DISRUPTIVE FUTURES:

The young people who are changing the face of the future of work and entrepreneurship

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Introduction

Who are Disruptors?

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Name:

Jordan Taylor, Vamp Sneaker Cleaning

Location:

Brixton

Vamp Sneaker Cleaning is a premium sneaker cleaning business. Send your dirty sneakers by post or drop them off at their brick-and-mortar store, where they offer a £30 per sneaker cleaning package. The package includes cleaning of all types of footwear and fabrics, including leather, suede and nubuck. Each service also includes a thorough cleaning of the shoe's interior, exterior, sole and laces. For an additional £10, they can apply stain and water repellent coating. Vamp Sneaker Cleaning also offers light-to-moderate repairs such as scuff repainting, sole restoration, and minor glue work where the team feels is necessary or feasible. The turnaround for their service is two-to-three days.

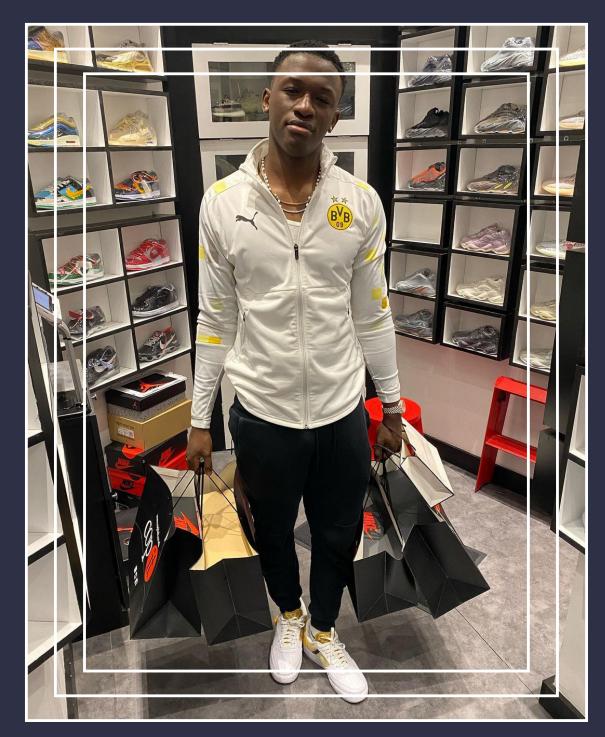*"I am inspired by Brixton and proud to have started here. But I want to be worldwide."*

Name:

Michael Gonedro, Cop-It UK

Location:

Brixton & Chelsea

Cop-It UK re-sells rare sneakers, clothing, and accessories from brands such as Nike, Off-White, and Supreme at their brick-and-mortar store and online. Cop-it UK purchases products upon release from a major brand or at a later date in new condition through an intermediary. They then resell the trainer at a higher price point determined by the "hype" level of the product. The value of this is calculated based on how many of the products were released, where they were released, how common the size of the product is, and current events, such as if the product has been recently worn by someone influential.

"I am one of the first at my level who has tried to take it big-time and have multiple shops."

Introduction

Jordan and Michael are what we call 'Disruptors'. They are successful, ambitious young people from underrepresented communities who have developed creative businesses outside of the traditional ecosystem in the creative and digital industries (CDI). They are just two of the Disruptors that are at the heart of this research who you will meet throughout this report.

According to the Department for Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) the CDI includes industries like

- Advertising and marketing
- Architecture
- Design: product, graphic and fashion design
- Film, TV, video, radio and photography
- Technology, software and computer services
- Music, performing and visual arts (Appendix A)

For various and often discussed reasons, young people from Black, Asian, and ethnic minority communities, and low socio-economic backgrounds are underrepresented in the sector.

Instead of asking "what is it that these young people are not doing" to try and explain this underrepresentation, The Social Innovation Partnership (TSIP) and Make Shift Create (MSC) came together to explore what disruptive young people like Jordan and Michael are doing to build creative enterprises. Specifically, the activity that has happened below the radar, despite facing adversity and being overlooked by the traditional players in the sector.

To appreciate the real value of disruption, we need to change the way we engage with and understand entrepreneurial activity, especially within the context of urban and youth cultures. There is a tendency for trauma-informed thinking to mediate the way young people are perceived, and perhaps ultimately, to determine the interventions devised for them. We want to help the CDI better value disruptive skills and engage with Disruptors in a mutually beneficial way. Particularly, given the growing importance of diversity and inclusion as a business imperative.

TSIP has a track record of comprehensive research and programme design with an emphasis on understanding the lived experience and cultural nuances of 'hard-to-reach' communities across London. MSC is a youth-led organisation that takes an innovative approach to reducing barriers to enterprise for young people. They provide space for young people to work and trade, creating hubs that nurture talent through increased connectivity and access to information. Crucially, their model is founded on the principle of learning through action, empowering young people to launch their enterprises and ideas into the public sphere.

Through our research we identified four characteristics of Disruptors which we will explore in this report:
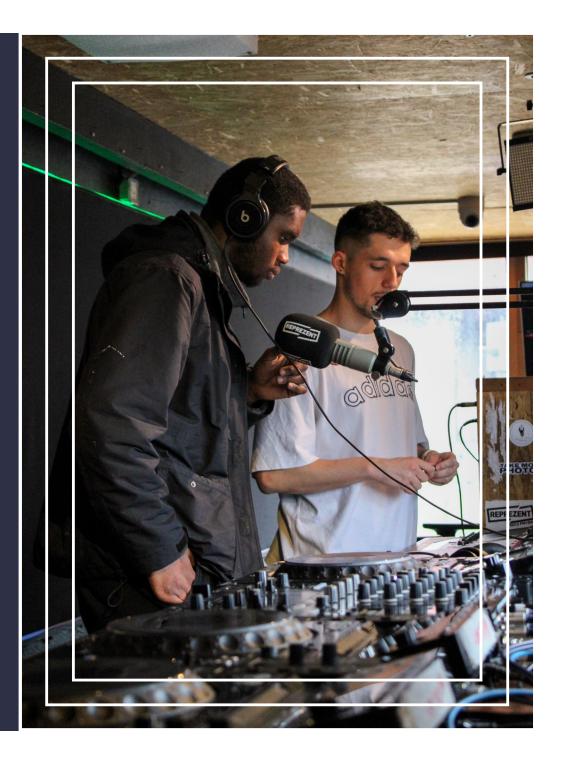
- **Cross-cultural dexterity**
- **Cultural integrity**
- **Agile disruptive networks**
- **Being Limitless**

There is a profound disconnect between the sector and Disruptors. The COVID-19 pandemic and growing social justice movements like Black Lives Matter (BLM), have brought this disconnect to the forefront. While many industries across the sector have struggled to adapt as a result of the pandemic, we continue to see Disruptors establish themselves and operate succesfully in this landscape. The government's recent calls for creatives to learn new skills to better navigate the Covid-19 pandemic shows a lack of understanding of the landscape, in particular how Disruptors continuously adapt and innovate in the face of adversity.

By showcasing Disruptor's stories and exploring 'disruption' as a behaviour this report unpacks how Disruptors form, incubate, and develop new ideas in informal settings. It sheds a light on how those ideas eventually filter up to influence the sector at a much larger scale. In this process, our report aims to provide insights and recommendations on how the sector can better learn from, and engage more impactfully with Disruptors. We are interested in how we can create mutually aligned value, and how we can ensure more equitable opportunities exist for young people from underrepresented communities.

Setting the Scene and our Research Journey

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Brixton as a Research Scope

The 'below the radar' nature of disruption can make it hard to see to the unfamiliar eye. Our own experiences working in London boroughs such as Lambeth, Southwark, and Hackney was key to designing our research approach. These are places we consider to be disruptive hotspots due to the prevalence of youth entrepreneurship, creativity, and diversity. All three areas also share underlying environmental factors that also can predict where we might uncover disruptive behaviours:

Population density

All three of these boroughs are amongst the top ten most populous boroughs in the UK (Office for National Statistics, 2020).

Multiculturalism

The percentage of black residents, people born outside the UK, first-generation Brits, and people who speak more than one language are all significantly higher than the London and UK-wide averages (Office for National Statistics, 2020).

Inequality

When looking at the government's primary measure of deprivation for small areas (known as LSOAs), parts of all three boroughs fall in the 5 – 10% more deprived localities in the UK (Elahi and Khan, 2019).

When people from different cultural backgrounds are living on top of one another, they are continuously sharing perspectives and forming new ideas through a process of hyper-socialisation. We believe this phenomenon is one of the definitive factors underpinning disruptive hotspots.

We've also observed that for some young people, given the odds they face, disruptive activity may seem the only way forward if they are to succeed on their own terms. There is a recognition of the need to beat 'the system' to achieve their objectives. This suggests a deeply held awareness of the ways inequality manifests itself through structural barriers to progression. This perspective may have been formed through a combination of lived experience and access to a deeper socio-historic memory.

Disruptors have been able to build new collectivities, collaborating and sharing resources to produce knowledge.

To collect culturally rich data, we focused our research in Brixton, one of the epicentres of London's disruptive ecosystem. Since the 1950s, Brixton has been in constant evolution; shaped by incoming and outgoing trends, radical undertones, adversity and strife, growth and achievement, and the coming together of different cultures. All of this contributing together to make it a hotbed for disruption today. We choose Brixton in recognition of it's storied past, the size and scope of its civic activity and ongoing struggle for its future as it grapples with inequality and austerity.

Literature Review

To build on anecdotal evidence from our broader work in this space and to inform the design of the research framework we explored current literature on subculture, space, entrepreneurship, and creativity in urban locales alongside A New Direction, a London-based non-profit generating opportunities for children and young people to unlock their creativity. Our literature review is attached in the appendices (Appendix B).

"The causes of underrepresentation in the traditional creative industries such as credit constraints, network limitations, and institutional racism are well studied. However, there is undeveloped literature on the value of these disruptors, and the manner in which they are operating. Justifying and coming to terms with the direction of this research has been challenging, because there is research on elements of disruptors but not the comprehensive picture."

The Current Cultural Landscape

This research has taken shape during a period of unprecedented change. Society has had to contend with how to recognise irrepressible calls for greater justice and equity for all while also facing a worldwide pandemic. Even before the pandemic, divisions across the country seemed to suggest that our economic and political systems were unable to meet the basic needs of many of the population.

With this as a backdrop, a growing number of consumers are looking to make more informed choices by prioritising concepts such as "purpose" (a brand's reason for being, beyond making money) and "authenticity" and "representation" (who the brand is speaking to and for). The Who, Why and How behind a business is paramount.

For the Disruptor, who has developed both their identity and business in unison, they understand intuitively how their activity engages with and reshapes the culture around them. Their business is an expression of the culture they live and breathe daily. They exude authenticity and purpose because *they are what they do*. This has enabled them to turn historic disadvantage factors (race, class, income, gender) into assets.

The Disruptors fluency with new media and technologies has allowed them to build powerful personal brands. Where they might once have been limited by access to finance, networks and knowledge, they are now increasingly able to tap into the power of technology, e-commerce and social media to succeed without having to go through the sector's traditional gate-keepers.

For Disruptors, social media is a place where they can be comfortable, authentic, and dictate conversations on their own terms. Disruptors have capitalised on their social media proficiency, not only to build their brands and communities but also to use their platforms to demand more equality and justice.

The current state of the Cultural Landscape means that corporations and institutions can no longer afford to be seen to be hostile or unresponsive to these calls for change without risking credibility and revenues. Disruptors are becoming more confident and assertive in their voices as they begin to understand the power of the constituencies they've built.

Research Approach

Our approach married desk-based research with rich, local and community-specific insight. The three key phases of our research were a literature review, primary data collection and insight development. Throughout each research phase our community researchers facilitated conversations with Disruptors to ensure that the voice and findings of the report resonated with Brixton's community of Disruptors.

Literature Review

Our literature review and reading of the disruptive landscape were initially used to form the research questions that helped us develop a strategy for collecting qualitative data. The literature review write-up was led by TSIP and MSC. To achieve this our literature review considered academic and grey literature on the key characteristics of successful innovators and entrepreneurs in order to better understand the value of Disruptors in relation to the CDI. Next, our literature review explored some of the problems that young people from Black, Asian, and ethnic minority communities, and low socio-economic backgrounds in Brixton face. To achieve this we mapped out the history of Brixton through the lens of culture, creativity and entrepreneurship. By exploring themes like subcultures, public spheres, informal networks, shared adversity and market maturity we were able to identify some initial Disruptor traits. Upon completion the literature review was shared with our Community Researchers to co-produce the following research questions:

- Who are disruptors and how are their identities shaped?
- What are the disruptive practices taking place across the creative industries?
- Is there a relationship between the social exclusion of BAME young people and the emergence of disruptive micro-economies?
- What are the characteristics of those succeeding by engaging in these disruptive practices?
- What are the ways in which young disruptors support each other?

Primary Data Collection

This research emphasises the equity and value of unheard or silenced voices. As such, primary data collection was led by a team of community researchers - themselves local Disruptors and entrepreneurs rooted in Lambeth. Our community researchers possessed four key assets:

- Positionality: leverage within local networks
- Credibility: knowledge about local issues and trust within communities
- Accessibility: access to parts of the community that are traditionally deemed to be 'difficult' to access
- Cultural equity: perceived to be similar to other members of the community

Between May and July 2020, the community researchers conducted 13 in-depth semi-structured interviews which tapped into different disruptive personas and perspectives to understand how they make-up Brixton's disruptive ecosystem. All of these interviews were in-person at the workspaces of Disruptors or public locations in Brixton. Because of their social equity, understanding and appreciation of cultural nuance, our community research team was able to identify and access the right people in the community and talk to them in a way which elicited more culturally refined, relevant and insightful responses.

Insight Development

After our primary data was collected we worked with our Community Researchers to code our data and identify emerging themes. This allowed everyone to bring in their own lived experience and perspectives to complement what was emerging from the data. The report you're reading was written by a team with a strong belief in the importance of meaningful community participation in the project. Though report write-up was led by TSIP and MSC at multiple points drafts were shared with Community Researchers and Disruptors to provide feedback. We have always tried to hold ourselves accountable to those who are represented in the report and to do justice to their achievements and aspirations.

Cross-Cultural Dexterity

What is Cross-Cultural dexterity?

Where does Disruptor's cross-cultural dexterity come from?

In our research, we observed a remarkable propensity amongst Disruptors to navigate different cultures, micro-economies, and experiences without compromising on their values. Building on our previous research, this observation suggests high cultural or global dexterity. These terms are used interchangeably in business psychology to describe how a person's cultural competence coupled with high emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills, culminates in their ability to understand a dynamic set of national, ethnic, generational, or other cultural groups to achieve better business results (Molinksy, 2013; Hazard, 2014; Banks, 2020).

Where our observations differ is that the Disruptors' we interviewed also understand hyperlocal cultural nuances, subcultures, and the relationship between Disruptive culture and popular culture. What makes the Disruptors unique is their ability to utilise an understanding of culture to create new products and services, and ways of working.

Our research in Brixton showed that the Disruptors developed cross-cultural dexterity through exposure to the area's multicultural social bricolage, abundance of enterprise, and multigenerational cultural memory. In our interviews Disruptors spoke about their influences growing up, whether engaging with their parents or grandparents' cultures- many of whom are immigrants - as well as the wider community's diverse range of cultures. This included areas of culture like food, music, fashion, and language. As one interviewee, a music producer and artist described.

"My friend's cultures have influenced me greatly. Let's put it this way. I wasn't listening to Reggae and Dancehall without my Jamaican friends. At this point, I have friends from literally every background. My French friends have influenced me with how I dress, made me a drinker, and have given me an appreciation for a bit darker humour. My Arab friends, the way I speak, and my slang is influenced by them. Roadmen definitely influenced the way I speak. My friends from the Caribbean taught me how to dance and I'm not just talking about catching a vibe".

Multiculturalism also significantly shapes the way that Disruptors think. In our interviews Disruptors talked about the pride that they feel being part of a multicultural community, and how movements like Rastafarianism and Pan-Africanist-thinking influences their beliefs, as well as their values on business, wellness, and social issues.

This research also indicates that Disruptor's cross-cultural dexterity is influenced by a high volume of local entrepreneurial activity. With many of our interviewees, there was a profound appreciation for entrepreneurs from the community who have achieved mainstream success, for the entrepreneurs aspiring to break through to the mainstream, and for day-to-day interactions with entrepreneurs within the community. The prevalence of entrepreneurship has led to Disruptors inspiring Disruptors to pursue their own enterprises.

"From the guy selling cigarettes on the corners, to the mum selling hair products while taking care of her children. Brixton has given me a hustler mentality".

Disruptors also exhibit an appreciation for Brixton's history and how the previous generation has paved the way for them. From a historical perspective, the people we spoke to were able to trace Brixton's unique identity back to the Windrush generation also recognise it as a spiritual centre of Black Britain. Whilst this does not necessarily translate directly to entrepreneurship, it demonstrates the high emotional and cultural intelligence integral to cross-cultural dexterity.

How do Disruptors leverage cross-cultural dexterity?

Why is cross-cultural dexterity important?

In an interview, internet comedian Coryoutside explains how he adopts elements of multiple cultures to create original content. For example, in one video he shows off a dance he dubs the "woospin" a play on a famous Caribbean-Brooklyn drill dance born from a cross-cultural exchange between the London and Brooklyn drill music scenes. In another video, he celebrates Liverpool FC's Premier League Title whilst bantering other football clubs. Then in a separate post, he advertises a Nigerian - Caribbean food takeaway. By adopting parts of African American hip-hop culture, British sports culture, and diaspora food culture Coryoutside utilises cross-cultural dexterity to create original content, grow a new audience, and take unique content to market.

Disruptors also leverage cross-cultural dexterity to inform their business strategy. Michael Gonedro's website and store Copit re-sells rare trainers and streetwear at a premium. "Sneakerheads" and streetwear enthusiasts come to him to buy these products, which represent a broad range of subcultures. For example, to a casual observer outside of streetwear culture, Jordan and Yeezy products are associated with a similar demographic. However, Michael Gonedro leverages his cross-cultural dexterity to strategically target Jordans to the local market and Yeezys to the central London market. Each represents unique fashion choices that reflect different subcultures, values, and self-expression. This is reflected by the recent opening of a store in Chelsea, to attract a different target audience than his first store in Brixton.

Cross-cultural dexterity is an especially vital competency for the creative and digital industry. A creative leader's success is dependent on their ability to build an effective team, understand different points of views, and communicate. Individuals with high cross-cultural dexterity understand how different cultural nuances can make people feel, complement one another, hold value, and can be utilised to develop new ideas and execute them (Hazard, 2014).

Similarly, as culture becomes increasingly dynamic via the power of technology and increasing exposure to different cultures, cross-cultural dexterity has a tremendous practical value. For many organisations, this can translate to new market opportunities, improving user experience, or selling more products. To grow their businesses, it is contingent to understand, and communicate effectively with different cultures through cross-cultural dexterity (Hazard, 2014).

Cultural Integrity

What is cultural integrity?

Where does cultural integrity amongst Disruptors come from?

Today, authenticity and purpose are paramount in a world where consumers are more informed than ever. People do not buy what organisations do, without buying into their reasons for doing so (Sinek, 2013). Consumers want to share experiences, express their authentic self, and ensure the brands they consume share their values (Kohli et al., 2015). Authenticity does not exist in any one form, but it is the sense that both individual or group behaviour and appearance, self-reflects core values and beliefs (Franzese, 2007).

In our research, Disruptors believe that the CDI have struggled to value, nurture, and meaningfully integrate authenticity into their organisational culture and brands. Disruptor's response to this absence of meaningful authenticity by larger brands is to emphasise cultural integrity in their own work. Cultural integrity refers to the retention and unbroken connection between products or services and the culture from which they emerged. In a world where authenticity can sometimes be 'faked' or manipulated – typically due to a lack of ownership – cultural integrity considers how culture is used, who owns it and who controls in (Root, 2018).

In our interviews, Disruptors described how different brands have aligned themselves with black musicians, athletes, and influencers to generate cultural equity and build audiences. Some Disruptors expressed an appreciation for these brands, while others feel that the way brands benefit from Disruptor's cultural equity to build a consumer base is exploitative. For instance, content creators such as Harry Pinero, Chuckie Online, and Julie Adenuga have publicly talked about their relationship with brands. On the one hand, they feel that a large brand provides the platform to scale their reach and tap into new audiences. While on the flip side of this, there is a question mark around whether they are adequately compensated for the value they bring and whether they are able to always truly exert creative authority. As one Disruptor that we interviewed put it:

"They are entitled, they don't value you, your work, your time, and you as a person. In our community, we are the pioneers and corporations benefit from this and we are left in the same position [from where we started], scratching our heads. But actually, we are not in the same position, because we created something. So now we are saying, wait a minute, I created that, so why am I still here."

For this Disruptor being undervalued and marginalised by the mainstream has driven them to pursue their own career and business. They believe that determining how their culture is used, owning it, and controlling their work takes precedence.

How do Disruptors leverage cultural integrity?

Why is cultural integrity important?

In our interviews, musician and all-around creative J Hami explained how he leverages and values cultural integrity in his work. For instance, he is hyper-conscious that the music he shares is honest, educates people on his culture and is true to who he is. When faced with the option to work with other musicians who are not consistent with his values, he refuses. He is also hyper-conscious that all other facets of his work align with his values. For example, in music videos he is extremely strategic, ensuring that his visuals, actions, and values are consistent by choosing to wear clothes made from other Disruptors, working with local cinematographers, and featuring people who he is confident share his cultural integrity.

Cultural integrity is also paramount to his future ambitions. Although he is in the early stages of his career, he discusses how he aspires to maintain the strong connection between his work, culture, and consumers. He believes it is crucial to own his creative capital and therefore chooses to play the long game. To illustrate this, he has the 1,000 loyal fan rule, which stipulates that if you have 1,000 loyal fans that will support and buy anything you produce, it is better than having 10,000 fans, if the additional 9,000 fans diminish one's control and ownership to a larger corporation. Cultural integrity enables Disruptors ability to see what is authentic, and what isn't. In this world, Disruptors are shifting to ways of working that are aligned to principles relating to cultural integrity like ownership.

From a brand perspective, as the UK's young population is increasingly influenced by Disruptors who share notions of cultural integrity, ignoring a growing market opportunity is a major loss (Rees, 2015). Cultural integrity is closely aligned with emotional branding, storytelling, and customer engagement (Torelli, 2013; Holt, 2016; Kim & Sullivan, 2019). According to one study conducted by the marketing agency, IPG Media, 39 percent of customers surveyed are more likely to support brands with high cultural relevance, of which 47 percent are more likely to support brands that have taken a stance on social issues, and 38 percent are more likely to support brands who engage directly with culture that they are passionate about (MAGNA, 2019).

Cultural integrity is important because of how it can seamlessly transcend an urban locale and influence how a business thinks about their products, services, stores - their entire marketing strategy (Brakus et al., 2009). Even the largest brands with the biggest budgets may not be successful. Universal Music Group has 2.26 million subscribers on YouTube at the time of writing. In contrast, GRM Daily, a British urban music outlet has 3.39 million subscribers. Both Universal Music Group and GRM Daily project authenticity but GRM Daily's lack of brand bureaucracy and grass-roots legacy, resonates deeply with consumers because they own, shape, and reap the benefits of the culture their content showcases.

Agile Disruptive Networks

What are agile disruptive networks?

Where do agile disruptive networks come from?

Through our research, we observed Disruptor's ability to leverage their networks to innovate, to capitalise on opportunities and to ultimately overcome a lack of resources in a highly competitive environment. Our previous research shows that areas where we might discover disruptive behaviours are amongst the most dense and unequal. The harsh reality is that only a certain number of people are going to make it out. Disruptors learn to navigate the competition by establishing mutually beneficial relationships with likeminded people. Social capital underpins strong networks and collaboration. Social capital refers to the networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit (Putnam, 2001). Research shows that as social capital increases, so does the flow of information, resources and empathy across an entire community. This process improves the community's capacity to come together and tackle problems (Sasaki, 2011).

Amongst Disruptors, we observed high social capital, a strong collaborative spirit, and a focus on mutual benefit. However, what makes the networks we observed in our research so unique, is their fluid and agile nature. The speed at which Disruptors go from ideation to reaching the market is remarkable. Disruptors use their agile networks to motivate one another, share opportunities, validate each other's ideas, share resources, market enterprises, and scale-up their enterprises together (Gibb & Ritchie, 1982; Dodd & Keles, 2014).

Agile disruptive networks are intrinsic to the concepts of cross-cultural dexterity and cultural integrity. In exploring where cross-cultural dexterity comes from, we see how a community's multicultural social bricolage, abundance of enterprise, and multigenerational cultural memory influences the way Disruptors compete against and collaborate with one another.

The hyper-localism and speed at which culture evolves in a place like Brixton, helps entrepreneurs to identify trends and new opportunities. However, when you consider that Brixton is an unequal place, entrepreneurs must be agile to capitalise on the opportunities that they have identified and be able to withstand the competition of a highly entrepreneurial culture.

The pressure of withstanding a highly competitive environment contributes to the formation and survival of the strongest ideas and Disruptors amongst whom there is often a shared identity, a shared experience of hard work and a united sense of purpose. All of this comes together to create a camaraderie that leads to the formation of agile disruptive networks. As one Disruptor said when reflecting on his experiences:

"When you realise that we [Disruptors] are constantly struggling and facing adversity because we are lacking resources and opportunities, it is almost like we know that we need to get ourselves straight [help ourselves] because no one else is going to do it for us."

This statement speaks to a "shared struggle" which can promote and enhance a group's commitment to building supportive relationships (Molero et al., 2011). Because of the importance of cultural integrity to Disruptors, they are naturally driven towards coming together and working with those with shared culture and experiences, who share the same social norms and informal rules, anchored in the community. There is also a shared motivation to push forward their community together, through their own agency and control in an effort to be resilient to outside forces. One Disruptor that we interviewed said:

"I support [Name removed] because I have seen them coming up. I rate the work they have done, their message. They are my people and from my area. And I love to see them doing their thing [being successful]."

These networks are made increasingly agile through social media, where people can exchange cultures and ideas at a fast pace. The power of the internet and technology means these Disruptors can not only engage with people in their own neighbourhoods easily but also with those with shared cultural integrity on the other side of the world. This all makes it easier to learn from each other, collaborate, share and amplify each other's work, and support each other's businesses.

How do Disruptors leverage agile disruptive networks?

We met with Eriggo Hamilton founder of E3 Exercise and co-founder of The Challenge who is a great example of how agile disruptive networks can be of huge benefit. E3 exercise is a fitness company that sells fitness programmes, nutritional supplements, merchandise, and equipment. In January 2019, Eriggo and five friends challenged one another via group chat and did a 60 Day Challenge to see who would work the hardest to meet their body goals.

After sharing his progress on social media, Eriggo's followers reached out to ask when the next 60-day challenge would be, so he capitalised on the opportunity and decided to organise another one. Some of the people who expressed interest in participating were women interested in working with other women so Eriggo reached out to the best personal trainer in his network - Takesha of TaKeepFit - to collaborate, and officially co-found The Challenge. As the next challenge concluded, demand continued to grow, and they wanted to scale-up, so they teamed up with Blank Tile, a local social-led sports creative agency to produce a website to handle registration and develop a marketing campaign. After the campaign, sign-ups tripled, and they needed a bigger base. Again, they were able to find the perfect partner in Terroll Lewis's charity-based Brixton Street Gym.

As the business continues to grow at a remarkable pace since the first challenge in January 2019 (through a pandemic-induced digital pivot), Eriggo has utilised his network to increase his access to resources, be agile to opportunities, and be innovative. Eriggo's cross-cultural dexterity has informed his understanding of his service users, and has helped him build trust from service users and partners alike. Because Takesha, Kacey Clarke of Blank Tile, and Terroll Lewis are disruptive in nature and share experiences and aspirations with Eriggo, they form a powerful agile disruptive network that they each leverage to collaboratively grow their enterprises. What is unique about this story is their strong collaborative spirit, approach to sharing opportunities, and tackling an untapped problem. Specifically, what separates their agile disruptive networks from other conventional marketing agencies, gyms, and fitness entrepreneurs is the ecosystem they have built around their consumers, who are local, and not engaging with the mainstream fitness programmes.

Why are agile disruptive networks important?

Disruptors' agility is important because quick idea generation, and being able to innovate quickly, economically and continuously is key to business survival and growth in a highly competitive environment. The most successful innovators are those who reshape the market, force it to adapt and thereby push out the competitors (Ghezzi & Cavallo, 2018). By forcing the market to change, you are also making a product or service more accessible for all people (Robles, 2015). As demonstrated by the Covid-19 pandemic, being agile is an invaluable asset.

Disruptors' ability to leverage their networks to move quickly is paramount because it increases the speed at which ideas are generated, can, become a reality, and survive the early trials and tribulations of launch (Aldrich & Waldinger, 1986). What is most significant about these agile disruptive networks is high levels of trust, which facilitates coordination, community unity, and goal-orientation (Comunian, 2010).

"I wouldn't have got to this point without people in my community sharing their resources with me and kicking knowledge to me. Giving me an opportunity to work with them, and for introducing me to people that can give me a bigger platform."

Being Limitless

What do we mean being limitless?

Where does this come from?

The disruptive journeys we researched are not without their lows. As some interviewees shared, having no money for equipment, trouble with the law, investing everything into a project only for it to fail, and experiencing discrimination no matter how hard you work are just some examples of the challenges that Disruptors face.

However, Disruptors feel that taking on the adversity and challenges associated with disruption is the only way to be truly happy, to change their family's lives, and have a positive impact on society - when faced with the alternative options of university or pursuing a 9-to-5 career. There's a profound belief that there should be no limitations on their aspirations and Disruptors' ambitions should not be constrained by the limits placed on them by society. It's being boxed in due to their race, socio-economic background, education, or other social factors that can constrain thinking. If Disruptors think, operate, and are resilient when confronted with these constraints, they'll start to realise their desired creativity and innovation.

By definition, limitlessness means the quality of being infinite without bound, or limit. There's a belief, desire and appetite amongst this group that they can drive systemic change through their enterprises, whilst improving their own lives and prospects as well as having a positive impact on their communities. Despite coming from challenging environments, Disruptors aspirations are disproportionately high to most people. Disruptors believe they can be the best at what they do, achieve generational wealth, and systemic change.

In our literature review, we discussed how generations of oppressed and minoritised communities have been unable to achieve the same quality of life as many of their white British counterparts, even when pursuing traditional careers as they faced a "glass ceiling" or inextricable barriers (Roja-Garcia, 2013). As evidenced in our primary data, today's generation of Disruptors is experiencing symptoms of "black burnout", "sunny nihilism", and "optimistic nihilism". Black burnout refers to a form of burnout caused by overwork, underpay, and institutional discrimination (Clark, 2019) and has a strong interplay with concepts mentioned such as 'sunny nihilism'. In short, these terms are used to describe young people's recognition that living a more "regular" way of life leads to less meaning. They, therefore, are ambitious and feel liberated to chase other pursuits, find happiness, help each other solve problems and find meaning in all they do. (Gupta, 2018; Skjoldborg, 2018; Syfret, 2019). One Disruptor spoke of their University and early career experience:

"I was the only black person in the class. And I am telling you I am the only one who did not get the support promised. I graduated University and I did not get the job I was expecting. So why not just do my own thing?"

Disruptors have realised that the "traditional" route is not going to make them happy. However, they've seen people they know and admire change their lives and have a positive impact on society through entrepreneurship. As a result, they have a strong self-belief that they can do the same despite the adversity they face. Throughout the interviews Disruptors referenced these people:

"Most of my inspirations are entrepreneurs who have had a positive impact on society through their work, take [named removed]. So, they are just an all-around great guy. What he stands for, I stand for: building the community, helping other marginalised people, creating your own team instead of working for larger corporations just because it pays more than being independent."

This same Disruptor believes that we 'are living through history' right now when talking about how systematically oppressed communities have united to achieve systemic change whether through the BLM movement and increased support for black-owned businesses. In his words: "this is one of the first times the world has ever come together in the way it did. And even if we have a long way to go, we are making progress." For this generation of Disruptors, this serious possibility of systemic change coincides with their belief that if they are resilient, they can also bring their ideas to life and break through the 'glass ceiling.'

How do Disruptors leverage being limitless?

In our interviews, entrepreneur and creative Stevii Campbell spoke of how self-belief, resilience and creativity can be leveraged to create new products and services. Stevii created 4playTV, a web series and founded Mayfive, a creative agency that empowers and gives structure to creatives.

Four years ago Stevii, a gay black woman, went on YouTube to try and find a web series with gay British black women like herself as the main characters. After failing to find anything she had a strong belief that there was an underserved audience of people like her. Ultimately, after working hard to develop her vision, secure the right team, and access the needed resources Stevii produced 4playTV- a web series that looks into the stories of four black gay females from different backgrounds. In 2016, Stevii released the web series independently and a few hundred thousand views later she has been truly moved by the public's response although she had already envisioned its potential impact.

Inspired by the support that the web-series has received, Stevii, a self-identified 'people person' reflected on how she could inspire and support more people from not only the black LGBTQ community but also other underrepresented groups. The first step to this was introducing new themes and characters to 4playTV to avoid being put into a box. However, she also wanted to empower other Disruptors to pursue their ideas. To achieve this, she founded the Mayfive creative agency to support them through the barriers they may face. Mayfive offers the following services:

- Coaches individuals to build their talent into a viable skillset to overcome barriers to trying to enter the creative industry
- Connects freelancers to work through Mayfive's network
- Organises workshops and programmes for creatives to learn more about their craft, new skills, and how to grow their business
- Provides a business management solution for businesses looking to hire talent and collaborate

Stevii is an excellent example of limitlessness because she identified a gap - the underrepresentation of gay black women in film and television - and believed in herself to create a web series to address this gap despite a lack of resources. Her work has empowered other people and inspired her to find an agency that will support other people to bring their own ideas to life and contribute to a greater change.

Why is being limitless important?

As innovation scholar Thomas Kelley says, "Belief in your creative capacity lies at the heart of innovation". At its core, Kelley describes how self-belief is about believing in your ability to create change in the world around you (Kelley, 2002). Disruptors' strong self-belief that they can bring their ideas to life even if it means defying norms is important because it is the first step towards action (Bradford, 2004; World Cities Culture Forum, 2015). It is also important because by being removed from and being resilient to the mainstream way of thinking, Disruptors can keep their ideas pure and protect themselves from being decayed by "the system".

As Covid-19 and its economic impact continue to unravel, self-belief and resilience are paramount. Being limitless allows Disruptors to transform the doubt around these circumstances into focused thinking, and proactive actions. Strong self-belief is important because it equips Disruptors with the confidence to overcome the challenges of an economic downturn and stagnation to pursue new business opportunities (McGee et al., 2009). What is unique about these business opportunities is often they do not seem initially feasible by other people. Therefore, resilience is an important complementary trait. Negative emotions that people experience in periods of adversity include distress and worry. Resilient people experience these emotions, but also experience thankfulness, curiosity, and patience (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2005). It's those positive emotions that protect resilient people and allow them to keep pushing forward. For people with strong self-belief and resilience, tough times are times of opportunity- they have two choices to do without or build their ideas into a business themselves (Latif, 2019).

"I am optimistic by nature. And why not I am seeing social movements open up new doors. I am seeing people like me achieving generational wealth. I am seeing communities grow and I want that for me too. I want the freedom to wake up in the morning and do what I want to do and help people with my creativity."

The Main Characteristics of Disruption

Cross-cultural Dexterity

Cross-cultural dexterity refers to a remarkable propensity amongst Disruptors to navigate different hyperlocal cultural nuances, subcultures, micro-economies, and popular culture without compromising their values. Disruptors cross-cultural dexterity emerges from growing up surrounded by cultural diversity, a high volume of enterprise, and the cultural influence of previous generations. However, what makes Disruptors unique is their ability to harness culture to create new products, services, and approaches to working.

Cultural Integrity

Cultural integrity is the belief that authenticity and purpose are dominant values in today's consumer market. Consumers want to share experiences, express their authentic self, and are more informed than ever about how brands share their own personal values. Disruptors believe that many brands and larger corporations struggle to value, nurture, and meaningfully integrate authenticity in their work. The Disruptor response to this absence of authenticity is to emphasise cultural integrity in their work. This term refers to the retention and unbroken connection between products or services and the culture from which they emerged.

Agile Disruptive Networks

Agile disruptive networks are leveraged by Disruptor's to innovate, capitalise on opportunities and ultimately overcome a lack of resources. Disruptors have high social capital, a strong collaborative spirit, and an ability to quickly go from ideation to market. This is intrinsic to growing up in areas where the harsh reality is that only a certain number of people will achieve success. The pressures of highly competitive environments contribute to the formation and survival of robust ideas. Disruptors who share experiences, identity and sense of purpose are more likely to work with one another. Their agility is significant because innovating quickly, economically, and continuously is key to business survival and growth.

Being Limitless

Being limitless is the belief, desire and appetite amongst Disruptors that they can drive systemic change through their ventures whilst improving their own lives and communities. This belief comes from realising that even when pursuing traditional careers, they will still face systemic barriers and a "glass ceiling" and that "traditional" routes are not going to make them happy. They have seen how people like them have changed their lives through entrepreneurship and as a result their sense of self-belief has grown,

What next? Some Recommendations

Why do we need to do something?

Recommendation: Building disruptive hubs for Disruptors

Despite the adversity, institutional challenges, and systemic inequalities they face, this research demonstrated Disruptors' ability and potential to build thriving ventures. While some Disruptors are able to scale up their work to match their ambition, the majority are only able to circumvent "the system" for so long before ultimately hitting a glass ceiling. Because they are unable to scale, institutions often lack motivation or willingness to align themselves more strongly with Disruptors. Also, because many 'disruptive' traits and experiences are not recognised through traditional recruitment and performance management processes, the sector struggles to see the value and realise the potential of Disruptors as lucrative talent for their organisations.

This research is significant because it allows us to imagine the possibilities of improving the way that the sector understands the skills and experiences of Disruptors. Whilst we are only looking at a small cohort, we know many young people have developed disruptive mindsets in the face of societal bias. Looking ahead, as we face further economic crisis, and unemployment looms for many, we consider a 'disruptive' approach to be one way to help drive creativity and foster the civic, economic, and social innovation needed to tackle many of the problems that we face.

Many people face increased challenges in finding and securing employment opportunities, as well as accessing finance and investment, especially in the creative sector. We are presented with a unique opportunity to reform and disrupt some of the old structures and thinking that have limited innovation in the past. Consider a world where we can build a mutually beneficial ecosystem that allows Disruptors to achieve their full potential equitably and where institutions and organisations can truly benefit from working with them.

Conventional ways of working with creative entrepreneurs do not necessarily align with the Disruptors' value systems or ways of working. This disconnect explains why many Disruptors have chosen to avoid traditional higher education, other training routes and careers to pursue their ventures and enterprises. Rather than investing time, money and energy into traditional further education or apprenticeship programmes, there's a strong feeling with these young people that it's more advantageous to upskill themselves and bootstrap their ideas. Sure, this also costs time and money, but Disruptors often prefer to invest their resources directly into innovating and growing their own ideas. While the return on investment at this stage, might not be clear-cut; Disruptors believe that for them, the learning is vast, the process more engaging and that their thinking is more outside the box. Finally, and importantly, they believe that the long-term potential of their ventures will be more substantial than if they had considered a more 'traditional' route.

To allow Disruptors to pursue their ventures, we need to overcome a lack of affordable and suitable space for young people to work, trade, and grow in. Disruptors need space, infrastructure, and resources. Unfortunately, considering the underlying environmental factors where disruptive behaviours can be found - in urban areas with higher population density - means that physical space is increasingly scarce, and widespread inequality perpetuates the resource gap. Although there has been an effort across the sector to open up access to resources, the approach has been disparate. For instance, Brixton's Creative Enterprise Zone (CEZ) has introduced affordable workspaces. However, previous research on their aims suggests that the affordable workspaces tenants are designed more so to fit a typology of older creative entrepreneurs (between the ages of 25 and 62) that work in areas that are associated with stronger economic outcomes. Brixton's CEZ does look to help young people below the age of 25 through an employment, enterprise, and skills stream but does

not include them in the creative production workspace element. Regardless, the current spaces would be unaffordable for some young people starting out and not necessarily provide what they're looking for in terms of creative studio and event space.

We suggest developing disruptive hubs in accessible locations that replicate the conditions that Disruptors thrive in. Part of this is adopting an asset-based approach that explores what makes disruptive environments unique, the community's assets and harnessess Disruptors skills. Disruptors should be empowered, have agency, and work alongside others to create their own hubs. To us, a disruptive hub is somewhere created by and for Disruptors, somewhere that provides Disruptors with access to space to grow, test and iterate their ideas and build an ecosystem much like those they continue to propagate under the radar. A hub would provide workspace, retail space, peer networks and events space all within the same space, allowing Disruptors to drive the outputs, work and value created. The disruptive hubs could also provide vital touchpoints between Disruptors and the academy, local and central government, and the private sector who fail to capitalise on their tremendous potential. Some other features might include on-site equipment like computers pre-installed with production, editing, and design software, videography equipment, a recording studio, and on-site support.

Recommendation: Increasing access to investment and funding

We know access to micro-finance is a big enough challenge for small businesses. This challenge grows exponentially depending on factors such as socioeconomic status, age, race, class and gender. When it comes time to scale, many Disruptors are unable to access the additional investment required.

Some Disruptors look to grant funding, but traditional funders are often so far removed from disruptive environments that they do not have the resources or inclination to seek out unconventional grantees. Instead, safer bets are sought via a balance-sheet approach to funding. Disruptors inclined to seek grant funding often report that they find the system obtuse and onerous. Having never been given any support or training in writing applications for funding, when unsuccessful with their applications, Disruptors feel that this kind of funding is not for them and often see it as an inefficient use of their time where despite their persistence, they see disproportionately little success.

We believe grant funding needs to be made more accessible by simplifying and demystifying the application and evaluation process, as well as providing more nuanced, tailored and relevant pre-application support. We also believe that our recommended hub approach could be a way to disburse and democratise funding in an equitable way. These hubs could provide a platform for giving out small grants for commissions or unrestricted micro -investments to further the work and development of Disruptors and help them break-through the glass ceiling.

Other Disruptors look to traditional financing and investment such as social investment and venture capital but find doors are closed to them. The structural barriers they face are multi-dimensional. Disruptors face a network constraint, although their networks are agile, they may not include the right contacts or references. Disruptors may not have the information on the steps they need to pitch or apply for funding. If they overcome these obstacles, some then face further challenges when faced with investors asking for information relating to their business plan, financial forecasting and product roadmaps for some of the requirements and are in a setting where they might be able to get funding, they might not have the competencies to produce the cash-flow, business plan, and product roadmap that would validate them in the eyes of the investor.

Disruptors have continuously shown that they can produce a lot with little and represent a good investment opportunity to forward-thinking investors. Yet, funders are also not investing in Disruptors in the way that they might invest in other entrepreneurs. There may be several reasons for this, but some actions to address it include spreading awareness and making funding available that is designed explicitly for Disruptors. Some funds have specific qualification criteria to increase diversity, inclusivity and equity of their funds, with a focus on characteristics around race, gender and disability but they could perhaps go further by, calling out characteristics relating to the lived experience, behaviours, and competencies inherent with Disruptors as discussed in this report.

Recommendation: Facilitating equitable relationships between Disruptors and the Creative and Digital Industries

Some Disruptors wish to work with more established corporations while others don't. Most will have to engage with corporations at some point as their reach and revenues grow. The challenge is how to build equitable relationships, where incentives are aligned for both parties. This is especially important, as there is a perception of historic and continued exploitation of Creators and Disruptors, where their culture, struggle, and work have been exploited for others' commercial gain.

We believe that a disruptive mindset, an agile approach and fresh ideas are needed in the creative and digital industries, not to meet diversity and inclusion statistics but because of what these Disruptors can do for the bottom line. Brands have an opportunity to exert real competitive advantage if they build authentic partnerships and understanding with the underrepresented communities that Disruptors are a part of. Likewise, Disruptors would benefit from engagement with corporations to diversify their field of experience, build and contextualise their expertise, and to start to formulate relationships. Our research demonstrates the versatility of their skill sets and how they can be transferred to other areas of enterprise. The challenge is that Disruptors lack sufficient awareness around what these development opportunities look like in reality and how to pursue them.

We have seen placements such as On Purpose, Year Here and Acumen taking candidates into community settings to work on solutions for social problems, whilst developing their leadership skills. We suggest a comparable, albeit inverted placement taking innovators from community settings and bringing their talent to corporations and other established bodies. By placing Disruptors into these organisations and challenging them to identify and solve key business challenges, bringing their unique perspective and lived experience in return for access, experience and relationships, it provides a mechanism to unite both parties in a mutually beneficial way.

"I am willing to work with big brands and I think they would be really interested in what I am doing. But I am not doing it unless the terms are right for me too."

Recommendation: Listen to Disruptors and value their approaches and experiences

We've only just started on this journey and we know now there is so much more to uncover. One limitation of our research is around gender – we spoke to many more men than women – and we think it's hugely important to spend more time exploring the nuances of Disruption from a female perspective. From the young women that we did speak to, we started to see the powerful differences in disruptive traits amongst women and how they leverage these skills and overcome adversity. We need to continue to provide a voice to these young people who are operating below the radar, who are often overlooked and not part of the debate. They have huge value to bring to the creative and digital sectors, the social sector and further afield and we need to continue to listen to what they have to say.

Using a community-led research approach was integral and hugely beneficial to this piece of research and we recommend leveraging this methodology for future research, with Disruptors leading, owning and being intrinsically involved in the entire research process. Equally, it is crucial that as part of this collaborative process, they are involved in the co-design and co-production of any recommendations coming out of this research. This will not only deliver deep insight, rich in cultural nuance but also provide a mechanism for Disruptors to get closer to the organisations and institutions that are so desperate to understand more about the best and effective ways to engage in a mutually beneficial way. Ultimately, it will also help organisations overcome own representation and authenticity concerns, while improving their bottom line.

"We are living through history. Things are changing so fast and I am constantly inspired by new music, ideas and what I can do with them tomorrow?"

Our Story

The Disruptive Futures is our collective attempt to make sense of a familiar story. The story is about a young black person from an estate or council house taking inspiration from their surroundings and wanting to bring their ideas and talent to the CDI. The story is also about the CDI situating itself in a place like Brixton and adopting the gestures and vocabulary of equality, and proclaiming it wants to make a space for our young person. But they do not connect. What is missing here? This is not a story on the margins, its a cliche, reflecting a day to day reality for a great many young people who have sought to make their own way in the world. So why are we still here? How have we come to misunderstand the vast majority of young people who make up low-income neighbourhoods in London?

The research is driven by a desire to change the harmful preconceptions that continue to inform the practice and strategies deployed to engage with young people in London's inner city. It's these preconceptions that keep us where we are, to the point that our story becomes banal. While the last 18 months have seen renewed debate about how best to improve the outcomes for young black people, policy and practice is still being driven by trauma-informed and/or deficit-based approaches. Through this work we have sought to create a new way of looking, and a new framework that enables us to better understand the motivations, talents and ambitions driving a new generation of young people forward.

At the heart of this research are questions around cultural production and cultural ownership. Where does culture come from and who gets to extract value from it. Why is urban culture so over represented in the mainstream while urban communities so underrepresented in the industries that profiteer from it? How do we define urban culture? How are young people disrupting the structures and systems around them to succeed and at what cost?

Shaun and Bayo brought TSIP and Make Shift Create together to develop their shared interest in addressing some of these questions. TSIP's community research experience is critical to delve into the nuances and hard-to-reach spaces in which these young people operate. After working on community-based initiatives for years, Shaun saw how researchers ignore community voices and as a result, young people face marginalisation in intervention delivery. Through the community research team, now part of Centric (an independent organisation that partners with TSIP, community researchers were able to tap into their understanding of cultural insights, build trust with the community through shared lived experiences and maintain ownership over their research and its outputs.

In parallel, Bayo's work with Make Shift Create opens up opportunities for the next generation of 16- 25-year-olds who have the ideas and ambition to create systemic change. Through Make Shift Create's spaces, programmes and networks, it gives visibility to young people, helps them be cultural producers and works with them to bring their ideas to life in the public sphere.

Through this work, Make Shift Create is on the pulse of disruption across London and has come to understand how young people work, the barriers they face to scaling up and the challenges of translating their potential to large institutions. As a non-profit organisation working to enhance the capacity and agency of young people in London, A New Direction recognised what TSIP and Make Shift Create aimed to achieve and shared an interest in researching the disruptive landscape associated with inner-city youth.

Specifically, to what extent these young people are succeeding, understanding the barriers they face and whether they are interested in support from institutions. AND's mission is to generate opportunities for children and young people to unlock their creativity. This research helps inform their work. Together Shaun and Bayo formed the project team. As entrepreneurs, lifelong Londoners, members of Disruptive Networks, and creative economy futurists Marcus Tayebwa and Daniel Morris were the perfect community researchers to collect primary data, broker relationships with Disruptors and act as the primary points of contact between us. Sebastian Turano as a former creative entrepreneur and someone with extensive experience researching the CDI, would be responsible for leading data collation, data analysis and report write-up. At the same time, Jennifer Christie's long track record of delivering business development and spearheading marketing programmes would prove critical to structuring our research in a way that resonates with funders, the CDI and other stakeholders.

Together, we aimed to showcase Disruptor's stories, shed light on the movement and provide insights and recommendations on ensuring more equitable opportunities exist for Disruptors.

TSIP x MAKE SHIFT CREATE

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IN PARTNERSHIP WITH

A NEW DIRECTION
We create **opportunity**

To access the report appendices, citations and additional literature on disruption, please click here.

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