but how am I supposed to get that if I can't even get my foot in the door?" Participant 1 *(female, Guadeloupean, 28, Communication in Art)* recounted similar experiences: "At the beginning, nobody wanted to hire me because they think because I was a literaire and I studied Korean, I don't know nothing about art. I'm lucky I found people who were nice enough to give me internships." One survey respondent （#81） remarked: "Many of the curators are educated at the École du Louvre… I believe the people I encounter in that sector have similar ideas stemming from one educational monopoly."

These insights align with critiques of "homophily" in hiring, where cultural institutions, unconsciously or not, recruit individuals who mirror the demographic and social profiles of existing staff (Skujiņa & Loots, 2020; Wreyford, 2015).

Navigating Information Gaps and Invisible Networks

Comparing to entering the more prestigious and established institutions, some participants said getting involved in independent and alternative creative scenes might be easier:

> "I do think that there's potential ways to get involved in more like underground, independent thing, where maybe there are more like-minded people and young creatives." *(PT3, female, 25, American, History and Art Management)*

However, participants highlighted difficulties in locating alternative or independent creative spaces, which are often not visible from the street or discoverable without insider knowledge:

> "I think there's a lot of stuff that you don't necessarily see from the street. But like once you go in, you see all these people there and you realize, oh, this is like a creative space. (…) It's kind of like shut off and you have to kind of know". *(PT2, female, German, 23, Art history and Art Management)*

This sense of invisibility reinforces feelings of outsiderness among newly arrived students, who may lack local connections or familiarity with the city's creative infrastructure. Several participants stressed the role of social media platforms such as Instagram in uncovering creative events or communities.

Participant 6 (female, Russian, 31, Art and Cultural Heritage Management) shared how she discovered a rehearsal space and art exhibition venue (Ménagerie de Verre) near her university through Instagram, despite walking by it countless times without knowing its purpose:

> "I found most of the creative events and people on social media.(…) I went to this exhibition of an artist I follow on Instagram, and it was in an artist rehearsal space very close to uni, but it looks like a garage from outside and I have passed that street million times, but I never thought that is a creative space."

Participant 7 (*Female, Chinese, 27, Museology and Cultural Heritage Management*) pointed out another dimension: even with access to events and spaces, many international students lack the cultural confidence or 'know-how' to network effectively: "Even if I know where things are, I don't feel confident enough to introduce myself or participate."

These accounts again underscore the systematic disadvantage faced by individuals lacking location-based knowledge and social ties (Taylor & Luckman, 2020a). While digital platforms and social media can help fill in certain informational gaps, such as event listings or job postings, they cannot fully substitute for the tacit, experiential knowledge that circulates informally among local networks. This "know-how" includes subtle cues about navigating professional norms, accessing unadvertised opportunities, or simply knowing whom to approach and how. For newcomers or "outsiders", such embodied knowledge remains difficult to acquire.

Lack of Support and Sense of Community

Many participants also cited the lack of institutional support and a sense of community as challenges, which not only hinder professional development, but also downplay their overall integration into the local creative environment. Participant 1 (*female, 29, Guadeloupean, Korean and Communications in Arts*) described her university's career services as absent in helping her navigate the arts job market: "They told me during the interview they could help. But when I actually needed contacts for internships, they said, 'We have nobody.' So, I had to do it all alone."

Others described broader feelings of isolation and alienation, often connected to language, cultural unfamiliarity, or lack of sense of identity. For Participant 5 *(female, Latvian, 25, Classical Philology and Cultural Heritage Management)* specifically, she felt out of place in a "over-creative" environment:

> "That's what I realised about myself, actually, in Paris, because of this strong opposition, because of the large number of people there who are into arts, and creative, and I really feel as a stranger there,

even though I study in an art management school, and even in the
uni, I felt very weird, it's, like too artsy for me, too creative for me".

Participant 5's reflection reveals a paradoxical experience of disconnection in what is ostensibly an inclusive and creatively vibrant environment. Although creative cities are often celebrated for their density of creative clusters and buzz, her account highlights how the saturation of creative energy can paradoxically alienate those who do not feel fully aligned with dominant creative expressions or subcultural norms. Her discomfort with what she describes as an "over-creative" environment underscore how this dynamism, may inadvertently produce pressure to conform to a hyper-creative atmosphere. This resonates with the literature's caution about the fragility of the creative milieu, that how it may become over-stimulated, burn out, or generate pressures of constant novelty (Landry & Hyams, 2012; Murzyn-Kupisz & Działek, 2021). Rather than fostering inspiration, the milieu may instead intensify anxieties around belonging, identity, and creative adequacy. This nuance complicates idealised narratives of the creative city, revealing that creative buzz can also be a source of fatigue or exclusion.

These feelings point to a lack sense of belonging, particularly among those are new to the city and don't have a network. While students may be surrounded by artistic energy, many struggle to access local networks or identify with the creative scenes, shaping a spatial and social disconnect between potential and participation.

Importance of Individual Agency

Interestingly, despite these challenges, many students acknowledged the importance of individual agency. Several participants articulated the belief that successful integration requires self-motivation and persistence, often through proactive engagement with events and communities. As Participant 3 *(female, 25, American, History and Art Management)* reflected:

"I I think, you have to put in the work if you want to be involved, maybe through events that happen, network in person. (..) it's up to the individual to try to navigate it and to see what they want to do, what can be done."

Similarly, Participant 1 (*female, 29, Guadeloupean, Korean and Communications in Arts*) commented when reflecting her journey of internship hunting: "you have to count on yourself and trust in yourself, because if you're like me, have no connections or networks, you have to put yourself out there, work hard and prove yourself to others for them to take you seriously."

This belief, however, also reinforces the precariousness of success in the creative economy. Without institutional support, students must rely on personal initiative, often at great emotional cost or even self-exploitation (Oakley & O'Brien, 2016).

The findings in this theme highlight the contradiction between Paris's attractiveness as a worldwide hub of artistic innovation and the lived realities of students attempting to develop creative careers there. These results are consistent with larger criticisms of creative city models, which emphasise cultural labour as engines of urban vibrancy and progress while frequently ignoring the sector's systemic disparities. The language of opportunity and meritocracy usually obscures the fact that entry to cultural labour markets is often dependent on financial wealth and social networks.

Other findings

Differences Between Short-Term and Long-Term Residents

A notable difference in creative experience and engagement emerged between short-term and long-term residents. Students who had been in Paris for less than a year tended to centre their creative explorations around more known locations and institutional landmarks, such as Le Marais, Montmartre, and the Louvre, often influenced by media representations and global imaginaries of Paris as an artistic capital. In contrast, long-term residents demonstrated more nuanced and embedded relationships with the city. They engaged with a wider spectrum of neighbourhoods such as Pantin or Saint-Ouen, and some of their practices extended beyond consumption into internships, collaborations, or individual projects.

This difference suggests that length of residency enables deeper spatial familiarity and social integration, which in turn shapes creative engagement. However, these variations were not strictly temporal. They were entangled with language fluency, nationality, and prior cultural knowledge, reinforcing that access to creativity in the city is not simply a matter of time spent, but of socio-cultural capital and positionality. This distinction underscores the importance of recognising heterogeneity among emerging creatives and avoiding overly generalised assumptions in creative city discourses.

Subjective Negotiation of Place Identity

In the interviews, participants offered divergent views on how symbolic value and authenticity are maintained or eroded in certain cultural places. A strong example came from reflections on Montmartre. Some participants expressed disappointment at its growing commodification and overtourism, viewing it as a 'Disneyfied' version of artistic heritage *(PT 5)*. Others, however, maintained that the creative spirit endures through grassroots collectives and hidden networks.

This interpretive dissonance highlights the influence of place is not objective but is heavily mediated by the subjective experience of the individual (Ferru et al., 2022). These observations also invite a deeper examination of how processes such as commodification of culture, and overtourism may alter the creative resonance of a place, and how creative individuals might be affected by the changes.

Location Choice and Future Intentions

Survey responses to the question of whether staying in Paris after graduation show that roughly 60% of respondents expressed the intention to stay in Paris, citing reasons such as the city's diverse cultural offerings, access to opportunities in the arts and cultural sectors (comparing to other French cities), and personal reasons such as friends and families.

However, other respondents raised concerns about affordability, social alienation, and limited access to creative roles, citing high living costs and low pay in the cultural sector. For many international students, the lack of local ties and visa-related challenges further limited their long-term engagement. These responses align with the findings on systematic barriers, especially highlighting the challenges of location-based inequalities (Brook & Comunian, 2018).

Chapter 4: Conclusion

This thesis set out to explore the research question: *how do art students in Paris interpret and navigate urban creative environments in relation to their personal inspiration and professional development*? Through a qualitative-led mixed-methods approach, including surveys and semi-structured interviews, it uncovered answers for the three sub questions: (1) Which neighbourhoods do art students most strongly associate with creativity in Paris, and why? (2) What are the spatial attributes or values (e.g., cluster and buzz, symbolic, utilitarian) of these places inspire the students creatively? (3) How do students navigate and engage with the creative environments of Paris in relation to their professional development, and what challenges or barriers do they encounter? This conclusion summarises the main findings for these questions, draws broader theoretical implications, and reflects on the value of the study in relation to practical implications. This chapter ends with reflecting on the limitations of this study and directions for future research.

Key Findings

The findings show that art students mostly associate historically established areas like Le Marais, Montmartre with institutional creativity and artistic heritage, and the 11th arrondissement for its young and experimental creative buzz.

These findings resonate with the creative city literature, which highlights the importance of infrastructure, institutions, and history and heritage in shaping the cultural appeal of urban environments. The notions of creative clustering and buzz clearly emerged in participants' narratives as central to how creativity is recognised and experienced in urban environments.

Notably, the discourse of the creative industries, or creative production, did not prominently feature in interview findings or survey data. This may be attributed to the positionality of the art students in this research, many of whom identify primarily as consumers of cultural content rather than active participants.

The study finds that art students' creative inspiration is not confined to institutional clusters or perceived creative geographies; and for them, creativity is more frequently evoked by the symbolic values of place, such as atmosphere, visual qualities, historical resonance, and emotional connection than utilitarian values, such as access to cultural resources, ideas, and peer networks. While utilitarian values were acknowledged, they were often described in fewer details or in less affectionate ways. One possible explanation according to observation is that students tend to associate utilitarian values with professional advancement, whereas symbolic qualities are linked to personal inspiration, emotional engagement, or just creative well-being. The emotional

and imaginative aspects of place appear to play a more resonant role in shaping how students engage with creativity in the urban environment.

At the heart of this research is a critical interrogation of the creative city paradigm. Dominant policy and planning discourses often promote creative cities as inclusive ecosystems that nurture talent and innovation. However, the lived experiences of art students in this study reveal an often-exclusionary terrain. While broader urban environments in Paris provide inspirations and opportunities, many students in this research remain consumers of arts and culture in the city. Major barriers for students include the prevalence of unpaid or underpaid internships and work, "homophily" in institutional environment, lack of institutional career support, feelings of "outsiderness" and a broader sense of isolation and alienation. Despite these challenges, many students acknowledged the importance of digital tools such as social media in finding information, and individual agency, self-motivation, and persistence in navigating the creative career, which, however, reinforces the precarious nature of success in the arts and cultural sectors.

Theoretical Reflections

One of the most important theoretical contributions of this study lies in challenging the spatial assumptions underpinning the creative city model. Traditional formulations of the creative city foreground spatial concentration and economic productivity. In this framework, dense urban hubs where creative industries and cultural producers are co-located are assumed to generate synergistic outcomes through creative buzz and knowledge spillovers.

While this perspective has empirical traction, it also risks ignoring how creativity is enacted beyond these spaces (Gibson and Brennan-Horley, 2020). Findings from this study suggest that inspiration often resides in diffuse and informal geographies. Art students described experiences of inspiration in spaces not typically framed as creative within the policy or in city branding strategies. These findings support scholars' critique of spatial orthodoxy in creative industry discourse and calls attention to the alternative modalities of creativity that emerge outside centralised creative clusters (Gibson and Brennan-Horley, 2020).

Thus, the findings align with critiques of the creative city narrative that argue for a shift from economic to humanistic understandings of creativity (Markusen, 2014; O'Connor & Shaw, 2014), where the symbolic and emotional value of places, the everyday rhythms of public life, and spontaneous social interactions constitute the spatial fabric of creative engagement. As Brokalaki and Comunian's (2020) recent article suggests that rather than seeing creativity as a commodity to be packaged and sold, creativity plays a role in fostering inclusion, dialogue, and a pluralistic sense of belonging within the city(Brokalaki & Comunian, 2021). These observations reinforce the call for more nuanced theories that centre subjectivities, informal practices, and the multiplicity of urban experiences in understanding how creativity is generated and sustained.

Practical Implications

The findings from this research can provide valuable insights for policy making. One of the key issue presented in this study is the disconnect between the aspirational narratives of creative cities and the lived experiences of art students. While the discourse of the creative city continues to prioritise image-making, one critical question to ask is how creative cities can retain talents instead of only attracting them (Comunian & Faggian, 2013).

Breaking down systematic barriers is essential to create inclusive mechanisms of participation, which has already been addressed in elsewhere by researchers. Form a place-based view, this study propose that urban environments should priorities fostering sense of community and belonging. Creative places should be where like-minded creative people can connect. In this sense, bottom-up initiatives might be more helpful rather than top-down strategies, as seen in many community-based place-making cases in the literature (Bain & Landau, 2019; Chang, 2022; Gibson et al., 2012; Pedrini et al., 2022; Pierce et al., 2011).

In this light, fostering urban creativity requires more than investing in infrastructure or staging flagship events. It demands institutional reflexivity, inclusive governance, and policy frameworks that allow for bottom-up initiatives, and also the legitimation of alternative voices. Without such shifts, the creative city risks becoming an image-driven façade(Brokalaki & Comunian, 2021).

Limitations and Future Research

This study offers valuable insights into how art students perceive and navigate urban creativity in Paris; however, it also presents several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample of interview participants is relatively narrow in scope. Due to the researcher's personal networks and recruitment channels, the qualitative component predominantly includes international students and those studying art and cultural management. As such, the findings may not fully capture the perspectives of art students in more practice-based or creative disciplines, nor those from different socio-economic or institutional backgrounds. This limits the diversity of voices represented.

Second, the study is small in scale. With a limited number of survey responses, the research cannot claim statistical generalisability. Future studies could build on this work by conducting larger-scale surveys and interviews, allowing for broader demographic representation and more robust comparative analysis.

Several findings from this research also point toward important directions for future investigation. One promising area involves the distinction between short-term and long-term residents. As the data suggest, students with different durations of residence

in Paris express notably different relationships with the city's creative infrastructure, social environment, and institutional access. A more detailed exploration of these differences, especially when intersected with national identity (French vs. international students), could provide greater clarity on how cultural familiarity, language, and local knowledge shape creative engagement and sense of belonging.

Another area for further research lies in disciplinary distinctions. The survey revealed subtle but meaningful differences in how students from different artistic fields perceive and engage with the creative geographies in city. For instance, those in visual arts may value studio-based facilities more than those in arts management, who might prioritise networking opportunities. Future work could investigate these disciplinary nuances in more depth.

Additionally, while this study employed semi-structured interviews and surveys, it had originally intended to include walking interviews as a method to gather place-based and embodied insights into students' relationships with creative geographies. Due to time and logistical constraints, this method could not be implemented. Walking interviews offer the potential to capture spatial narratives and emotional responses as they unfold in real time and space(J. Evans & Jones, 2011; King & Woodroffe, 2017). Future studies employing this approach may offer more situated and sensory-rich understandings of how creative inspiration is experienced in specific urban settings.

Lastly, while the focus here has been on students' subjective interpretations, future research could seek to triangulate these perspectives with other stakeholders in the creative ecosystem, such as educators, policymakers, or cultural institutions, to develop a more holistic understanding of how art students and other emerging creatives are positioned and supported (or not) within urban creative frameworks.

In sum, this research offers a steppingstone for broader inquiries into the experiences of emerging creatives in urban contexts. Future studies expanding the sample size, incorporating comparative and place-sensitive methods, and engaging with intersecting institutional perspectives would deepen our understanding of how creative cities can become not only sites of inspiration but also spaces of inclusion, support, and meaningful participation.

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Appendices

Questionnaire:

Creative city - Paris and art students

Creative City - Paris and Art Students

Thank you for participating in this short survey. It is about urban creativity in Paris and your relationship with the places in the city as an art student/graduate. Your opinions ar very valuable and your voices shall be heard!

Creative city - Paris and art students

Demographic and Personal Information

* 1. What is your gender?

○ Female

○ Male

○ Non-binary

* 2. What is your age?

○ 18-24

○ 25-34

○ 35-44

○ 45+

* 3. What is your nationality? (If French, please specify if you are originally from Paris or another region.)

[   ]

* 4. How long have you been living in Paris?

○ Less than 1 year

○ 1-3 years

○ More than 3 years

* 5. What is your primary artistic discipline?

[   ]
[   ]

* 6. Which of the following are you?

○ Undergraduate student

○ Master student

○ Recent graduate

○ Other (please specify)

[   ]

* 7. Which institution do/did you study at?

[   ]

Creative city - Paris and art students
Perception of urban creativity and engagement

* 8. To what degree do you consider Paris as a creative city?

0   5
○————————————————————————————   [   ]

* 9. What main factors do you think contribute to Paris's reputation as a creative city? (Select up to 3)

☐ The city is a hub for entrepreneurial activities

☐ The city has great cultural entertainment facilities and infrastructure

☐ The city promotes diverse cultures and lifestyles

☐ The city offers great opportunities for careers in the arts and creative sectors

☐ The city has strong cultural and creative industries

☐ The city has many artists and creative professionals

☐ The city has prestigious arts education institutions and arts programmes

☐ The city has rich artistic and cultural heritage

☐ Other (please specify)

[   ]

* 10. What types of places do you visit most frequently in Paris for creative inspiration? (Select up to 3)

☐ Museums & galleries

☐ Study-based places (libraries, co-working spaces etc.)

☐ Theatres/ Cinemas/ Live performance venues

☐ Arts/culture centres (studios, rehearsal spaces, etc.)

☐ Cafés/ Bars/ Restaurants/ Clubs

☐ Stores and boutiques

☐ Outdoor spaces (streets, parks, markets, etc.)

* 11. Please name a neighbourhood or place in Paris that you associate with your artistic or creative field. (ex: Le Marais - visual arts)

[   ]

* 12. Which of the following areas that you associate most with creativity? (Select up to 3)

☐ Saint-Germain-des-Prés

☐ Quartier Latin

☐ Montmartre

☐ Le Marais

☐ Montparnasse

☐ La Villette

☐ Belleville-Buttes-Chaumont

☐ Canal Saint Martin

☐ Oberkampf-Parmentier-Ménilmontant

☐ If you have another area/neighbourhood in mind, please put it here

[   ]

* 13. Which of the following places that you associate most with creativity? (Select up to 3)

☐ Le Louvre

☐ Le Centquatre

☐ Viaduc des Arts

☐ Atelier des Lumières

☐ La Cinemathèque française

☐ Foundation Louis Vuitton

☐ Lafayette Anticipations

☐ La Gare - Le Gore

☐ Centre Pompidou

☐ MAIF Social Club

☐ If you have another place in mind, please put it here

[   ]

* 14. Which attribute of a place do you consider to be the most important in fostering creativity?

○ Accessibility to ideas, skills and networks

○ Visual aesthetics

○ Atmosphere and dynamics

○ Images and histories

○ Emotional connection

○ A sense of community

○ Other (please specify)

[   ]

Creative city - Paris and art students
Paris for Arts Students

* 15. Do you feel that Paris offers inspiration for your development as a future arts or creative professional?

○ Yes

○ No

○ Tell me a bit more ;)

* 16. What best describes your current engagement in the Arts and cultural/creative scene in Paris?

○ I mostly consume cultural activities (museums, events)

○ I am involved in projects such as exhibitions and festivals

○ I create work independently but have limited public engagement

○ I have an internship/job in the sector

○ I am a freelancer and I have a good network in Paris

○ I feel disconnected from local creative scenes

* 17. What do you think are the biggest challenge for professional development as an art student in Paris? (Select up to 3)

☐ Limited access to job opportunities

☐ Lack of networks

☐ Lack of knowledge in the ways things are done here

☐ Financial and housing pressure

☐ Too much competition

☐ Lack of accessibility to information about opportunities

☐ lack of policy and institutional support

☐ Language barrier

☐ Lack of a sense of community

☐ Other

* 18. Do you plan to stay in Paris after you finish your studies? Why or why not?

Creative city - Paris and art students
Thank you! 😊

19. Lastly, if you are interested in participating in a walking interview in one of the creative neighbourhoods in Paris, please leave your email/WhatsApp number here:)

Interview Guide

Semi-structured interview guide

Introductory Questions
1. Can you tell me a bit about your background — How old are you, where are

you from, what do you study, where do you study, which year you're in, and what are your general interests in the arts?

2. How long have you been living and studying in Paris? What brings you to study and live in Paris?

3. What is a 'creative city' to you? And how would you describe Paris as a creative city?

On Creative Place Perception

1. What is creativity to you?

2. What kind of places you visited the most in Paris?

3. When you think of a "creative place" in Paris, which neighborhoods or locations come to mind? Why these places?

4. What qualities or feelings make a place feel "creative" to you? Are these more about atmosphere, people, aesthetics – or practical things like opportunities or resources?

5. Are you familiar with areas like Montmartre, the 11th, or the Marais? What do you think of their creative atmosphere?

6. Do you feel inspired in some way, like getting new ideas… in those places?

7. What are the main purposes you visit these places?

8. How do you find out/hear about these places?

On Barriers and sense of places?

9. Do you feel connected to a particular place in Paris? Why or why not?

10. Are there things that make it difficult for you to take full advantage of the creative environment in the city?

11. In the places you consider creative, do you feel you have opportunities to network or grow professionally?

12. What is your relationship with the creative scene in Paris now, do you think you play an active role in it? What's your plan for the future?

13. What do you aspire to be? Professionally?

14. Do you think Paris is a good place for that?

Closing Questions

15. In your opinion, what does a 'creative city' mean? What should an ideal creative city look like?

16. From the perspective of an art student, what do you think can be improved in terms of the creative environments in Paris?

Survey respondents' demographics:

Category	Subcategory	Frequency (n)	Rounded Percentage

			(%)
Gender	Female	70	76%
Gender	Male	20	22%
Gender	Non-binary	2	2%
Age Group	18–24	64	70%
Age Group	25–34	28	30%
Level of Study	Undergraduate	18	20%
Level of Study	Postgraduate	66	72%
Level of Study	Recent Graduate	7	76%
Level of Study	Other (please specify)	1	1%
Nationality	French/outside Paris	39	42%
Nationality	French/ From Paris	23	25%
Nationality	International	29	32%
Time in Paris	Less than 1 year	36	39%
Time in Paris	1-3 years	19	21%
Time in Paris	More than 3 years	37	40%
Primary artistic discipline	Visual Arts (Painting, Sculpture, etc.)	8	9%
Primary artistic discipline	Fashion/ Design	1	1%
Primary artistic discipline	Film/ Photography	13	14%
Primary artistic discipline	New Media/ Digital art	1	1%
Primary artistic discipline	Performing Arts (Theater, Dance, etc.)	6	7%
Primary artistic discipline	Art management/ Art markets	34	37%
Primary artistic discipline	Music	27	29%
Primary artistic discipline	Literature	1	1%
Primary artistic discipline	Architecture	0	0
Primary artistic discipline	Other (please specify)	1	1%
Institution of study	IESA	71	77%
Institution of study	ICART	8	9%

Institution of study	EAC	1	1%
Institution of study	EDHEC	1	1%
Institution of study	EFAP	1	1%
Institution of study	IÉSEG School of Management	1	1%
Institution of study	Industrie culturelle et créative	1	1%
Institution of study	Koç University Istanbul Turkey	1	1%
Institution of study	Sup de luxe	1	1%
Institution of study	Université de Bretagne occidentale	1	1%
Institution of study	University of Glasgow	1	1%

Interview participants' profile

Participants	Age	Gender	Nationality	Art Subject	Art Interest/Practice	Year of Study	Resident Time in Paris
Participant 1	28	Female	French/ Guadeloupe	Communication in art	Photography	2nd year of master	6 years
Participant 2	23	Female	German	Art history	Writing/ Literature	2nd year of master	5 months
Participant 3	25	Female	United States	History and art management	Literature/cultural heritage	2nd year of master	10 months
Participant 4	23	Female	Italy	Art and cultural heritage management	Musiology	2nd year of master	6 months
Participant 5	25	Female	Latvia	Art and cultural heritage management	Literature/cultural heritage	2nd year of master	8 months
Participant 6	31	Female	Russia	Art and cultural heritage management	Journalism/ museums	2nd year of master	9 months
Participant 7	27	Female	China	Art and cultural heritage management	Curation/ cultural heritage	2nd year of master	9 months
Participant 8	22	Female	Italy	Art market	Fashion/ Photography	4th year of bachelor	5 months

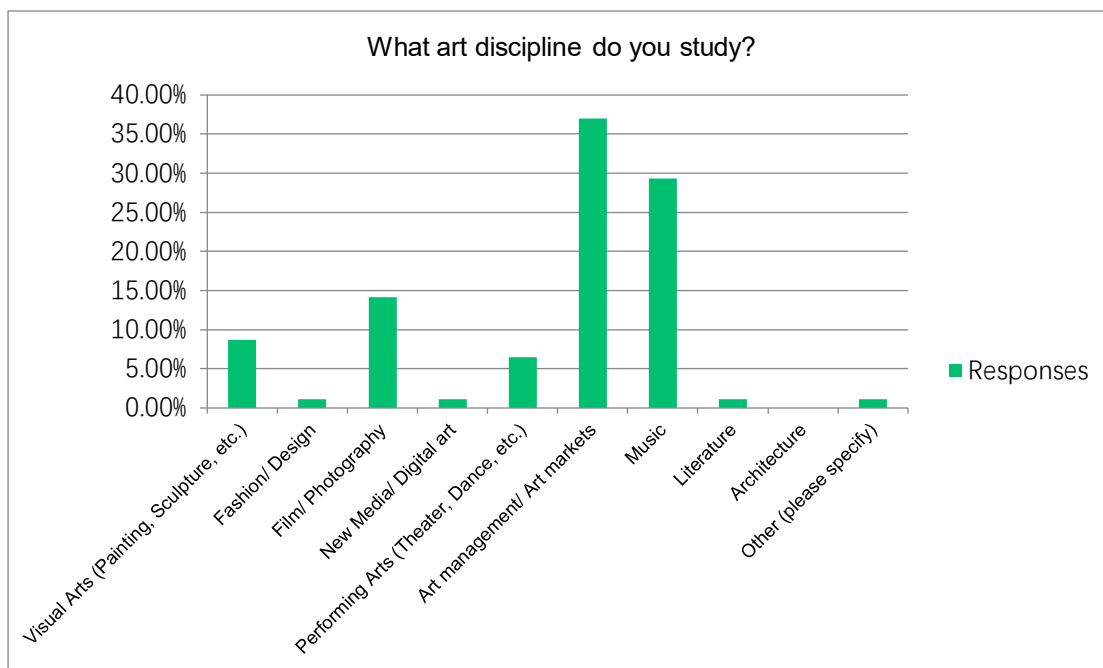## List of tables and graphs

Table 3 Research design metric

Sub-Questions	Corresponding Hypothesis	Method(s)	Data Source(s)
Which neibourhood and spaces do art students associate most with creativity in Paris, and why?	Art students' perceptions of creative locations in Paris are shaped by the clustering of cultural infrastructure, artistic activity, and the presence of other creative individuals.	Survey; Interviews	Survey responses on creative places identification; Interview narratives on the reasoning behind the associations and perception
What spatial attributes or values (e.g., cluster and buzz, symbolic, utilitarian) do students consider important for fostering creativity?	The places that art students consider most creative are supposed to provide strong creative inspiration and stimulation; and art students are more likely to prioritise utilitarian over symbolic values.	Survey; Interviews	survey responses on spatial values; Interviews discussing what makes inspires art students in a creative place
How do students navigate and engage with the creative environments of Paris in relation to their professional development, and what challenges or barriers do they encounter?	Despite finding certain places creatively inspiring, arts students may feel limited in leveraging these environments for professional development due to social/systematic barriers.	Survey; Interviews	Survey questions on identifying challenges and barriers; Interview reflections on navigation of places and barriers to integration

Table 4 Overview of survey respondents' demographic

Category	Subgroup	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	70	76%
Gender	Male	20	22%
Gender	Non-binary	2	2%
Age Group	18–24	64	70%
Age Group	25–34	28	30%
Level of Study	Undergraduate	18	20%
Level of Study	Postgraduate	66	72%
Nationality	French	63	68%
Nationality	International	29	32%

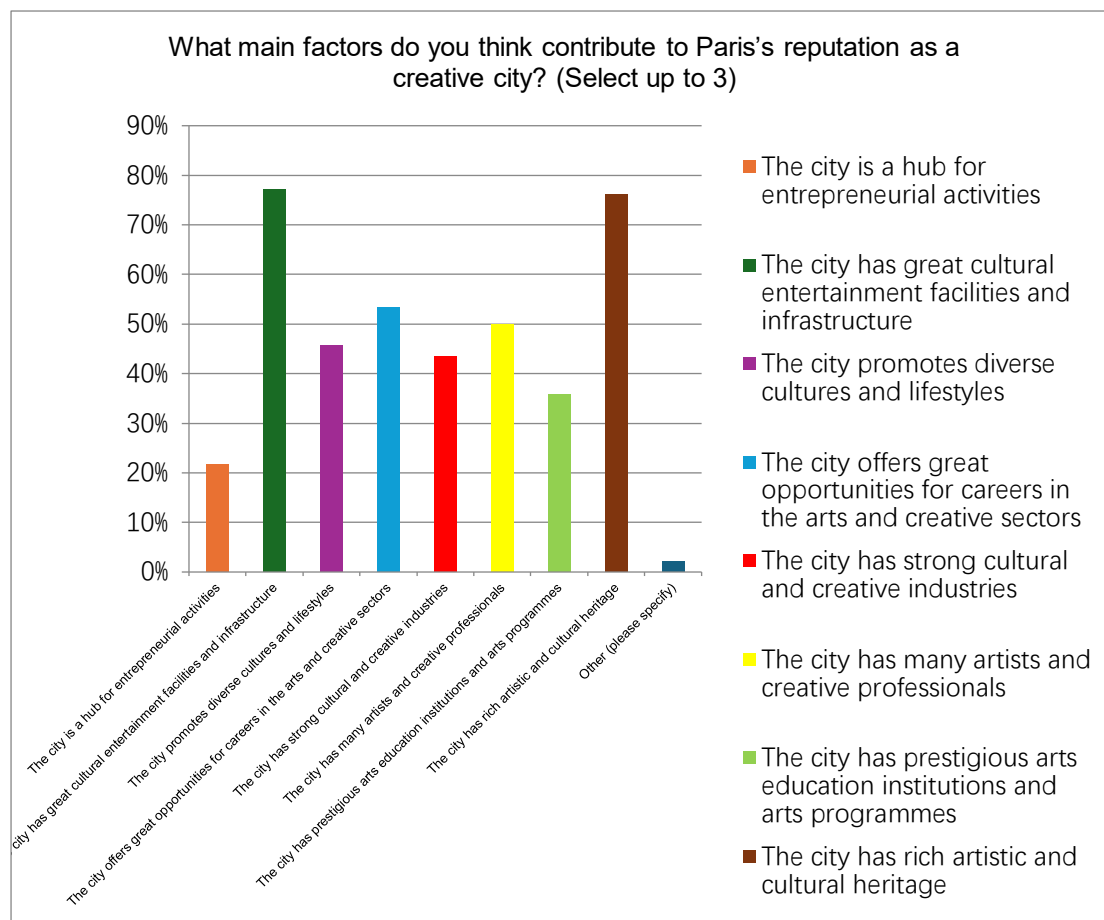| Time in Paris	Less than 1 year	36	39%
Time in Paris	More than 3 years	37	40%

graph 6: art disciplines of respondents

graph 7: Creative neighbourhoods
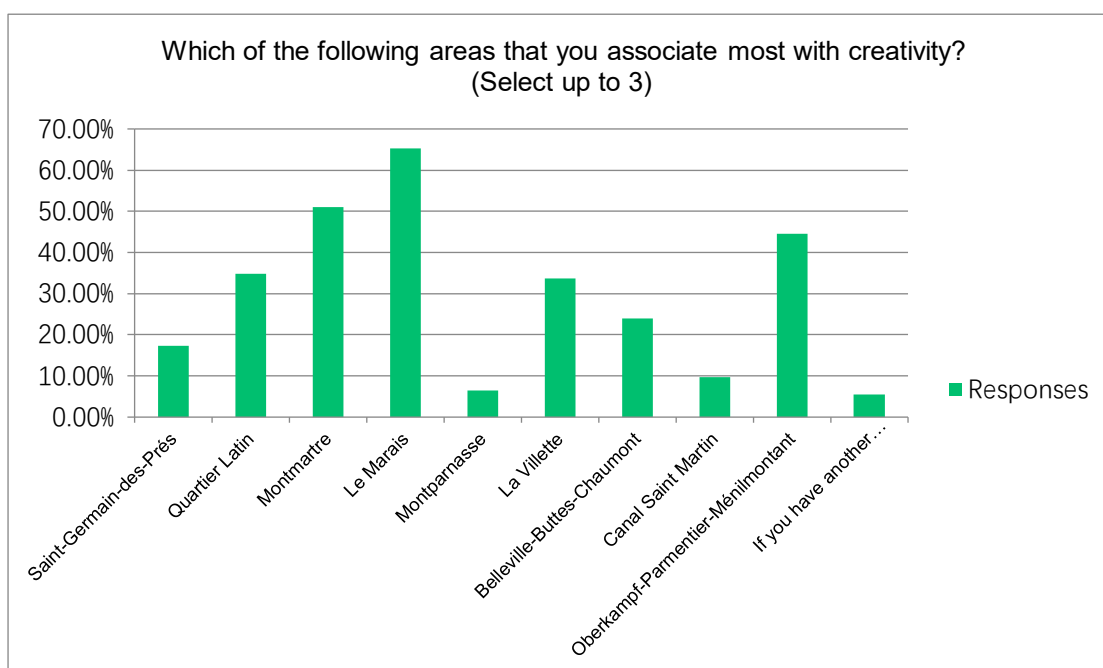
graph 8: Perceptions of Paris as a creative city

What main factors do you think contribute to Paris's reputation as a creative city? (Select up to 3)

Legend:
- The city is a hub for entrepreneurial activities
- The city has great cultural entertainment facilities and infrastructure
- The city promotes diverse cultures and lifestyles
- The city offers great opportunities for careers in the arts and creative sectors
- The city has strong cultural and creative industries
- The city has many artists and creative professionals
- The city has prestigious arts education institutions and arts programmes
- The city has rich artistic and cultural heritage

graph 9: Inspirational attributes

Which attribute of a place do you consider to be the most important in fostering creativity?

Legend:
- Responses