# CREATIVE BURNOUT: SUFFOCATING THE FUTURE OF DESIGN

## A DETAILED ANALYSIS OF THE EFFECTS OF CREATIVE BURNOUT AMONG DESIGN STUDENTS AND PROFESSIONALS

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*Creative burnout is a major inhibitor for creative individuals that is often overlooked or dismissed. The purpose of this study is to better understand creative burnout and its effects on creative individuals, gaining insight on how to prevent, cope, and eliminate creative burnout. A 22-question online survey was distributed via email and anonymous link. 90 survey responses granted significant results and great insight into burnout causes and effects in creative individuals. 3 semi-structured interviews were conducted in-person and online via Zoom. Participants were recruited via email and chosen based on their level of design experience. The interviews granted significant insight into individual burnout, coping methods, and potential preventative strategies. Results of the study indicate participants experience burnout symptoms such low motivation, anxiety, and irritability due to work, personal expectations, failure, and school. Preventative measures include spending time with family/ friends, physical activity, and playing/ listening to music. Further research should experiment with suggested burnout prevention methods to understand the effectiveness more accurately in students and professionals.*

*Keywords: Creative Burnout, Mental Health, Creative Professionals, Design Students, Academia.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Burnout among professional creatives is suppressing creativity and increasing job turnover. Burnout is described as, "a psychological syndrome that involves a prolonged response to chronic interpersonal stressors on the job (Hill et al., 2014a)," while creative burnout is more specifically described as, "the loss of the ability to generate novel and/or useful ideas and solutions to everyday problems, function confidently as a contributing member of a creative team, and maintain faith in the creative process for yourself (Hantula, 1998)." This condition has been observed among various creative fields and is proven to affect students as well as practicing professionals. Burnout is known to have a greater impact on creatives due to their need to recharge creativity.

The purpose of this study is to better understand creative burnout among students and professionals to further evaluate and implement changes within creative professions. Methods for achieving these results include conducting secondary research utilizing the databases and search engines available through Kansas State University, an online survey, and semi-structured interviews.

## 1.1 CAUSES OF BURNOUT

Various studies reported causes such as high distraction, uncontrollability, multitasking, unrealistic expectations, and dysfunction, but perhaps one of the largest contributions is work-life imbalance. Among a poor work to life ratio, people such as executives, professors, and clients greatly contribute to the previously mentioned causes and are quite possibly the root issue (Espedido et al., 2018; Hill et al., 2014a; Hill et al., 2014b; Pueschel et al., 2018). Constant expectation from superiors paired with ever-changing market trends and impatient clients bring a lot of designers to their breaking point. Creative individuals pursuing a professional career find themselves in a service-oriented profession, emotionally investing in projects from unappreciative clients with little patience and tight budgets (Hill, 2014a).

## 1.2 SYMPTOMS AND EFFECTS OF BURNOUT

As a result of these high-pressure environments creatives experience cynicism, early onset mental disorders, little confidence, and extreme levels of exhaustion (Hantula, 1998; Hill, 2014a; Hill, 2014b). These effects are often reported higher in young designers as they have high ambition but little confidence in themselves. According to various studies, these short-term symptoms can ultimately lead to long-term medical conditions including coronary heart disease, circulatory issues, sleep disturbances, substance abuse, depression, and anxiety (Hill et al., 2014a). As a result, professionals are leaving their 'successful' design careers in exchange for seemingly less successful fields to sustain a better quality of life.

## 1.3 STRATEGIES TO MEASURE, ADDRESS, & PREVENT BURNOUT

There are a variety of tools to evaluate burnout including psychotherapy, the Heuristic evaluation, and the preferred MBI-General Survey (Ju, 2021). The official MBI-General Survey categorizes burnout by three factors: exhaustion, cynicism, and professional efficacy (Hill et al., 2014a). Participants receive 16 statements representing the three previously mentioned categories, and rate how often they experience the statement. The averaged results are compared to a set of standardized ratings and the participant is then given a burnout rating of low, moderate, or high based on their results (Hill, 2014b). Preventative measures can be taken both at a systematic and personal level. Academically, professors could help reduce the encouragement of burnout culture. "…educators may need to reassess the studio culture of long work hours and 'all-nighters' … Does the exhaustion from school carry over to their early careers and become an expected 'norm' to their detriment? (Hill, 2014b)." Employers can encourage employees to practice better balance between work and home life and take further preventative measures to protect employees from unreasonable client expectations (Hill, 2014b). Personal preventative strategies such as energy management, stress management, mental exercises, self-monitoring/ screening/ care, and a proper work-life balance suggest reduced burnout levels and higher job satisfaction (Hantula 1998; Hill, 2014a; Ju, 2021; Pueschel et al., 2018).

1.4 POSITIVE RESULTS OF REDUCING BURNOUT

Increasing awareness and reducing burnout levels pose many significant benefits to individuals and design professions. Creative benefits included recharged creativity, highly creative environments, sustainable creativity, and healthy stress levels within creativity (Byron et al., 2010; Hantula, 1998; Hill et al., 2014b). Personal benefits include feelings of freedom, stronger relationships, personal growth, improved mental health, smarter use of energy and higher renewal of energy, and increased job/ life satisfaction (Hill et al., 2014a; Ju, 2021; Pueschel et al., 2018).

1.5 FUTURE DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS REGARDING MENTAL HEALTH & BURNOUT

Understanding burnout is vital to creating new systems and products. Personal energy sources and consumption must be considered, as a proper balance is required to avoid burnout. To obtain positive results, types of stress and their negative implications must also be addressed, understanding cognitive stressors and divergent thinking tasks as well as the concept that low stress increases performance and high stress decreases performance (Espedido et al., 2018).

1.6 FINDINGS

Gaps in current research provide opportunities for continued exploration in academia, the workplace, and culture/mindset shifts to prevent burnout encouragement. Future research should analyze workplace environments across multiple professions and compare results. Environments with highly satisfied employees should be noted, and their strategies potentially implemented. Future design direction should include in-depth analysis of current projects on the market as well as multiple surveys and user studies. Students should be a major focus as they are reported to experience higher levels of burnout and are the future generation of creative professionals. Opportunities for products should focus on encouraging creativity and enabling the user to recharge.

## 2. SURVEY

2.1 PURPOSE OF THE SURVEY

Creative burnout is caused by various lifestyle requirements and produces mild to severe symptoms. Current strategies to measure, address, and prevent burnout are not properly implemented to achieve reported positive results. Future design considerations regarding mental health and burnout will utilize existing strategies to properly address and implement preventative strategies to reduce burnout levels. The purpose of the survey is to evaluate burnout levels within creative individuals to gain insight on personal causes, effects, prevention, and coping strategies.

2.2 METHODOLOGY

A 22-question survey was distributed online to a group of ~275 individuals via email and anonymous link. The survey granted significant results from participants in various creative fields with varying levels of experience. A thematic analysis was conducted to analyze the data. The survey was distributed to creative students, professors, and professionals in the United States. Participants were recruited utilizing

existing faculty email lists from Kansas State University, as well as snowball recruitment strategies via anonymous email in various student group chats. The survey plan was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Kansas State University (IRB protocol number: 11092).

2.3 PARTICIPANTS

The inclusion criteria are as follows: 1) Design students, professors, and professionals at least 18 years of age and 2) reside in the United States. In total, 144 participants were recruited by email and an unknown number recruited through anonymous links and snowball recruitment strategies. Participants were recruited to represent a variety of creative disciplines. Of the total 113 responses, 90 responses completed over 80% of the survey and were used for the survey analysis. See Table 1 for specific participant information regarding profession.

| Area of Study/ Profession | # of Participants |
|---|---|
| Architecture | 27 |
| Interior Architecture | 22 |
| Industrial/ Product Design | 13 |
| Other | 11 |
| Interior Design | 5 |
| Landscape Architecture | 5 |
| Graphic Design | 2 |
| **Total** | **85** |

Table 1. Participant's current profession or area of study

2.4 RESULTS

Specific categories such as Typical Work-Week Hours, Burnout Causes and Symptoms, as well as Coping with Burn Out and Burn Out Culture proved especially interesting areas of responses.

*Typical Weekly Work to Life Balance:* 43.53% of participants reported working over 40 hours a week, with most of the responses landing between 45-60 hours a week. 24.71% of participants spend more
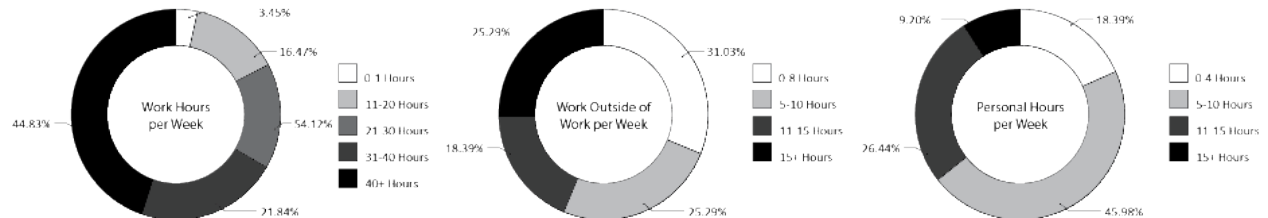


Fig. 1. Work hours per week; work hours outside of work; personal hours

than 15 extra hours a week working outside of normal hours. In contrast, 64.71% of participants spend between 0-10 hours a week on personal activities outside of work/ school (see Fig. 1.). This reports evidence of a drastic work-life imbalance which is a leading cause of burnout.

*Burnout Causes and Symptoms:* 83.53% of participants felt burnt out at least 1 day during the work week (see Figure 2.). Of those participants, most experienced burn out on Mondays, Thursdays, and Fridays (see Figure 3.), with low motivation, anxiety, and irritability being the most common symptoms (see Figure 4). Top causes for
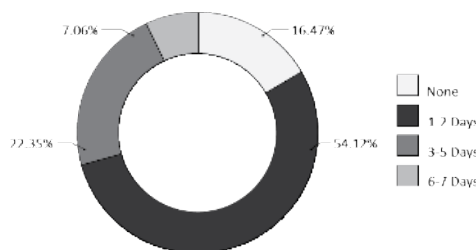


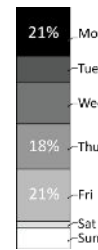Figure 2. Number of days of the week participants feel burnt out



Figure 3. Days of the week participants feel burnt out

participant burnout include school, work, internal/personal expectations, and failure (see Figure 5). Data suggests academia and creative work environments are a leading contributor to burnout and pose a
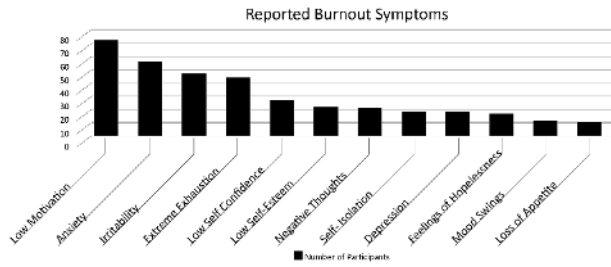


Figure 4. Burnout Symptoms



Figure 5. Burnout Causes

large opportunity for preventative strategies.

*Coping with Burn Out:* Participants primarily do physical activity, spend time with family/friends, and play/listen to music to relieve stress (see Figure 6). 55.29% of participants disagreed to some degree with the statement, "I am completely satisfied with my balance between work/school and my home life. (see Figure 7)." 63.53% of participants agreed to some degree with the statement, "Design is a lifestyle. (see Figure 8)." Findings suggest creatives feel consumed by their work and desire change.

*Overview of Qualitative Data:* Responses were analyzed using a thematic analysis. Three themes evolved as a result: Causes of



Figure 6. Reported Burnout Coping Strategies



| 13% | 42% | | 28% | |
|---|---|---|---|---|

Strongly Disagree · Somewhat Disagree · Neither agree nor disagree · Somewhat Agree · Strongly Agree

Figure 7. Satisfaction with work to life balance



| | | | 45% | 19% |
|---|---|---|---|---|

Strongly Disagree · Somewhat Disagree · Neither agree nor disagree · Somewhat Agree · Strongly Agree

Figure 8. "Design is a lifestyle."

Creative Burnout, Burnout Preventative Strategies, and Personal Burnout Coping Strategies.

*Causes of Creative Burnout:* Participants reported feeling design culture is subjective, comparative, toxic, overworked and overstressed. Creative academia is perceived as toxic and glorifying unhealthy behaviors, leading to expectations of students sacrificing their health for design excellence. On individual levels participants reported feelings of a life-consuming culture with expectations to give one's whole self to their work in fear of accusations of not being passionate enough. Participants feel pressured to constantly be accessible and creative regardless of personal sacrifice, and good is never good enough. This allows little to no time for personal creativity and space to recharge.

*Burnout preventative strategies:* Participants reported utilizing do-not-disturb settings on technological devices, separating work/ school devices from personal devices, to-do lists, and creating a set time to turn off work devices or remove oneself from completing work tasks.
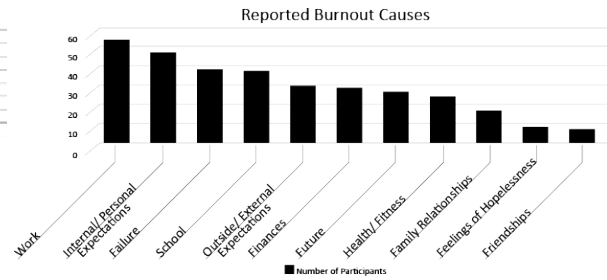
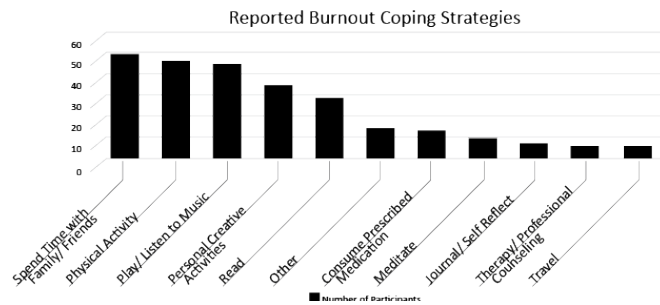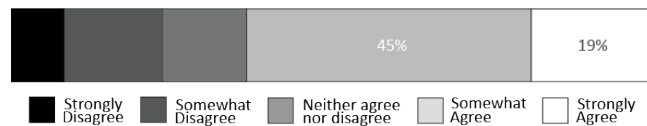*Personal burnout coping strategies:* Participants reported individual strategies such as watching television or social media, playing music, reading, taking days off, as well as basic health needs such as getting adequate sleep and staying active. On a creative level participants reported journaling and creating music. Relationally participants reported socializing with friends, cultivating friendships within the workplace, being intentional with personal relationships, and expressing stress rather than internalizing. Participants also expressed setting boundaries such as not working from home or in certain rooms, setting communication standards with ranking superiors, reducing notifications on technological devices, and setting aside days or periods of time to rest.

## 2. SUMMARY

Results conclude participants feel burnt out at least 1 day of the week, experiencing symptoms such as low motivation, anxiety, and irritability caused by work, personal expectations, fear of failure, and school. Reported coping strategies include spending time with family/ friends, physical activity, and playing/ listening to music.

## 3. INTERVIEW

### 3.1 PURPOSE OF THE INTERVIEW

The purpose of the interview is to gain insight on personal burnout and how it affects creative individuals with varying levels of experience. Mild symptoms from creative burnout can quickly develop into severe symptoms due to poor implementation of preventative strategies. Future design considerations regarding mental health and burnout should utilize existing strategies to properly address and implement changes to reduce overall burnout levels and produce positive results.

### 3.2 METHODOLOGY

A series of semi-structured interviews were conducted in-person at Kansas State University as well as online via Zoom. The interviews granted significant insight regarding creative burnout amongst creative individuals with varying levels of experience. Responses were analyzed using a thematic analysis.

### 3.3 DATA COLLECTION

Participants were recruited via email and chosen based on their level of experience, representing students as well as successful design professionals. Participants include a second-year Industrial Design student (PA 1), a fifth-year graduate Industrial Design student (PA 2), and a working Industrial Design professional with over five years of experience at a large active-wear company (PA 3). Data was stored on a password protected laptop's One Drive file. The interview plan was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Kansas State University (IRB protocol number: 11092).

## 3.4 DATA ANALYSIS

A detailed thematic analysis was conducted to analyze and report the data. Multiple themes evolved as a result: Factors Participants Enjoy/Dislike, System Acknowledgment of Burnout, Personal Burnout Symptoms and Strategies, and Suggested System Preventatives.

## 3.5 RESULTS

*Factors Participants Enjoy/Dislike:* PA 1 enjoys the hands-on learning environment and ability to hand craft projects while PA 2 enjoys the day-to-day task variety and family environment. PA 3 enjoys working with athletes, seeing the final product enable better performance, and combining personal passions to create. All participants enjoy the scale of product design.

Student participants report disliking the high level of expectations, often unclear, the overly competitive environment and little design freedom. PA 3 dislikes the overall subjectiveness of design.

*System Acknowledgment of Burnout:* PA 1 reports burnout is acknowledged in a humorous way and not taken seriously with no action taken. PA 2 reports professors are disappointed in students, often asking to sacrifice outside activities such as work to meet deadlines. Academia leaves it up to students to cope instead of providing ways to help them succeed. In contrast, PA 3 reports burnout is acknowledged and preventative steps are taken within their workplace. They can communicate with their superiors and receive help. They value employee feedback and implement preventative strategies such as tracking workload, periodic surveys, and designated meeting-free days.

*Personal Burnout Symptoms and Strategies:* Students report increased stress and anxiety, exhaustion, irritability, a wandering mind, low motivation, sleep disturbances, difficulty socializing/communicating, and no energy to complete personal projects key to recharging their creativity. In contrast, PA 3 reports little experience with burnout but instead feels underworked, leading to similar symptoms such as feeling uninspired and unmotivated. PA 3 also states designers within their work environment experience burnout but is potentially self-inflicted due to high internal expectations over reasonable external expectations. Reported preventative strategies include planning in advance, compartmentalizing schedules, surrounding oneself with people outside of design, staying physically active, and disconnecting from technology. PA 3 reports focusing on the bigger picture rather than the details, connecting back to the end goal, and focusing on the end user's needs.

*Suggested System Preventatives:* Preventative strategies at an academia level include having classes with interlocking assignments, collaborative projects between upper and lower year students, and one on one meetings to discuss outside commitments and create more reasonable expectations. They suggest creating interdisciplinary lounge spaces for students to socialize, rest, prepare food, etc. On a professional level, PA 3 suggests seeking ways to break up work and de-load when a team member's plate is too full. Multiple participants proposed including regular wellness days.

## 3.6 SUMMARY

Participants enjoy the hands-on creative nature of design however dislike the unreasonable expectations and competitive nature. This leads to high exhaustion, extreme stress, and low motivation.

Participants partake in various activities to relieve burnout such as physical activity, task organization, and socializing. Opportunities for burnout prevention include more collaboration within academia, clearer expectations between student and professor, open communication, and spaces for rest and socializing within design communities. Burnout is felt at both an academic and professional level, however it is significantly more evident in students.

## 4.  DISCUSSION

Future studies should further experiment with suggested burnout prevention methods to better understand what strategies are effective in combating creative burnout. Studies should include creative individuals with varying degrees of experience and monitor burnout before, during, and after suggested strategies have been applied. Studies should separate students from working professionals to better understand the causes and effects of burnout in specific creative environments, allowing for better creation and implementation of preventative/coping strategies. Future products should consider encouraging mindless creativity and allowing the user to focus on recharging their creativity.

## 5.  CONCLUSION

Key findings from the survey show most participants experience creative burnout and have a poor work to life balance caused by work, personal expectations, failure, and school, resulting in low motivation, anxiety, irritability, and extreme exhaustion. Coping mechanisms include time with family/ friends, physical activity, playing/ listening to music, and personal creative activities. Interview results reported participants enjoy the hands-on creative nature of design but dislike the competitiveness, high expectation, and perfectionism. Potential areas for improvement include more collaboration within academia, clearer expectations between student and professor, and spaces for rest and socializing within design communities. Product opportunities should focus on recharging creativity and reducing creative barriers.

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