

INTRINSIC REWARD AND TEMPORAL DISRUPTION: WHEN WORKERS LEAVE THEIR MEANINGFUL WORK

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ABSTRACT

Many workers pursue opportunities for their intrinsic rewards as well as their extrinsic rewards. Intrinsic rewards like meaningfulness – having a positive impact on others – is also a strong commitment device. Even in the face of low pay or unsafe working conditions, workers can justify staying with meaningful work. Workers can justify leaving their meaningful work when factors external to their job, like family commitments, require their time and attention; without such external factors, workers are likely to stay in seemingly meaningful jobs even in the absence of extrinsic rewards. Based on interviews with nightlife entertainers during the pandemic in 2020, this paper identifies a case of workers leaving an intrinsically rewarding job. Specifically, workers' embodied experience of meaningfulness is related to their decisions to leave or continue with entertainment work during the pandemic. This author submits that work itself is not always rewarding, rather workers develop their own ways of knowing if the work is rewarding. The presence and intensity of meaningfulness indicators are the reward and workers must justify pursuing work when such indicators are absent. In the case of nightlife entertainers, these workers justified leaving their work when the pandemic disrupted their embodied knowledge. The pandemic was disruptive by disconnecting entertainers from the recognizable sensations of crafting a good “vibe” and by obscuring when work could happen in nightlife venues again. As opposed to a purely cognitive assessment of extrinsic rewards, evaluating intrinsic rewards like meaningfulness relies on cognitive and affective knowledge that one accumulates with experience.

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While employment continues to be a means of survival, many contemporary workers seek jobs that also serve a purpose (Bellah et al 1985; Wrzesniewski et al 1997; Bunderson & Thompson 2009). American workers, especially younger Americans, want employment opportunities that either help others or that invite affective commitments that they can be passionate about (Kalleberg & Marsden 2019; Cech 2021). Workers today desire what is referred to as *meaningful work*, work with activities that are seen as beneficial for others, beyond the material provision of employment (Pratt & Ashford 2003; Steger, Dik & Duffy 2012). As workers search for and evaluate employment opportunities, many choose jobs with meaningful activities over other sometimes higher paying, more stable jobs (Adler 2021). Thus, janitors at NASA have described their work as “putting a man on the moon” (Carton 2018). Meaningful work can foster a positive self-image and reduce stress (Arnold et al 2007; Allan et al 2018).

However, the pursuit and maintenance of meaningfulness can also have a dark side. Those seeking to improve the lives of others may find that they do not have the organizational support required to succeed (Holm 2021). To meet their own moral standards, workers endure emotional strain as they push themselves to work more hours and endure uncomfortable working conditions (Bunderson & Thompson 2009; deRond 2017; Wingfield 2019). Employers also mobilize this meaningfulness motivation as to get workers to work harder, like telling care workers that their clients are like “family” (Kunda 1992; Dodson & Zincavage 2007). Additionally, many workers accept or expect lower pay so long as the opportunity allows them to pursue something emotionally important to them (Umney & Krestos 2015; Rowe 2019). Meaningfulness becomes its own form of compensation. Workers continue doing their meaningful work, even with strong deterrents that typically encourage workers to quit.

For workers that face exploitative conditions, when might they leave what is otherwise interpreted as meaningful work? Forces external to their work can pull¹ workers away from jobs. For one, artists with an artistic degree are most likely to leave the arts when they carry a large debt, suggesting that workers can justify lower pay only if they have some financial security (Frenette & Dowd 2020). Also, developments over the life course, like more family responsibilities, that motivate workers to leave (Stokes 2017). But without an external pull factor, research has not found factors internal to one’s work context that would lead workers to leave meaningful jobs.

Interviews with Boston nightlife entertainers in 2020 show that pull factors alone could not explain their leaving behavior². Rather, the pandemic disrupted their embodied sense of *how impactful* their work could be and *when again* their work could be as impactful as they were accustomed to. As entertainers shifted to digital platforms for producing nightlife, the leavers described their digital entertainment work as lacking in the high vibration experience they relied on to assess their work. Also, indefinite venue closures left them wondering when they could go back to their usual work routines. A minority of informants, the stayers, focused on new indicators that their work was meaningful; two informants had temporal continuity of performing

¹ I use the concepts of push and pull, commonly used in studies of immigration (Todaro 1969). Push and pull factors are in relation to the destination of immigration. Push factors comprise the context of their home country that push them to their new destination. Pull factors are attractive features of the destination country that pull them. In this paper, the destination comprises responsibilities outside of meaningful work. Push factors are related to their existing work and pulls factors comprise the context external to their work.

² I use the concept of leaving as opposed to the common notion of quitting. Workers left behind all possible jobs in the domain of nightlife entertaining rather than quitting a specific job. See more on this distinction in the theory section.

in person with the few venues that could re-opened in the summer of 2020. With this research I expand on prevailing models of intrinsic rewards by identifying the role of embodied experience as shaping how workers evaluate whether their work is meaningful and whether it is worth pursuing. In the following sections I will review existing theories of intrinsic rewards, meaningful work and work behavior, describe the data and methodology, review the findings, and address generalizability and implications.

Theory: Pursuing intrinsic reward

Working is not just a source of income. Work provides the means of sustenance, and it can occupy time, taking up a sizable portion of our waking hours. Some Americans describe their paid work as if it is spiritual (Bellah et al. 1985; Bunderson & Thompson 2009) or plan to have a job in the future that serves a purpose (Rivera 2016; Cech 2021). Many workers are searching for *meaningful work*, or a set of work activities that has significance beyond its material provision (Pratt & Ashford 2003). For example, doctors fulfill their duties with the commitment to saving lives. Saving lives can have extrinsic value like high pay and can also be meaningful because of its pro-social impact. Even if a military doctor cannot save a soldier's life, they can still describe their work as significant and in the spirit of "saving lives" (deRond 2017).

When a worker pursues meaningful work, they justify their work by relying on non-economic reasoning and intrinsic rewards (Boltanski & Thevenot 2006). This justification rationalizes the time, energy, and resources dedicated to work activities. Workers associate tangible indicators, like attending to a wounded patient, with an abstract concept of meaningfulness, like "saving lives." Contemporary urban butchers describe their work as respecting an animal's life and making sure an animal's death was not in vain – so they take extra time in selecting vendors, cutting the meat, and educating their customers (Ocejo 2017). These butchers rely on the abstract ideal of respecting an animal's life to justify activities that are seemingly less efficient. The careful selection of vendors and customer education are the indicators, examples that aid in interpreting the work as meaningful. This association of one's work with positive consequence proves to be a strong commitment device (Jiang & Johnson 2018; Adler 2021), producing positive psychological states like satisfaction and a sense of purpose, motivating workers to stay with their work (Steger 2013; Hackman & Oldham 1976).

Intrinsic rewards like meaningfulness are contrasted with extrinsic rewards like wages and benefits. In labor markets, these rewards are individually determined trade-offs (Menger 1999). Workers have different preferences, and some are willing to accept less income for job that fosters a sense of purpose. Teachers, musicians, and non-profit workers prefer their affectively rewarding work over a higher-paying job disconnected from a social purpose. However, this utility-maximization model obscures that workers experience intrinsic rewards differently from extrinsic rewards. Wages and benefits are often explicit and predictable.³ Intrinsic rewards do not have a switch that turns on and off. One's experience of intrinsic rewards –like indicators of meaningfulness – is rife with uncertainty, uncertainty in both magnitude and timing. For one, when a teacher manages a curriculum to progress students' learning, it is unknown how successful that teacher will be. Improved test scores or a student's expression of comfort with a subject are indicators teachers may look for, which will vary in how rewarding they feel. Additionally, it is unknown when such indicators will appear. A comedian

³ Some extrinsic rewards like pay-for-performance or tips for tipped workers can be uncertain, but tacit local norms often determine the timing and valuation of such rewards.

hopes that their next open mic will be met with much laughter, but that risky joke could also be met with silence.

Uncertainty is not new for workers pursuing intrinsic rewards. Artistic professionals pursue their work without knowing when the next project will happen or how consumer preferences might change (Hesmondhalgh & Baker 2013; De Laat 2015). Social service workers know that the kinds of patients and the volume of patients are volatile (Jiang 2021). While this cognitive aspect of uncertainty is well documented, I propose that the pursuit of intrinsic rewards also has an emotional dimension. Workers can express when and how they know that their work is impactful, but there is also an embodied knowing of such impact. Though not explicitly about intrinsic rewards, Tim Hallett's ethnography of a school demonstrates the importance of the teachers' embodied experiences of impactful teaching (2010). In this school, the city hired a new principal to be more transparent about improving students' test scores. The principal's efforts came into conflict with the existing habits and routines that teachers developed over time to know how successful they were at supporting their students. Teachers described these new processes as wreaking "turmoil" and "distress." The principal's efforts at being more transparent displaced teachers' embodied senses – both cognitive and emotional – of assessing student progress in a personal and contextual way.

Building on phenomenological theory (Schutz 1967; Ahmed 2006), I submit that workers develop their own embodied knowledge of intrinsic rewards as they navigate the uncertainty of magnitude and timing. Workers assess the current situation of their work by connecting the present to their prior experiences and the future potentials of their work (Emirbayer & Mische 1997). Prior emotional experiences and desires for future embodied experiences affect how workers assess their present experience. In his sociological theory of emotions, Jack Katz asserts that one's emotional experience not only depends on the present moment, but how the present relates to social life beyond the moment (1999). This is exemplified with his metaphor of waiting in line:

“If the queue is seen as slow or fast, that appreciation grasps how the situation-bounded interaction of checking out is fitting into the ongoing course of one's day. The moments spent in a slow checkout line may carry a warning of trouble down the road, that other situations will not be entered on time. A fast line may carry the promise of a smooth connection among the various sets of others to be encountered later on; one generalizes easily; life seems “a breeze” (Katz 1999, p.325).

Similarly, the present sense of one's work as having purpose relates to the embodied intensity and temporality. Pursuing a job for intrinsic rewards comes with peaks and valleys. Much like waiting in line, when a worker is in the valley of a reward drought, their embodied knowledge of the work informs whether the current client or project is either a worthy endeavor or a waste of time.

Leaving meaningful work

When might someone leave meaningful work? In creative industries, there are various pull factors – factors external to or independent of the work itself – that a worker can use to justify leaving their creative work. For example, changes in a family situation can pull a worker away from their creative work, either to take on increasing demands or to take on work with more stable employment (Stokes 2017). Similarly, workers may find the need to pursue more stable employment when they face escalating financial challenges like mounting debt (Frenette & Dowd 2020). This challenge is particularly salient as workers get older, when an artist feels

they have “aged out” of their creative career and need to move into other kinds of work that may not feel as significant or satisfying (Frenette 2016). These pull factors can become a stronger justification for a worker’s time and energy than the meaning of the work once was.

Extant theory has also established general push factors – factors related to the work context – that lead a worker to leave their work. While the presence of some highly-motivating job characteristics – skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, and feedback – can cultivate commitment to one’s work, the absence of other job characteristics – good pay, good working conditions, job security – can drive workers away from that job (Hackman & Oldham 1976; Herzberg et al 1959). Without characteristics like good pay, workers can perceive the work as feeling unhygienic (Herzberg et al 1959). For example, workers in both high and low wage jobs quit when they believe that they are not paid or recognized for their work (Bond 2020; Dube, Giuliano & Leonard 2019). Workers are also likely to leave work when they persistently experience unsavory working conditions like harassment, a lack of support, or safety hazards (Sallaz 2015; Böckerman & Ilmakunnas 2009).

However, research on meaningful work has demonstrated that workers remain committed to their work even when their work is lacking in this hygiene. Healthcare workers often put themselves in risky situations (deRond 2017; Jiang 2021) and even take on additional work without support or clear guidance (Wingfield 2019). Workers in artistic careers also tolerate persistently low pay for their efforts (Umney & Krestos 2015; Adler 2021). In fact, some workers pursuing meaningfulness prefer jobs with lower pay and benefits, believing that economic incentives may thwart their prosocial missions (Rowe 2019). And even when workers find their efforts to be ineffective at meeting their meaningful goal, they develop practices that “re-enchanted” themselves with the work (Frenette & Ocejo 2019; Holm 2021; DiBenigno 2022). While pull factors can influence workers to shift their priorities and leave meaningful work, existing research demonstrates that well-known push factors do not always push workers out of meaningful work; in some cases, push factors may encourage workers to increase their commitment.

Importantly, leaving is not the same as quitting. Quitting is often attributed to leaving a specific organization. I employ the idea of leaving as a behavior which involves moving away from an entire set of jobs rather than a specific organization or employer. For example, should one find their employer is actively working against their meaningful goal, they could quit this job and find another or similar job where they can be more effective. This quitting behavior may be quite common for those who pursue meaning. If one job becomes ineffective or boring, getting a different job within the same line of work can convince a person that they are still committed their mission (Frenette & Ocejo 2019; Adler 2021). A teacher who moves from one school or school district to another has not abandoned their commitment to education or teaching specifically. The leaving behavior would mean leaving the entire line of work to pursue something else entirely. This is a more restrictive concept but is an important distinction. Should someone pursue meaning and leave the field entirely, the action pertains specifically to the work itself rather than the specifics of an organization or a job assignment.

When might the context of one’s meaningful work push a person to leave? Interviews with Boston nightlife entertainers in 2020 show that low pay, while present, could not explain their leaving behavior. Instead, the pandemic disrupted their embodied sense of how impactful their work could be and when again their work could be as impactful as they were accustomed to. The COVID-19 pandemic confronted entertainers with the indefinite closure of nightlife spaces. During the pandemic, these entertainers believed that producing an escapist experience

was just as important during the pandemic and adapted by entertaining in digital spaces. These digital spaces afforded them limitless creativity, but also disconnected entertainers from the usual physical sensations like vibrations from an energetic crowd. Entertainers could read comments from their digital patrons, but the dampened emotional experience was in conjunction with lower pay and indefinite venue closures. These factors together disrupted workers' embodied sense that their efforts would successfully create a fun experience for their patrons anytime soon. Crafting a digital experience for patrons became a waste of time. While some informants relied on each other to reframe the success of their work by focusing on digital comments, most of the informants left nightlife entertaining in 2020 to focus on other employment.

Data and methods

I use data from an interview study of Boston nightlife entertainers during the first year of the pandemic. The case of Boston nightlife draws on 44 hours of semi-structured paid interviews with 32 entertainers (**Table 1**). Boston is a useful case within cultural industries as most research in this field select cases in major hubs for cultural production like New York, Chicago and Los Angeles with more extensive networks and subcultural supports (Lingo & Tepper 2013); interviewing Boston creatives can expand our understanding of job choice in cultural industries by exploring labor markets in peripheral cities of production. In line with a “conditional approach” to qualitative research (Abbott 1997; Small 2004), I sought to understand work choices in a specific context rather than seeking an average or universal explanation of behavior. All names in this article are pseudonyms. Informants were paid \$75 for their contribution. I conducted interviews mostly over the phone as was the preference of nearly all informants.

As is common in cultural industries, entertainers were identified and interviewed through snowball sampling (Mears 2020; Adler 2021). I began with a convenience sample of several entertainers, referred to me by a former entertainer, and then added to the sample with suggestions from those interviewed. Recommended informants were included if the person “relied on Boston nightlife for income,” in this way excluding pure hobbyists. Recognizing that the race, gender, and age distribution may be driven by the demographics of Boston and its contingent creative workers, I sought to create variation by type of work and by the scene, interviewing audio or visual artists (e.g. DJs vs drag queens) and those entertaining in queer or non-queer spaces. These differences in types of work and scene did not relate to variation in work behaviors, so I stopped sampling for new informants when I reached saturation, or no longer learned anything new from new informants (Small 2009).

I was initially drawn to nightlife as Massachusetts restaurants were beginning to reopen in the summer of 2020. In the early months of the COVID pandemic, I began with an interest in studying working conditions, specifically how much influence these freelance workers had over health and safety practices within nightlife venues. I quickly learned that entertainers had a lot more to say about the transition to digital nightlife rather than the hazardous working conditions under the pandemic. I revised the interview protocols to specifically collect data about the individual's leisure and employment experience with Boston nightlife prior to the pandemic, about their leisure and employment experiences during the pandemic, and their personal and professional relationships within the Boston nightlife scene.

As I heard divergent accounts of continuing with or leaving nightlife during the pandemic, I did not rely on asking why they chose that, given that a “why” question can inspire defensiveness or encourage informants to tell me what they think I want to hear (Small & Cook

2020). Instead, I focused on questions that asked for detailed accounts of how the work was actually done in venues and on digital platforms. For example, at one point I prompted interviewees to tell me about their first experience with digital nightlife. I followed up with probes seeking clarification on details or seeking more descriptions about tools, people, or their sensations and feelings about the work. These process-oriented “how” and “what” questions left room for potentially surprising details rather than making an informant commit to any one motive or interpretation of what they were doing.

Table 1: Interview informants

Pseudonym	Income	Age range	Work behavior
Devin	low	25-34	stay
Shane	high	35-44	stay
Nial	low	18-24	stay
Dave	high	35-44	stay
Angel	low	35-44	stay
Shaggy	high	25-34	stay
Lyle	high	25-34	stay
Jo	high	25-34	stay
Dana	low	25-34	stay
Stu	low	25-34	stay
Graham	low	25-34	stay
Orlando	low	25-34	stay
Pepper	low	35-44	leave
Shadow	high	35-44	leave
Edson	high	25-34	leave
Phil	low	25-34	leave
Joshua	low	25-34	leave
Trent	low	25-34	leave
Victor	low	25-34	leave
Bianca	low	25-34	leave
Yara	low	25-34	leave
Reishi	low	18-24	leave
Dale	low	18-24	leave
Scott	high	35-44	leave
Jake	high	25-34	leave
Dano	high	18-24	leave
Aleksy	high	18-24	leave
Harvey	high	18-24	leave
Cheyenne	high	18-24	leave
Mariah	high	18-24	leave
Greg	low	18-24	leave
Paulie	low	18-24	leave
Note: <i>income</i> indicates whether an entertainer's 2019 share of income from nightlife entertaining was reported to be more than 50% (high) or less (low)			

I used the model of grounded theory for data analysis, which also affords the opportunity for surprises (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Analysis iterates between data and prior literature; close reading of the transcripts produces inductive codes and hypotheses, which are interpreted and adapted from prior literature (Charmaz 2006; Timmermans & Tavory 2012). I began with a coding dictionary that I created from a close reading of the first five interviews, creating broad codes like “space,” “time,” “pay”, “technology” and “affect.” I used these codes to connect

chunks of text to create categories and subcategories like “fun gig” or “energetic audience.” Informant accounts about patrons and about the future emerged as important categories, with leavers expressing negative feelings like fear or boredom during the pandemic in connection to these two categories. I present the meaningful work context of nightlife entertaining and the emerging explanation of work behavior variation in the next section.

Findings

The findings are sequenced in the following way: first, I outline nightlife entertaining as a type of meaningful work, meaningful because entertainers craft an escapist experience; I then describe the similarities for the entertainers in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, namely that they experiment with digital platforms for nightlife, experience a decline in income, and find challenges with new media tools; and finally I connect the role of embodied experience – both cognitive and affective – and the pandemic’s temporal disruption of emotional intensity to leaving behavior.

Nightlife entertaining as meaningful work: escaping mundane demands

Participating in nightlife is an experience good (Pine & Gilmore 1999; Mears 2019). Like those in the wedding planning or tourism industries, a nightlife organizer makes money by producing a memorable event for their customers. In Boston, venues like clubs and bars across the city drive the nightlife economy, collecting cover charges at parties and selling alcohol. While the experience may involve goods and services, the customer chooses to attend nightlife events in pursuit of affective experiences. So, while everyday people turn out to nightlife venues to spend money on goods or services, what draws them in the door is the opportunity to participate in something different from the day-to-day. Away from work and family responsibilities, these patrons can engage in taboo behavior, connect with friends, or revel in a chance encounter with a stranger. Patrons are entertained by their own behavior, which a nightlife venue facilitates. By the end of the night, the patron hopes to craft a new story about themselves.

Within these venues, various service workers collaborate to produce the affective experience and facilitate economic exchange. Security workers maintain the flow of patrons into the building, collecting any cover charges at the door. They also keep a watchful eye on everyone’s behavior, removing any rowdy patron or anyone consuming illegal drugs in an obvious manner. Other service workers maintain the flow of alcohol sales, keeping the bar stocked and swiftly mixing drinks. Behind the scenes, administrators maintain the physical spaces and facilities, execute the marketing, and oversee the hiring of the various kinds and numbers of workers. Beyond the service workers, venues also seek out entertainers to craft a “vibe,” the auditory and visual aesthetics of the experience. Entertainers apply their creative skills like playing music or physically performing in drag or as a go-go dancer, which attract patrons to the venue and keep patrons in the building to continue buying alcohol.

As opposed to New York City’s reputation for a bustling nightlife with limitless opportunities or Nashville’s reputation as a place for discovering unknown musicians, Boston does not seem to attract entertainers from afar. Boston nightlife offers entertainers few opportunities for steady income or stable employment. The entertainers I spoke with were all

born and raised in Boston or stayed after they moved to Boston for college. Many Boston entertainers get most of their income from another job; when asked about their 2019 earnings, \$35,000 was the highest reported level of earnings from nightlife entertaining. Additionally, none of the informants had a formal contract with a specific nightlife venue, unless their other job was a management position with a venue. They all cobbled together gigs through connections or from publicizing their work. One does not become a nightlife entertainer, especially in Boston, for stability. Lyle, a full-time nightlife entertainer who DJs and performs in drag, describes the work as “scary” because “you don’t know how you’re going to pay rent the next month.”

With little income provided, entertainers pursue nightlife work because of the positive meaning, emotional reward and pleasure they derive from it. Specifically, they enjoy being able to produce an “escape” for everyday people. What Boston lacks in creative careers, it overflows with lucrative but demanding opportunities in the medical, legal, and academic fields. This seems to matter to the performers. Nightlife entertainers enjoy crafting an overstimulating or euphoric experience that distracts their patrons from the world outside the venue. Richard, a middle-aged DJ, calls himself a “pied piper” when he talks about his love for DJing:

[T]here's nothing like it to be in a room that's completely going bananas and people are literally swinging from the rafters because they're so excited about the music that you're playing. You're like a conductor with an orchestra. I don't know, like you're bringing them to climax. It's great.

And while he tells me that “not every gig is like that,” what keeps the entertainers going is the belief that they are able to change how people feel.

For many, the meaningfulness of producing an escape is informed by their early experiences with nightlife. Prior to entertaining in these spaces, they were patrons. They once relied on nightlife to be their own escape, so they understand firsthand how transformative the nightlife experience can be. Bianca told me how much she enjoyed sneaking into clubs at a younger age, an experience quite common among the informants. Nightlife was a freeing space that she could experience with her entire body:

I was spending my weekends trying to be a hood rat in Boston. I grew up around like this huge dance crew that like had people from all over the world that were like the best ever coming around. They were going to clubs and I was like the younger side of it. All I wanted to do is be a part of it. So I used to sneak into the clubs when I was like 18[...] I was most excited about the DJ part of it. Watching the crowd get into it and the synchronicity between the people playing the music and the people responding to it. I felt a huge sense of freedom and I started being addicted to going to clubs like before I was even able to.

These experiences led to entertainers finding a space where they could apply their creative skills to make a unique experience for others.

Entertainers who identify as LGBTQ+ also note how bars and clubs served as a “safe space” for them as they were growing up. Participating in nightlife felt liberating because they could present themselves how they wanted and meet others like them. Jake, a local DJ who also does administrative work for a club, told me

[N]ightlife was always, and I think it is for anyone, kind of like an escape. People go to bars or nightclubs to kind of forget the problems of the world. It's a place to drink, to see friends, to meet people, especially in the gay community. The gay clubs are a sanctuary and a home to a lot of people. Unlike straight bars, I would say [...] Gay people particularly, we don't have [safe] spaces as readily available. Nightlife was always like a second home to me, and I think that's why I was always so passionate about it.

Downloading music never feels like work.

Once they started entertaining in queer nightlife spaces, they interpreted their work as important because they could help improve how other queer people feel about themselves. For Mariah, a trans woman of color, queer spaces seemed to cater to cisgender and white patrons and thus she asserts how important it is for queer patrons to see an empowered trans woman of color like herself entertaining in these spaces:

[T]he fact that I could add to people having a good time and having happy moments is really memorable for me because I know that sometimes the club scene is not always for everyone. And so if somebody who was feeling not so confident came in and saw me performing or dancing or jumping up and down with everyone, it might make them feel confident and happy. And that goes back to my goal of always making sure that there's a safe space for people.

Beyond providing an aesthetic experience that can distract patrons from the outside world, many of these queer entertainers note how important it is for them to create a space for others to escape and feel safe in their gender and sexual expression. While the “safe space” ideal for LGBTQ+ entertainers may seem different than escapism or distraction, I found that entertainers engage in the same practices when describing their work as meaningful regardless, notwithstanding their gender or sexual identity.

Entertainers engage in two practices to evaluate how effective they are at crafting an escape: “reading the room” and sensing positive energy. Like others in service jobs, entertainers visually survey how their patrons are reacting to their work. If the response of your patrons is subpar, you can respond by trying something different. If the response is satisfactory, you want to find a way to keep them entertained.

[A]s an entertainer, you need to see how your audience is feeling in order to make that next move. I feel like all entertainers do that. Like if what they're doing is not working, they artistically find a way to switch it up in some way or form. If I can't see how people are feeling[...] that girl in the back giving me that dirty look and saying, what are you playing right now, to kind of feel what's going on in the room or like reading the room, I don't know where to take it next. And I'm kinda just doing whatever I want to do. And as much as DJing is partly doing what you want to do, you have to play what people want to hear (Devin).

Devin, like others, enjoys experimenting and playing music the room might not be expecting. At the same time, he wants to keep the room energized and dancing. By reading the room, he can assess just how effective he is in creating an experience.

The other way to evaluate your work is by sensing the energy level in the room. While performing, one cannot always focus one's eyesight across the entire room. Entertainers also turn their attention inward, noting intense sensations like an adrenalin rush or those ineffable feelings

that signify a job well done. In nightlife, work should feel “fun” more often than not, but one cannot have fun if no one else in the room is having fun. Entertainers interpret this embodied feedback effect as evidence that their work is effective.

I find a lot of joy in being able to [get people to move] because when you really get people moving, it's kind of like an incredible feeling. It feels like enjoyment slash feeling exhilarated slash feeling bliss and kind of like crying at the same time. People are smiling, they're dancing, they're happy, you know, they're cheering sometimes. You brought them there and you're causing sometimes hundreds of people to have a really good time and that energy just transfers onto you. And you get this heartwarming feeling like, Oh, wow, I'm doing that. (Victor)

The entertainer's pursuit of meaningfulness is not just an abstract ideal they hold onto. By reading the room and sensing positive energy, entertainers are constantly evaluating their own performance and assessing how successful their work is in creating positive sensations for their patrons.

Through this process of self-evaluation, they also note that not every gig can be the most successful. Sometimes, especially those earlier in their entertaining career (Reilly 2017) have to take on less desirable gigs where the ability to create the room's distinctive ludic vibe is more difficult and less likely, such as the earlier shifts in the night before the venue gets crowded. Entertainers newer to the nightlife scene describe those gigs as having something missing, where you play a song or perform an act with minimal reaction from the room. More tenured entertainers, like dancer Bianca, say how important it is to hold onto the memories of great gigs: “[I]t gets old real quick, cause there's no money to be made. It's just like people do it for the love of it and you have to keep that constantly as a reminder for yourself.” So while not every gig or string of gigs can feel as meaningful, what keeps these entertainers going is the chance that another fun and impactful gig is just around the corner.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to digital nightlife

When I began conducting interviews in July 2020, the pandemic had been with us for several months. Massachusetts Governor Charlie Baker developed a four-phase reopening plan (without specified dates but with sequences once named conditions were met) with large venues and nightclubs opening back up in the final phase, presumably when a vaccine was widely available; there was no projected date of this final phase happening. Entertaining for large, physically present audiences was both unsafe and illegal. Restaurants began reopening at the end of June 2020 with outdoor spaces, and some would hire entertainment for outdoor diners, but this was rare. Interviewing in July also meant that LGBTQ+ Pride Month was behind us. For those entertainers who catered to queer audiences, a month with a lion's share of annual earnings had also been a dry one. I approached these entertainers to learn about restaurant reopening gigs, but instead they asserted that their pivot to digital spaces was more important to discuss.

Every informant had observed and participated in a pivot toward digital spaces to continue with nightlife entertainment. For example, nationally acclaimed artists like Timbaland were turning to Instagram Live for performances and an LA-based nationally recognized drag artist Bitqch Puddin was hosting parties for LGBTQ+ audiences on Twitch. On digital platforms like Instagram and Twitch, entertainers could maintain a connection with their fans while simulating a shared experience with the platform's chat feature.

A lot of people saw Bitqch Puddin's digital drag show, which is like a huge audience. I remember there being like 3 or 4,000 people watching. So [someone can do] that. And then they got a lot of recognition from that and a lot of people saw them and then they started doing more digital drag stuff. So it's just something like, you never know what's going to vibe with people. But then when it does, it's like a "Look out! Here's the wave, you've gotta ride it" kind of a thing (Jo).

Well-known artists were setting the stage for what entertainment could look like during the pandemic and the informants all had their own experiences with entertaining in digital spaces. The Boston entertainers leveraged their own social media accounts to produce digital events and participated in group shows coordinated by well-known local entertainers.

For digital entertainment, informants reported that they could perform live or pre-record an act as part of a larger body of entertaining content. Performing live would involve live streaming on a platform like Instagram or inviting patrons to a party on Zoom. Patrons would pay entertainers with tips. As an example of pre-recorded entertainment, one local organizer would host a party on Twitch every other Tuesday evening. The organizer would select an album from an artist, like Dua Lipa or Beyonce, and ask local entertainers to pre-record a video for one of the album's songs. During the Tuesday evening gathering on Twitch, the organizer hosted live and played through the entire album with everyone's pre-recorded videos. Patrons could engage with each other and the entertainers in the chat. Entertainers would be paid by audience members directly into their Venmo accounts or into a shared Venmo account that would be divided up at the end of the night. For a short period of time, a local brewery sponsored the Tuesday evening album party to advertise their beer.

Although entertainers were still able to do their work and get paid, this was not without frustrations. Every interviewee lamented the sharp decline in income, the difficulty of adapting to new technology, and the lack of connection with their patrons. As it pertains to their decisions to continue or leave nightlife entertainment, these three factors are important context but are insufficient to explain leaving behavior. With respect to income, entertainers reported even more volatile income in digital spaces. In the club, a gig's financial payout was never a sure thing, but online "you can make \$1 or you can make \$200," says Lyle, a full-time drag queen and DJ. Entertaining on digital platforms meant relying entirely on voluntary tips or "donations," which can be hard to ask for when so much online entertainment is free.

[F]or our parties, we didn't charge a cover. That isn't really how the livestream world works. The ones that have charged covers have not done well at all. Even if the cover is like \$5, it's still this weird thing where people don't feel like the experience is worth money. (Victor)

Rather than relying on cover charges at the door, getting a percent of alcohol sales or getting tips in person, which were common compensation mechanisms in the clubs pre-COVID, entertainers online relied on the good will of local viewers to tip and to tip during a less immersive experience.

Creating an experience on digital platforms also requires entertainers to use social media in new ways. While any entertainer uses social media to maintain a branded image and publicize their upcoming performances, now they needed to use these platforms to stream themselves performing and to communicate with patrons in the chat. Even more, those producing pre-recorded performances had to learn new editing software.

It was like a little awkward 'cause I didn't really have any of the equipment. I didn't really have any idea. My expectation of streaming had the assumption that you can just take

your phone, put it on like selfie camera, prop it onto a wall and hit record or like hit live or whatever. In reality, there's a lot more to it than that. So I had to learn the hard way. Every week I was doing one or two, sometimes three of these hours long sets and getting better at it each time, then better equipment, then getting a bit more familiar with the tempo of it and how it operates differently than real [laughs] like real nightlife. (Nial)

Adapting to digital spaces meant many entertainers had to buy new kinds of equipment and learn how to incorporate them into a creative process they were already comfortable with.

Using digital platforms also presented an unexpected hurdle: content regulations. In the bars and clubs, showing off your body and playing copyrighted music could be part of your performance, but social media platforms have their own community guidelines. Any user on the platform can report behavior they deem too sexual. The platforms also developed AI that could detect copyrighted music and shut down streams.

[I]t truly sucks because there was one day I had almost 70 people watching me and people were talking and it was great. And then it shuts down and I got like four viewers back. [escalating tone] You're getting in the vibe and the people watching, they're liking it, and then the shit shuts down and you're just like, fuck! And then I'm stressed out 'cause I'm trying to reset the program, the songs on there. It's like starting a brand new night at a club and a hundred people show up and you're feeling great and the fire alarm goes off. That's what I can equate it to. (Jake)

Entertaining online required finding new mixes to play or running the risk of having your party suddenly shut down.

Even as entertainers accepted using social media platforms to facilitate a shared experience, their patrons were physically disconnected from each other. Entertainers believed that the possibility of connecting with strangers was an important aspect of the escapist experience. Physical co-presence was key to maintaining this sense of possibility.

I used to work at a library and there were so many books that I never would have found if I wasn't in a physical library just walking around and it happened to catch my eye or I saw it on the shelf. When you look at a card catalog or library on the computer, it's only going to show you the things that you're specifically searching for. You know, there's no random encounters. And I guess to me random encounters and surprise experiences are part of what makes someone get really drawn into something and something that you get from a real-life night club experience more so than a virtual one. You're around people that you wouldn't normally associate with. (Trent)

But physical co-presence was not just important for patron-to-patron interactions; entertainers also relied on physical co-presence to get immediate feedback. In the same room as your patrons, you can sense the general energy level and feel connected to other people. Putting on a show at home, they missed the occasional boost of adrenalin that an energetic room could provide. "It's not as fun, just performing in your bedroom [...] We all kind of live for that adrenalin and that rush of seeing others happy" (Jo). Without physical co-presence, entertainers described their digital entertainment as lacking that energy exchange, which helps them evaluate their own work and gives them the boost to keep pushing through a gig.

Leaving meaningful work

When assessing how meaningful one's work is, entertainers rely on their feelings. When doing this work at home, many struggled to explain what it felt like to entertain digitally. On the

one hand, they were still getting paid to perform digitally, but they also described their work as lacking that energetic feedback. “I was DJing, so I was just playing music and looking up at the screen occasionally. So it's fun. I like playing music in my room by myself. It just felt like the same way I would if I was recording a set,” Richard told me. Even though one can have fun by just activating creative skills, entertainers also described it as “sterile” or even “ridiculous” to perform for a screen. The entertainers reported that they could no longer rely on their feelings to assess their work.

Additionally, with respect to performing in nightlife venues, entertainers did not report spending time counting heads and tracking the exact number of patrons. Yet, in digital spaces entertainers could see the exact number of people who were attending. With less energetic feedback, entertainers would attend to the number of attendees to assess their impact; but, without a clear baseline, the specific viewer count is a noisy signal. Slight fluctuations in attendance also became more obvious. In person, entertainers believe the level of patron engagement, like movement and smiles, to be more important than the number of people in the room. “If you had like seven or eight people there that had a good time [...] as much as we want a million dancers, we'd rather have the most hyped, positive dancers than fifty of the most mediocre ones” (Bianca). In digital spaces, entertainers could interpret small attendance, even if it is steady, as a negative or a positive signal. Harvey, a younger DJ, was excited to leverage social media for engaging experiences. Because he is newer to the nightlife scene, he feels like he gets fewer of the “fun” gigs. The pandemic afforded him the possibility to be more creative with his DJ sets, but he tells me that “all these thoughts start running through my head where it's like, Why am I even doing this right now? I could be spending my time doing much more productive things than playing music for like two people.” The lack of energetic feedback as well as the foregrounding of viewer numbers made it challenging to know how meaningful one's performances were.

On top of the missing energetic feedback, the entertainers who left nightlife entertaining also feared what the future held for local nightlife. In the second half of 2020, it was unclear when large gatherings would happen again and what life after a pandemic would look like. Prior to the pandemic, if an entertainer had a gig that they interpreted as less meaningful, there was the possibility that a future gig could be better. During the pandemic, with less emotional intensity in each digital gig, it was unclear when they might be more successful at creating an escapist experience. There was hope about vaccines and the possibility of going back to normal, but entertainers also saw that there was no timeline. “We don't have an idea of when things are going to be able to go back to quote unquote what it was before” (Angel). They oscillated between positive media stories of vaccine development and concerning media stories that gatherings like live concerts and Broadway shows might be postponed until 2022.

Entertainers also cited concerns about local venue closures. By the second half of 2020, venue owners had kept their doors closed for months. Some establishments – those with kitchens – maintained a modest delivery business and could begin offering outdoor dining in July. Others struggled financially and, even with government relief for small businesses, many owners chose to close their businesses for good. Entertainers reminisced about their favorite gigs at closing venues, but also expressed fear that nightlife might be “dying.” Fewer venues could mean fewer opportunities, but pent-up demand could mean bigger and more exciting opportunities.

[L]et's say next March, knock on wood, is when finally we're able to come out of hibernation. What is the landscape that we're returning to? 'Cause things aren't on freeze, you know. Things are happening. Venues are closing. Restaurants are dropping like flies. Bars are dropping like flies. So, on the one hand, there's the sense that the spaces that we've relied on to provide us with platforms to do our thing might not be there anymore [...] Maybe the unexpected consequences of this is that when we come back out in March, it's a lot easier to find an empty space that's willing to let us rent it out for a night to do something. And maybe the city will be a little bit more relaxed about issuing liquor licenses, or maybe be a little bit more relaxed about policing places that are running a little bit later into the night because they'll be more concerned with other stuff and happy to see any kind of economic activity going on at all. (Richard)

The pandemic's financial toll on local business led entertainers to believe that the future of their work was uncertain.

20 of the 32 informants chose to leave nightlife entertaining behind. For those who relied on nightlife entertaining for most of their income, the pandemic was a time to find more steady jobs. This mostly meant finding white collar jobs they could do from home, though two found retail jobs. For those who got most of their income from other work, the pandemic became a time to focus on the other job. Many continued creative side projects for themselves, but entertaining online was not one of them.

While the entertainers all struggled with less income and with new technologies, these reasons were not enough to justify leaving their nightlife work behind during the pandemic. Additionally, pull factors that workers can employ to justify leaving were not strongly associated with leaving. Specifically, neither one's financial situation nor one's interpretation of being too old for entertaining were related to leaving behavior (**Table 2**). The leavers are distinguished from the stayers by their interpretations of the new work arrangements. Specifically, pursuing this work digitally made it difficult for entertainers to know how successful their work was. In person, they could tell that their work was meaningful when they were able to create an escapist experience; digitally, some indicators signaled it was a meaningful escape and other indicators signaled an inadequate escape. Additionally, pursuing this work was set against the backdrop of mass venue closures in 2020. Entertainers faced competing information about when nightlife facilities would reopen and if their patrons would return. Those who left chose to focus on their other sources of income or to seek out more stable jobs, like a job in public administration.

Table 2: Pull factors' relationship to leaving

		Stay	Leave
financial dependence	low	7	11
	high	5	9
age	18-24	1	9
	25-34	8	8
	35-44	3	3

Staying with meaningful work

Even though most informants left nightlife entertaining behind, 12 of the 32 continued creating digital experiences online. Like those who left nightlife, the stayers saw a significant drop in income with digital nightlife and struggled with new technology. The stayers differ in how they related to the pandemic disruption. Many stayers also feared the future of their work but drew from digital comments and reactions to justify their work as meaningful. Two informants also complained about how sterile digital nightlife was but were a privileged minority that were able to continue performing at venues during the pandemic; the future of nightlife was clearer.

Angel, a drag queen who uses they/them pronouns, was one of the entertainers who continued with digital nightlife throughout the pandemic. Like many others, Angel was unsure about the future of nightlife. Angel also missed getting that adrenaline rush from a live performance and sometimes even had digital “cancellation by non-participation.” Not every show was well-attended. What makes them unique is how they derived meaning from creating digital experiences for local patrons. Angel, like the others who stayed with digital nightlife, attended to the chat.

The part that I love the most is, if I am performing, if I am part of a show that's on Twitch, seeing the comments that people leave during my performance. I feel like that's successful when people have something to say. Even if it is, “I don't like this,” great! I made you feel something that made you compelled to write that you don't like it, you know? Knowing that I am able to reach people, I feel like I'm successful.

Seeking out reactions during one’s performance provided indicators that even digital experiences could engage viewers. Patron engagement meant that entertainers were able to distract others from the grim reality of the pandemic. This was especially important to Angel, who wanted to ensure there were still shared experiences for their queer community during the pandemic. But this was not unique to queer performers. Many believed that, set against the backdrop of the pandemic, it was important for creatives to provide “positive vibes for unpositive times,” as DJ Devin told me. In spite of the uncertain future, several entertainers drew on viewer engagement to know that their work was able to create a temporary escape.

Two performers, Shane and Jake, maintained strong relationships with the local venues that remained opened and would perform for these venues in a limited capacity. These venues also had kitchens and could have patrons come to dine with some entertainment. Jake could DJ at a safe distance and Shane could perform as a drag queen with a translucent mask. Shane and Jake also performed digitally but had mixed feelings, similar to the leavers. Even with positive comments in chat, the meaning of performing online was unclear. These two performers looked to the future of nightlife as more certain, so it was easier for them to justify performing.

[Digital nightlife is] awesome because it's another source of income and it's going to come in handy when it's the wintertime again. If it's a blizzard and I can't go to work or [...] God forbid, we go back into another lockdown, I know that I can go that it's a place where I can make, maybe not a living, but I'll be able to make money in the meantime.
(Shane)

Shane and Jake still believed nightlife performing was a viable option going forward. It was easier to justify less exciting digital performances, similar to having some less meaningful gigs

before the pandemic, between their in-person gigs. Their stable relationship with successful local venues made it easier to justify work that is temporarily less exciting and less impactful.

Discussion and conclusion

For many today, work is not just a way to make income, but is also a way to make a positive impact on others. This pursuit of an intrinsic reward can also leave workers susceptible to poor working conditions; one can justify low pay or sub-standard working conditions if they believe their work has a positive impact on others. Some scholars have found that factors external to one's work can pull workers away from work they find meaningful, but as yet there is not an explanation for how the work conditions themselves could push workers to leave such a meaningful job. In interviewing nightlife entertainers during the pandemic, I found that low pay and new technologies were necessary but insufficient factors related to leaving meaningful work. When workers perceived that their digital entertainment was less impactful and that the timing of being successful again was ambiguous, these additional factors justified leaving a job they once found to be meaningful.

One might ask if disrupting one's sense of intrinsic rewards could only be disrupted under extreme circumstances, like during a global pandemic. However, disruptions to existing routines and habits abound for workers when other major changes are thrust upon them. For example, when elections bring in leaders with different agendas, organizations that rely on government funding can observe changes to what kinds of projects get funded (Bernstein et al. 2019); publicly funded contracts can support climate-related projects under one president and then focus on economic competitiveness projects under the next. Workers who pursued their work to reduce the negative effects of climate change may find themselves experiencing a lack of rewarding experiences and an uncertain timeline. Similarly, with the growth of mergers and acquisitions, changes in ownership can lead to dramatic shifts in the priorities of the impacted organizations (Kelly & Moen 2020). These field-level and organizational-level shocks can reproduce the disorientation that entertainers reported during the pandemic.

At the same time, scholars also cite the role of "sensemaking" in organizations where leaders can fill in the blanks when something undesirable or unexpected happens (Weick 1995; Maitlis & Christianson 2014). Many researchers conduct studies on meaningful work in stable organizational and occupational contexts. The cases of Jake and Shane provide important context as they maintained ties with organizations. The strong ties to local venues made it seem as though, even if the work may be ineffective today, one day it could be meaningful again. Workers in formal communities, like a non-profit organization or an association of civic-minded professionals, can develop practices or strong relationships that convince workers to pursue a meaningful goal, even if they are unable to meet this goal (Holm 2021). This could also be supported by some of the accounts from other entertainers who stayed with digital performances: stayers participated in informal communities that co-produced digital parties. Some leavers also participated in these communities, but these cases point to the role of collective sensemaking in processing ambiguous information.

Nevertheless, this research provides an incomplete picture of leaving meaningful work. Why is it that some felt confident in some indicators of meaningfulness, like chat engagement, when others failed to attend to these indicators? While the data indicated that older workers did

not age out of performance work, the youngest demographic overwhelming left. There may be unobserved variation in younger workers who persist, which could be a specific practice or psychological state that persistent older workers rely on. More tenured workers also may have experienced different work disruptions in the past, making them more open to a temporal disruption like the pandemic. More research is required to explain why different interpretations of one's impact can emerge and under what context this leads to staying or leaving.

This research could lead one to optimistic or cynical interpretations about contemporary work arrangements oriented toward social purpose. When workers leverage their work to pursue a mission, it is unlikely that they will always be effective. Withstanding periods with fewer rewarding experiences may enhance the resilience of civic-minded workers; a disruption on its own does not debilitate the collective efforts of doing good things for others. On the other hand, should employers exploit a worker's resilience in the face of uncertain efficacy, widespread disruptions like this pandemic may be a rare condition that pushes workers to leave. Further research is needed to explain if factors external to work are more likely to influence workers to leave exploitative work arrangements. Those concerned with workers in such arrangements may need to explore other practices that pull workers out of these jobs or that raise the floor for working conditions.

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