Continuing Professional Development (CPD) in Uncertain Times: Insights from the Italian Actors' Response to the COVID-19 Crisis

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the Continuing Professional Development (CPD) experiences of performing arts professionals during the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy. The research is aimed at examining actors' approaches and challenges to inform current and future CPD strategies, better suited to address the uncertainties of the social and economic juncture. The following four main themes are elicited by the research: the renewed need for self-directedness in CPD, the struggle to overcome the decrease in CPD opportunities in the workplace environment, the intensification of the use of social media for CPD purposes, and the role of CPD in the diversification of competencies. The investigation shows that CPD is still a relatively underdeveloped subject in the performing arts sector and that the attitudes towards, environments of, platforms for and focus on CPD will benefit from a critical re-evaluation in the postdigital context. Implications of these results for practitioners, policymakers, and public and private organisations are discussed.

Keywords:

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Continuing Professional Development, Performing Arts Professionals and the Postdigital in Pandemic Times

Within the Cultural and Creative Sectors (referred to as CCS hereafter), the entertainment and arts sub-sector has been massively disrupted by the unprecedented social and economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic (Banks, 2020; Harper, 2020; Pratt, 2020). As a result, the job opportunities supporting the professional livelihoods of the agents, which were already challenged by the structural market uncertainties, have been severely impacted by the stagnation of the sector and by the new safety restrictions (Comunian & England, 2020; Zahidi & Schwab, 2020). Professional actors are faced with a particularly challenging situation as the COVID-19 pandemic amplified and further exposed the precarious 'system of flexible and pluralised underemployment' (Beck, 1992, p. 140), which pre-dated the current crisis.

In this context, structural investment in human capital is of critical importance in overcoming the current crisis and in developing greater resilience (World Bank, 2020). Continuing Professional Development (referred to as CPD hereafter) is considered a key measure for skill building, to appropriately respond to short-term shifting market requirements and to efficiently address evolving long-term sectorial needs (Blundell et al, 2005; Martinaitis, 2021), especially for those at a greater risk of unemployment and work displacement, such as performing professionals. Notwithstanding the multiple challenges, the crisis has caused an accelerated transition towards postdigital and technology embedded strategies, as a result of the disruptions on access to and provision of traditionally designed and face-to-face opportunities (Ryberg, 2021). The COVID-19 crisis has evidenced the relevance and the need of forward-looking evaluation of traditional CPD tools and practices, with regards to the attitudes, environments, platforms and focus of professional development in the postdigital. This collective effort may provide performing professionals with a sizeable impulse to attain future modalities of work.

The present paper is aimed at understanding how Italian actors experienced CPD under the COVID-19 circumstances. The overarching objective of this investigation is to contribute to the comprehension of CPD approaches and challenges in the postdigital, and at the identification of the emerging solutions enacted by the professionals of performing arts during the pandemic juncture. In turn, these solutions may allow a more informed and stronger response by cultural agents to current and future shocks. They may also reinforce to develop tailored policies, which may support CCS workers more effectively.

To that end, a first section is set out to briefly outline the state of the literature, followed by the methodological approach leveraged in the investigation. The next section will present the outcomes of the research and the discussion, which will inform the conclusions of the paper.

Continuing Professional Development in the Postdigital Era

The work environment has undergone a mighty transformation over the last few decades. Globalisation, transition to a green economy, and an all-pervading spread of technological innovations have been largely discussed as important factors driving the changes in the work environment (Kurer & Gallego, 2019). In the postdigital, entry-level knowledge is no longer sufficient to fulfil the requirements of lifetime employment (Dymock et al, 2009; Maurer, 2002). Collin et al (2012) acknowledged that 'effective participation in contemporary, technology-based, knowledge society implies an increasing importance for voluntary learning and development' (p. 155). In this context, the COVID-19 induced recession has raised important questions on how occupational capabilities should be transformed to optimise employability. The crisis accelerated the need for new and updated skills and competencies to fulfil the changing demands of the market and to attain personal and professional goals. At the same time, the circumstances of the pandemic produced an important impact on the long-lasting technology and society debate (Knox, 2019).

Technology-enabled social practices have seen a renewed impulse also for the CCS (Green, 2020; Jandrić, 2020; Zhu & Liu, 2020), as significant amounts of professional developmental provisions were shifted online. Coeckelbergh (2020) adverted that the dualism between physical and virtual dimensions is only apparent and advocated for an integrated conceptualisation of online and face-to-face experiences in the postdigital. In this sense, the postdigital, understood as the "profound and far-reaching socio-technical relations" (Knox, 2019: 357), fully frames the ways in which the digital systems may critically influence the society also in the practices of knowledge acquisition. Different CPD forms, media, spaces, and modes of interactions

co-exist in the current "postdigital hybrid settings" (Partington, 2021: 104), in which the CCS professionals structurally redesigned and adapted their preferences, priorities, and expectations of CPD to the rapidly evolving conditions. Beyond the initial emergency response, the COVID-19 outbreak contributed to blur the traditional boundaries dividing the online and offline developmental experiences and evidenced the opportunities for a more synergetic approach, which could be characterised as a postdigital CPD.

CPD is considered as a powerful mechanism to enable workers to achieve incremental updates of competencies, capabilities, aptitudes, and understandings (Brekelmans et al, 2013; Saville, 2008). According to Friedman and Phillips (2004), CPD is largely understood as the maintenance, improvement, and broadening of 'professional and technical competencies together with personal qualities' (p. 363). It is also considered a structured and reflective process that aims to positively enhance one's present and future professional practices (Ryan, 2003; Shibankova et al, 2019). Irrespective of the digital, physical or hybrid context in which CPD is performed, the existing literature tends to group CPD activities into two broad categories, namely, formal and informal professional development activities (Cross, 2007; Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2012; Eraut, 2000).

In formal professional development, learning is considered as a primary motivation for participants, and it comprises structured activities that are generally institutionalised, conducted in a prescribed environment, and developed with a specific educational aim (Avidov-Ungar & Herscu, 2020; Karagiorgi et al, 2008). Formal professional development includes the provision of professional knowledge and may generate a certificate or qualification upon successful completion. Conversely, informal professional development may be defined as the result of 'observation, trial and error, asking for help, conversing with others, listening to stories, reflecting on a day's events, or stimulated by general interests' (Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2012, p. 4). Depending on the professional context, it is commonly less structured than formal development practices, and is intrinsically related to the learner's drive (Hall, 2009). Attwell (2007) confirmed the increasing recognition of the importance of informal learning, and Cross (2007) highlighted that 80% of the development in professional environments is elicited by informal activities. In spite of this distinction, Hall (2009) advocates for the merging of formal and informal learning environments in a continuum to optimise the outcomes of professional

development efforts and the overall self-development effectiveness. Furthermore, the emerging postdigital perspectives highlight the importance and relevance of digital information in a boundaryless understanding of CPD environment (Fawns, 2019)

A number of organisations and institutions advocated for placing postdigital CPD at the centre of the debate. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) urged governments and organisations to develop widely accessible CPD opportunities to increase the quality of people's working lives and to reduce the gender gap and inequality at the workplace (Kühn, 2019). In 2019, the World Economic Forum (WEF) launched "The Reskilling Revolution" initiative and insisted on the importance of upskilling and reskilling for professionals and called for an effectively leveraging of the opportunities in both physical and virtual environments. Considering the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the European Parliament's Committee on Culture and Education (CULT) indicated that utmost importance needs to be placed on the establishment of programmes for skills development and retraining of the CCS workforce to ensure their future employability (KEA & PPMI, 2019). Additionally, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) recognised that "these atypical forms of employment necessitate specific policy responses to ensure social protection, career development and skills upgrading pathways for creative workers in general, and in particular in the face of a crisis such as COVID-19" (2020, p: 10).

Despite the relevance of postdigital learning and CPD in the context of the COVID-19 circumstances, remarkably scarce scholarly attention has been paid to these subjects in the context of the CCS.

Continuing Professional Development, and Unexploited Resources for the Cultural and Creative Sector

In the international economy, cultural and creative industries are reputed sources of economic growth and competitiveness. They operate in a fast and dynamic environment in which professional practices, market trends, and business models are constantly challenged by the rapid pace of the social and economic transformations (Bakhshi & Cunningham, 2016; Campbell et al, 2019). The convergence of technological advances and the widespread access to the Internet is profoundly reshaping the sector's products, services, and business models (Peukert, 2019).

This paper adopts the definition of CCS outlined by the Regulation (EU) No 1295/2013, which encompasses all the sectors that are fuelled by creative and artistic expression, tangible and intangible heritage and cultural values, irrespective of the structure, financing, and orientation of cultural and creative organisations. CCS are also characterised by the fact that they are largely underpinned by the individual creativity and self-expression of the cultural and creative workers. In spite of their heterogeneity, and of the fact that some professional profiles are more exposed to the impact of the changes in technology that others, the cultural and creative workers share singular "occupational cultures" (Campbell et al, 2019: 350) and rank as the CCS most important assets.

Professional actors can be considered as a paradigmatic example of the cultural and creative workforce, which faces distinct struggles to thrive (Caves & Jones, 2001; Cunningham, 2002). In comparison with professionals of other cultural and creative sectors, such as those employed in digital and technical positions, actors display remarkably lower rates of career success and income levels (Higgs & Cunningham, 2008). In the field of professional acting and performance, freelancers, self-employed individuals, sole traders, and micro-enterprises account for an increasingly significant portion of the workforce that navigates amongst an ever-changing market (Creigh-Tyte & Thomas, 2001; McRobbie, 2016). Volatile working patterns and periods of unemployment or underemployment are frequent in the careers of actors. In these conditions of "new self-employment" (Pongratz & Voß, 2003), the responsibilities and expenses for CPD are transferred to and supported by the creative workers to a large extent (Gill & Pratt, 2008).

From among the few studies dedicated to CPD practices of cultural and creative workers, Anderson (2007) underscored the relevance of learning for music practitioners to acquire and refine the principles sustaining their professional practice. The author also devised a conceptual continuum between graduate knowledge acquisition and CPD in which the former "provides the information-seeking skills and encourages a reflective habit that underpins independent lifelong learning" (p. 94). Scholars have also considered CPD in the CCS as an important means to extend professional competencies beyond the entry-level qualification (Bridgstock, 2011), master the elements of cultural and creative competencies (Blix, 2004), acquire work readiness capabilities and soft skills (Munro, 2017), and address low graduate employability rates (Ball et al,

2010). It remains remarkable the limited attention to the acquisition of digital literacy and skills in the CCS literature. Amongst the few authors that engaged with this subject, van Laar et al (2019) concluded that cultural and creative organizations did not display sufficient levels of attention to digital skills in spite of their crucial importance for the workforce.

Noonan (2015) highlighted the importance of networking and exposure to professional development resources for forging successful cultural and creative career paths. Additionally, a number of studies concluded that purposeful discussions on a regular basis between mentor and mentees enhanced the transmission of know-how and tacit knowledge in the performing arts industry (Kane, 2014; Krzepkowski, 2010; Morley, 2011; Navalinsky, 2016). Another study that is particularly relevant to this research is Prior's (2013) exploration of actors' knowledge transfer mechanisms. Prior (2013) concluded that while graduate training is generally acknowledged as necessary, it appears to be insufficient for aspiring actors to professionalise. Actors are expected to refine and update their skills by engaging with post graduate learning and leveraging job opportunities. Finally, the author acknowledged the increasing relevance of the opportunities for actors' development in the virtual world, which in his opinion may not be fully exploited in the traditional acting curricula.

The Difficult Path of Professional Actors in Italy

The Italian performing arts sector presented highly volatile patterns long before the outbreak of the pandemic. The material changes in legislation, pressure from the economic downturns, the rapid shift in audiences' preferences and the disruption of digital technologies increased the complexity of the market and imposed additional burdens onto the heavy subsidised business models of the performing arts organisations (Slavich & Montanari, 2009). The capacity and readiness of the sector to embrace digital technologies remain endemically limited. In a situation where precarity and instability of work is the norm, especially for workers in non-standard or atypical work (Murgia, 2014), the livelihoods of the CCS workforce and of the performing artists became more challenging.

In spite of the undisputed importance of arts and culture in the development of society and economy, in Italy the CCS dynamics highlight the problematic status of cultural workers and unsatisfactory governmental

provisions dedicated to these categories. The investigation Vita da artisti (Di Nunzio et al, 2017), unveiled a generalisation of a highly concerning low-income situation amongst professional actors. For professional performers, work engagements are to a large extent intermittent and unpredictable. Precarity was indicated to be widespread, and contractual guarantees constituted the exception. The authors argued that stable job opportunities were a rare event in the careers of actors and performers, and that they face fragmented engagements in a variety of heterogeneous contractual formulas. Moreover, unpaid working hours and irregularities in the acknowledgement of effective working periods were also reported to be significantly consolidated practices across the sector (Ibidem, 2017: 21).

With reference to CPD practices, the study concludes that performing artists in Italy valued the necessity of skills enhancement, and that 60% of the study respondents had participated in one or more CPD activities during the 12 months antecedent to the research. Even though formal training was recognised as a necessary step towards professionalisation, informal development actions, such as networking, were considered to be the one of most contributing factors towards enhancing employability and ensuring a successful career progression. Nevertheless, actors who commonly engaged in intensive work settings were offered little or no possibilities to benefit from organisation driven CPD programmes, as are available in other traditional business settings. The limitations of time and resources were determined as additional hindrances in the professional actors' participation in CPD activities. This was due to the actors' need of complementing their income with other occasional employment to boost individual sources of income and secure subsistence.

As mentioned, the COVID-19 crisis and the induced recession adversely impacted the Italian CCS, and more specifically the performing arts sector and the associated workforce. In the attempt to afford some relief from the sudden effects of the crisis, Italy became a pioneer in implementing sector specific support provisions, which were approved through the decree known as Cura Italia (D.L. n.18/2020). Amongst other measures, the decree established a fund for the performing arts, film, and audio-visual sectors and included the extension of unemployment benefits, the suspension of social security payments, and the grant of allowance for specific categories of cultural workers and non-profit organisations. Professionals, unions, and organisations welcomed the relief measures even if they were largely deemed insufficient (Sanfelici, 2020).

Research Design and Methods

This research employed qualitative research methods since the aim of this research was "to answer questions about experience, meaning and perspective, from the standpoint of the participant" (Hammarberg et al, 2016: 499). The qualitative approach served the purpose of gathering nuanced information on how actors experienced postdigital CPD during the COVID-19 pandemic and the resultant recession in Italy. The participants of this study were selected based upon the predefined inclusion criteria consistent with the objectives of the research, namely, (a) self-identified professional actors, (b) having sustained professional experience in the performing arts sector for the past three years in Italy, and (c) having experienced the COVID-19 pandemic in the Italian territory, in Florence (F), Rome (R) and Milan (M). All participants received all the relevant information regarding the purpose of the research and the research conditions prior to the interview.

Initially, eight actors were selected as participants for this study, and they were sent invitations to participate in this study via social media. From the original participants gatekeepers, a snowball sampling method was deployed. This process assisted in identifying "cases of interest from people who know people who know what cases are information-rich" (Patton, 1990: 182). A gradual referral chain (Valdez & Kapplan, 1999) amongst the participants' acquaintances led to the recruitment of additional subjects, and a total of 34 actors consented to participate in this study. Every effort was made to overcome the limitations of homogeneous affiliation and representation by establishing parallel snowball networks (Cohen & Arieli, 2011; Peterson & Valdez, 2005; Vogt, 2005).

Considering the limited amount of research on the subject under study, the investigation was carried out by using inductive research mechanisms (Yin, 2009). Theoretical concepts and patterns from observed data were inferred, and the data retrieved from the research led to the emergence of key conceptual categories (Bhattacherjee, 2012; Tracy, 2010). To that end, semi-structured interviews of the participants were conducted via video conference. The duration of these interviews was between 45 and 90 minutes, and the interviews were securely recorded over the period between the months of May 2020 and August 2020.

This method was considered especially relevant in the context of the health and safety limitations resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic (Gray et al, 2020).

The collected data were subjected to a process of thematic analysis. The investigation was conducted within a realist/essentialist epistemological paradigm, considering a direct relation between the verbalisation and the meaning of a given experience (Wooffitt & Widdicombe, 2006). A semantic approach to the analysis was undertaken. Through an iterative process, four representative themes were identified in relation to the attitudes towards environments of, platforms for and focus on postdigital CPD.

The Attitude Shift: Renewed Need for Self-Directedness

Self-directedness appeared as a recurrent theme to characterise the attitude towards postdigital CPD processes during the COVID-19 pandemic. As emphasised by Raemdonck et al. (2017), "self-directedness is considered a key characteristic for workers both in relation to work and career as in lifelong learning" (p. 401) and a central part of everyday professional practices. Self-directedness was defined as a domain-specific characteristic (McCrae & Costa, 2003) where individuals are responsible for evaluating their individual learning needs; selecting appropriate goals, paths, and strategies; implementing the CPD process; evaluating outcomes; and reformulating the goals when necessary (Knowles, 1975; Saks & Leijen, 2014).

Actors reported an outstanding level of responsibility in relation to the self-management of the acquisition of individual skills and the overall design of their individual CPD trajectory. The crisis faced by CCS as a result of the recession due to COVID-19 incremented the actors' sense of responsibility and urgency in the planning and enactment of CPD schemes as a means to reach their personal and professional goals under the new circumstances.

"Acting is my life, and I know if I want to be able to work in the future, I have to learn new things. Working is becoming very difficult. Everything is cancelled or postponed. So, I must focus and work harder to reach my goal. What is needed to work as an actor is (…) changing so quickly, I cannot stay behind. Now is [sic] the moment to take the lead or I may lose it all" (Actor, R25).

In order to achieve a desired degree of self-directedness in postdigital CPD, the respondents highlighted the importance of personal initiative. The respondents declared that a high level of motivation, proactive behaviour, and personal initiative was necessary in the postdigital development context. To be attained, the CPD goals required significant self-directedness over the deployed strategies, the tactical choices, and the operational timelines. It also required a remarkable capacity to preview and to anticipate changes in the definitions of employability in the markets.

"Some organisations offer seminars or courses that may be interesting. They are good but may not come at the right moment or not be exactly what I need. Every actor is different … [I] have to search for what is right in this [sic] moment of my career. What drives me closer to my ideal … to my goal" (Actor, R06).

The previous literature already established a relation between CPD and personal initiative, defined as the "active approach that is characterised by its self-starting and proactive nature and by overcoming difficulties that arise in the pursuit of a goal" (Frese & Fay, 2001: 89). Consistent with the findings regarding this relation in other economic sectors (Frese et al, 1996), the actors reported that personal initiative supported self-directed CPD was useful in addressing gaps in individual knowledge; sustaining and updating professional competencies; attaining the highest level of proficiency in particular skills; and in anticipating and reacting to future knowledge requirements.

"I consider development a highly personal process. I'll need to find the right path for me to grow, otherwise I am out of the market." (Actress, R12).

Notwithstanding the described attitude shift, the formulation of CPD goals was unprecise and lacking progressive milestones. The definition of goals was found to depict an overarching framework of learning than an actionable plan towards the acquisition and refinement of skills. The development of tactical learning plans was deemed to be implied in the definition of the strategic learning goals. The respondents did not consider the definition of intermediate milestones to be necessary. Respondents did not express substantial interest in setting CPD impact evaluation mechanisms, and the adjustments to their learning plans were generally enacted as a result of changes in personal interests or due to restrictions in access to learning activities.

"You learn what you feel will enrich you as a person and as actor … It is impossible to evaluate. How you can measure what is useful for art?" (Actress, M12).

Scouting for Alternative Environments: Struggle to Overcome the Decrease in CPD Opportunities in the Workplace

In the CCS, the primary function workplace is the production of cultural and creative goods and services. However, the workplace was also considered as an environment that supports CPD, as it presented distinct occasions for learning and knowledge acquisition. In Italy, the widespread decline in job opportunities, lockdown and accentuated social distancing restrictions derived from the pandemic negatively impacted the capacity of actors to develop in the work environment (Zahidi & Schwab, 2020). These limitations appeared to be particularly distressing for live performers.

"If theatres, bars, hotels, and entertainment venues are closed I cannot perform in front of an audience, I cannot learn from my fellow actors, the director, from the interaction with the spectators, from the exchange with the people, from the silences, from their feelings, from the magic of having a community participating in a play together. [It] is a disaster" (Actor, M22).

CPD activities in the workplace constitute important opportunities especially for non-codified knowledge acquisition (Chisholm, 2003; Saint-Onge, 1996), which was considered by the respondents as particularly relevant to the development of their professional practice.

"What you find in the books is only a part of what matters to develop as an interpreter, is about learning from feelings, experiences and personal baggage of others" (Actress, M,13).

In order to surmount these restrictions, actors actively sought to further develop their personal and professional networks and to invest in informal social relation. The involvement in virtual working groups and the participation in professional online networks was recognised in previous literature as an effective mechanism for knowledge transfer in previous literature, specifically in terms of the mobility of tacit knowledge (Schostak et al, 2010; Sadeghi Avval et al, 2019; Zhang et al, 2010). Sparks (2002) concluded that effective network collaborations and peer-to-peer (P2P) interactions are to be considered the highest indicators of CPD effectiveness.

The respondents also cultivated and developed novel socialising environments to sustain interactions which are not formally governed and do not entail formal recognition, previously enacted in the workplace. The development of close ties supported the actors

in the acquisition of advantageous knowledge, enabling their social and functional integration into the creative ecosystem. To build these relationships, the respondents primarily targeted other members who appeared particularly accessible and willing to engage in the process of knowledge sharing, as claimed in previous investigations (Tuttle, 2002; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Most of the respondents actively participated in online discussion circles and joined domain specific social network groups and online discussion fora in the postdigital space.

"A lot of online working groups have been created since the COVID-19 lockdown. I feel that actors are finally connected, … understanding each other and working towards a solution of the current situation" (Actress, F01).

Even if a significant number of interviewees participated in these processes primarily to maintain and enhance personal relationships and friendships, most actors confirmed the convenience and the adequacy of these informal activities in the comprehensive CPD postdigital framework. The participation in shared social activities, such as collaborative entertainments or virtual lunches, were reported by respondents as a useful to increase personal exposure to new knowledge streams.

"We have started discussing with some friends and colleagues from [sic] about the aspects of a particular film, what we learned from the screening, the dialogues, the narrative… what we liked about a particular film or about an actor. We discussed and learned from others' comments. There were no rules. At first it was a small [group], but after a few days it started growing and more and more people were interested in participating [in these discussions] … Wild" (Actress, F17).

Repurposing Well-known Platforms: The Intensification of the Use of Social Media for CPD

As physical distancing measures became necessary in response to the COVID-19 crisis, computer-mediated communication expanded as a mechanism for facilitating social connectedness. All the respondents declared to regularly engage in social media before the outbreak of COVID-19 also, to source new ideas, upcoming trends, and interesting concepts. This finding appears to be consistent with investigations prior to the shock, which considered the relevance of social media in activating learning and

professional development opportunities (Alsobayel, 2016; King, 2011; Markham et al, 2017).

Beyond previous participation in social media platforms, actors declared that the pandemic context triggered a more intentional approach to the use of social media as an instrument for CPD. The physical restrictions and the limitations of face-to-face training revealed new possibilities for embracing previously untapped online repositories of tacit and explicit professional knowledge. The respondents felt empowered after participating in previously unexplored multiple formal and informal activities spanning beyond their immediate individual circumstances, which in turn fostered novel cooperative learning through social media. The native capacity of social media to facilitate learning was highlighted during the COVID-19 circumstances and actors believe that this trend may continue to grow in the future, albeit only for the acquisition of certain competencies.

"There is no way back. Learning about how to better market yourself in LinkedIn is too convenient" (Actress, F17).

The access, the sharing, and the exchange of user generated content, notably in Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and to a lesser extent, TikTok, Twiter and LinkedIn, was evidenced as increasingly pertinent to the respondents' upskilling and reskilling needs.

"YouTube videos are amazing to get to know other actors' proposals from all-over the world. Now, the work I see online definitely impacts my own work" (Actor, M22).

In this regard, the actors' experiences are compatible with the findings of Bruguera et al. (2019) regarding social media as effective platforms for CPD in a postdigital context. Moreover, and in line with studies prior to the pandemic (Magnifico et al, 2013; Vromen et al, 2015), actors declared that the participation in social networks increased the motivation to develop professionally. Ito et al. (2019) concluded that "learning is most resilient and meaningful when it is tied to social relationships and cultural identities" (p. 291) and that social networks played a crucial role in the effective pursuit of developmental goals. This was also confirmed by the respondents, since the management of the feedback process in the frame of social media contributed to enhancing their reflective and reflexive CPD practices (Creta & Gross, 2020; Trust, 2012; Van Den Beemt et al, 2020).

Actors generally perceived social media as a positive and useful resource to attain their CPD goals and considered postdigital social interaction within these platforms a novel component of their overall CPD strategy. Furthermore, certain specific benefits were highlighted by interviewees when referring to professional skills acquisition and refinement, notably concerning the development of a better cross-cultural understanding of diverse audience as a result of the broadening of their interactions. Social media dialogues and personal accounts also provided a privileged access to a variety of life experiences, which were considered extremely useful to inform a more nuanced and well-constructed acting repertoire. Cost-efficiency was also mentioned as a driver for postdigital CPD via social media platforms. Ethical and sustainability concerns were specifically highlighted.

Actors considered that social media supported their CPD also in formation of their professional identity by providing a shared understanding and important insights on current challenges and upcoming needs for the actors' community. Social media platforms were deemed instrumental in retrieving practical information, shared attitudes and common believes amongst actors. "Facebook groups for professionals are becoming very useful. You can be updated about what is going on, you can have access to the latest initiatives, and participate actively in discussions of the effects of the pandemic and the situation of actors.

They [Facebook groups] also facilitate discussions with casting agents where you can learn what people feel" (Actress, R33).

The respondents recognised that the high frequency of interactions amongst professionals in social media allowed interviewed actors to explore enhancers to their professional identities.

"I have been watching a number of Instagram live sessions, as interviews with actors and some discussions with film directors. I especially learned from [sic] the live sessions of musicians. You can immediately see from the comments what works and what doesn't…… You understand what people think" (Actress, M15)

Lastly, the respondents acknowledged that the COVID-19 crisis increased their need to reflect on issues concerning their practice, to share their views and make them known, and to discuss and gather feedback regarding their work from fellow professionals and the general public. To that end, they regularly monitored comments on their social media profiles as a means of gathering valuable feedback from their audiences, without necessarily engaging in online conversations. The respondents stated that they reflected on these types of feedback more systematically and that they incorporated the outcomes of these reflective

processes into their CPD strategies during the lockdown and the subsequent period of COVID-19 induced recession.

"I now have more time to read and to think on people's comments on my social media posts … some comments are useful for my growth… People point out stuff that I had never thought before" (Actor, R09).

Expanding the Focus: The Role of CPD in the Diversification of Competencies

The accelerated precarity of CCS under the COVID-19 circumstances drove the actors to seek to incrementally expand their opportunities for employment and income generation. Consistent with earlier findings (Jones & De Fillippi, 1996), the respondents admitted to having re-evaluated their core competencies with respect to the needs of the evolving market. The actors integrated their baseline skills with additional competencies that presented different degrees of contextual distance (Djumalieva & Sleeman, 2018). They engaged with a range of CPD activities to diversify their competencies. By acquiring and incorporating competencies from disparate knowledge domains, cultural workers sought to further their creative practice and identify new professional opportunities. In consonance with the trends reported in other business sectors (Lee & Meyer-Doyle, 2017; Mom et al, 2007), competency diversification became a strategic choice for creative workers to thrive in an extremely volatile environment.

The respondents repeatedly stated that a bulk of their postdigital CPD efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic were dedicated to acquiring diversified competencies. They devoted a significant amount of time and resources to gain a number of diverse skills from a variety of knowledge domains with the aim of increasing the versatility of their skillset and to operate more efficiently under the new COVID-19 pandemic-induced constraints and the resultant market uncertainties. As employment opportunities have stagnated due to COVID-19 restrictions, the respondents examined the possibilities of acquiring diversified skills to incorporate emergent and more fruitful endeavours in their portfolios.

"My father was a theatre actor, and he did not consider working in film. Now, if you want to work, you must learn skills in many areas … you need different skills to work in radio, and to record audiobooks as well as podcasts. Live streaming performances are very different from real theatre performances… we have to look beyond traditional acting [in these circumstances]" (Actress, R31).

In a context of generalised self-employment, mastering sector-specific entrepreneurial skills such as commercial awareness and audience building were considered important by the respondents. Most of the respondents also referred to the need to master functional business skills, such as the projection of cash flow, financial management, fundraising, taxation, and legal notions related to copyrighting. They also perceived an increasing need for digital literacy and technological capacitation. The respondents considered that acquiring entrepreneurial competencies positively broaden their capacity to control their career progression.

"It is not enough to be a good actor. You need to know about many other things to be able to develop your projects and get some income out of it… Like a business" (Actress, M19).

The respondents also declared their willingness to develop a range of artistic, aesthetic, and creative skills that were considered complementary to the primary acting and performance competencies. They regarded the acquisition of interrelated skills as contributory to their core artistic expertise. Furthermore, the integration of new knowledge was believed to improve their professional reputation, obtain societal acknowledgement, and strengthen their competitive position in the marketplace. The acquisition of these wide-ranging skills was framed by the respondents in an overall CPD effort to their increase professional versatility and resilience. The respondents stated that they primarily undertook postdigital CPD efforts during the research period to develop, amongst others, the skills of poetry writing, script writing, and music composition. Actors also expressed the preferences for competencies that could be coherently integrated into their predominant occupational identities.

"I am not a composer, but I am learning by ear because I gave up the piano when I was a child (…). I started studying by hearing the music, searching what was available out there and trying and trying again. I wanted to produce something personal and a piece of mine came out on Spotify. It felt great. Music if fundamental for an actor" (Actor, R23).

Lastly, the interviewed actors considered the engagement in formal and informal postdigital CPD activities also as a means to sustain their professional status and to enhance their reputation and social recognition. In a comparable manner, Bain (2005) related the process of CPD competency acquisition

to the construct of artistic identities in the field of visual arts. The risk of fragmenting their identity as professional performers was a recurrent concern for the actors, which partially hindered their CPD efforts. The actors acknowledged the relevance and urgency of enlarging their individual skill base, but also considered that, on specific occasions, the output of this process could be detrimental to their deliberately crafted occupational identities. Far from being contradictory, these findings are largely consistent with Kokkodis's (2019) investigations of skills diversification, in which professionals carefully balanced reputation losses from a perceived reduced specialisation with opportunity gains derived from the mastered diverse skills.

Embracing Postdigital CPD: a Collective Journey

This paper aims to contribute to the current body of knowledge in several ways. The research provides further insight into the responses to postdigital CPD of the Italian performance professionals in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the investigation evidences the specific attitudes displayed towards postdigital CPD, the non-traditional environments where to enact professional development activities beyond the workplace, the ways in which actors embraced online social media platforms for novel CPD purposes and the renewed CPD focus on expanded and more fruitful competencies in postdigital context. The findings presented here have practical implications for the players in the performing arts ecosystem, including, but not limited to, actors and cultural workers, advocacy groups, institutions and organisations, social partners and policymakers.

Italy was selected for the study as it presents interesting dualities. On the one hand, Italy shows a sharp contrast between the social and economic relevance of performing arts sector and the situation of structural precarity of its workforce. On the other hand, Italian creativity and innovation is a main driver of its economy, but its digital capabilities remain behind most the comparable geographies. The paper focuses on actors, who constitute a cohort particularly vulnerable to the long-term effects of the postdigital unfolding and of the COVID-19 consequences. The insights highlighted by this investigation also advance our understanding of CPD patterns and practices for freelancers and self-employed professionals, who share characteristics with creative workers such as multiple job holding, career intermittence, and employment insecurity. Lastly, this research provides informed insights to extend our current knowledge of the impacts of COVID-19-induced recession in non-traditional organisational structures.

The insights of this study may support the design and deployment of an innovative postdigital CPD approach for the performing arts community, which would be specifically tailored to overcome the challenges of the COVID-19-induced crisis and of the technology-embedded social context. In times of uncertainty, professional performers may require the support of the cultural and creative community to define and fully embrace the most relevant post digital CPD strategies.

In this joint journey, actors would benefit from the support of educational institutions and training organisations in the development of self-directed CPD strategies. Open-learning programmes, non-traditional educational initiatives, and sector-specific designed innovative training activities may help actors to effectively achieve CPD goals and may lessen their stress regarding the acquisition of new and updated skills. Instructors, coaches, and mentors are in a position to channel the collective transition to postdigital education models by anticipating the learners' needs and by remodelling the CPD content, the tools and the means. Organisations appear to be instrumental in shifting the focus from the dissemination of doctrinal knowledge to the building of professional competencies relevant to the evolving work environment. They also can play a major role in the negotiation of the overarching diversity, ethics, and sustainability frameworks of governance for postdigital CPD. Institutions and social partners may also contribute to enhancing the postdigital CPD of actors by structuring accredited learning environments and fostering formal and informal networks for collaborative learning.

The development of alternatives to CPD in professional settings would sustain the continuity of actors' CPD efforts during periods of recession, lockdown, inactivity between projects or more prolonged times of unemployment. Moreover, the consolidation of further opportunities for informal CPD in the physical, digital and hybrid spaces would significantly sustain the actors' developmental efforts. Institutionally led intra-sectorial knowledge sharing, exchange, and transfer programmes and initiatives can provide incremental opportunities for the skills diversification of cultural and creative workers. A wider

range of inclusive and accessible CPD opportunities may also contribute to legitimising and sustaining actors' diverse artistic identities and occupational status during the period of the COVID-19-induced recession and in the contemporary postdigital settings. The design and implementation of new and updated skills and competencies may open new avenues for creativity and innovation, which may in turn lead to new and enriched forms of cultural expression.

Traditional state aids and other forms of support appear ill-suited to addressing the specific needs of self-employed and portfolio workers in CCS. In the shifting landscape, robust and informed policies for facilitating CPD are required to support the cultural workforce in the transition to a more sustainable future. Evidence-based postdigital CPD programmes should be made available to actors in order to secure more regular employment patterns and to develop an internationally competitive workforce to generate social and economic growth. The relevance of upskilling and reskilling is a central aspect to ensure that the skills of the cultural and creative professionals correspond to the present and future needs of the market, and to enhance the resilience of the cultural and creative ecosystem in the postdigital landscape. A novel approach to technology enabled formal and informal CPD should be considered within sector-specific support measures and recovery plans.

This investigation presents certain limitations inherent to the definition of the research topic, such as the limited sample size; the limited body of literature regarding postdigital CPD for actors; and the lack of prior research studies with regard to the Italian actors' experience of CPD during the COVID-19 circumstances. The findings of this qualitative study are not automatically generalisable to workers of other cultural and creative sub-sectors that may have been impacted to a different extent by the COVID-19 crisis and by the postdigital. These limitations should be addressed in future studies. Further investigation may seek to understand the longitudinal effects of the COVID-19-induced recession on the CPD activities of professional actors. Additional investigation may be required to evaluate whether the issues and responses of this study's sample group are consistent with the issues and responses of professionals operating in other cultural and creative sectors. Moreover, a broader investigation may contribute to the assessment of whether the findings of this study may also be applicable to other workforce groups of the gig economy beyond that of the CCS. Further studies may also provide a comparative analysis with regard to the situation of the workers of CCS in other countries and regions under different cultural policies and regulations.

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