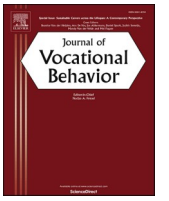
Journal of Vocational Behavior 163 (2025) 104181



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Vocational Behavior

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jvb



Emergence of calling in the domain of creative work, and the role of context: The stories of manga artists

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Calling
Context
Creative work
Nonstandard work
Passion
Careers

ABSTRACT

Despite growing attention to calling and its benefits for workers and organizations, little is known regarding how calling emerges in the domain of creative work as a distinct type of nonstandard work, and how context shapes its emergence. To address this knowledge void, we offer a unique qualitative study of the career journey of Japanese manga artists who draw manga and view creative work as their calling. We show that manga artists' calling emerges through the gradual enactment of their existential passion for drawing manga, beginning in their formative years, and is intertwined with and mutually reinforced by multi-layered validation—e.g., social circle, professional, and continuous validation. In their career journey, we demonstrate that context operates dually, both constraining and enabling the emergence of calling. Based on these insights, we theorize a model and show manga artists' transition from a metaphorical 'shell'—symbolizing an initial solitary existence—toward breaking free as their existential passion is enacted and their professional calling emerges. We finally contribute to the literature on calling by offering insights into creative work and foregrounding the crucial role of context in shaping the emerge of calling.

1. Introduction

> *Without manga, my life would have little meaning. I was saved by manga, and it was manga that supported me during the most critical period of my adolescence […] When I realized that I could draw manga, I wondered whether my life was devoted to it.*
>
> *(Makiko, Japanese manga artist)*

In the quote above, our interviewee expresses that working as a professional manga artist has brought fulfillment to her life, making her realize this is what she always wanted to do. This feeling toward her work and career aligns with the concept of calling, that we define here as a belief that one is destined to engage in a particular domain of work to leverage their unique gifts, passions, and talents (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009). While calling has gained prominence due to its benefits for individuals and organizations (Dobrow,

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2025.104181
Received 31 January 2024; Received in revised form 9 June 2025; Accepted 29 September 2025
Available online 9 October 2025
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Weisman, Heller, & Tosti-Kharas, 2023; Duffy, Bott, Allan, Torrey, & Dik, 2012; Thompson & Bunderson, 2019), scholars have emphasized the need to better understand the process leading to the emergence of calling—e.g., in recent special issues (Lysova et al., 2023; Lysova et al., 2019) and literature reviews (Schabram, Nielsen, & Thompson, 2023; Thompson & Bunderson, 2019).

A couple of studies tried to explain the emergence of calling through exploring how individuals engage in sensemaking of cues—e.g., by quickly recognizing an attraction to a particular domain, experiencing a growing sense of alignment with it (Sturges, Clinton, Conway, & Budjanovcanin, 2019) or listening to their emotions (Schabram & Maitlis, 2017). In turn, Bloom, Colbert, and Nielsen (2021) illuminated how calling emerges as a result of identity construction—e.g., through a destiny-driven path focused on self-discovery or an exploratory path involving trial and error with various professions. These valuable insights have been further enriched by knowledge on the predictors of calling (Dalla Rosa, Vianello, & Anselmi, 2019; Dobrow, 2013; Duffy, England, Douglass, Autin, & Allan, 2017), with a specific focus on disruptive or serendipitous life events (Afiouni & Karam, 2019; Ahn, Dik, & Hornback, 2017; Conklin, 2012). While this research has signalled that the emerge of calling is shaped by context, such as the cues or support one derives from the environment (Dalla Rosa et al., 2019; Sturges et al., 2019) or a priori immersion in the calling domain (Dobrow, 2013; Sturges et al., 2019), the role of context in shaping the emergence of calling remains surprisingly undertheorized. This is problematic as context is critical for understanding the occurrence and meaning of individuals' behavior within organizations (Johns, 2006, 2018) and particularly, careers and vocational behavior (Gunz & Mayrhofer, 2021; Mayrhofer, Meyer, & Steyrer, 2007). What's more, the changing nature of work—reflected in the growing presence of nonstandard work and traditionally defined in line with limited contractual obligations, flexible schedules, and decentralized work environments (Ashford, George, & Blatt, 2007; Bolino, Kelemen, & Matthews, 2021; Okhuysen et al., 2013)—calls for attention to the role of context in relation to work and careers. Critically, nonstandard work is often deemed precarious (Spreitzer, Cameron, & Garrett, 2017; Spurk & Straub, 2020), limiting workers' ability to meet essential life needs (Karpman, Loprest, & Hahn, 2022). Beyond this traditional definition, an alternative conceptualization highlights nonstandard work as not only precarious but also characterized by the absence of a clear career path, the necessity of natural talents, and the opportunity for individual self-expression.

While there is limited knowledge about how calling emerges for workers in nonstandard employment, we know even less about the context of the creative industry in shaping calling; this context often "exemplif[ies] nonstandard employment" (Adler, 2021, p. 208) because of its connection with precariousness (Gotsi, Andriopoulos, Lewis, & Ingram, 2010; Lingo & Tepper, 2013) but also lacks a clear professionalization path, such as in the case of influencers (Trittin-Ulbrich & Glozer, 2024), or video game designers (Lysova & Khapova, 2019). Despite the challenges, many creative workers gain intrinsic rewards, including heightened fulfillment and a stronger sense of meaningfulness (Bennett & Hennekam, 2018; Hoedemaekers, 2018; Lysova & Khapova, 2019). Research indicates, for instance, that musicians' sense of calling can contribute to their career success (Dobrow & Heller, 2015), and drives them to reject discouraging career advice (Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2012). This sense of calling may explain the growth of the creative workforce. In the United Kingdom, the number of creative workers reached 2.3 million in 2021, representing "a 49% increase since 2011" (UK Government, 2023, p. 4). Similar trends can be seen across European and Asia Pacific economies, where over 20 million creative workers are "likely to be a key driver of economic growth over the long term" (Deloitte, 2021, p. 5).

Taken together, we lack knowledge on the emergence of calling in the domain of creative work as a specific type of nonstandard work and, more broadly, the role of context in explaining the emergence of calling. To address these shortcomings, flagged as problematic in the calling literature (Lysova et al., 2019), in this article we ask: *how does calling emerge in the domain of creative work as a distinct type of nonstandard work, and how does context shape its emergence?*

In a bid to respond to this question, we collected qualitative data from 27 Japanese manga artists who recognize their work as their calling. Manga work is particularly relevant as a unique yet underexamined type of creative work; it is often demanding, involving challenging working hours, limited job security (Kinsella, 2000; Schodt, 1996), but also requiring exceptional drawing skills, with only a few artists securing stable positions (Schodt, 1983; Tanaka, 2020). Yet, drawing manga provides artists with a platform to express their personalities and emotions (Shamoon, 2009), and encourages them to help others (Drazen, 2014; Galbraith, 2019; Moscato, 2017).

Hence, our article delivers a threefold contribution to the calling literature.

We first theorize a model elucidating the process through which calling emerges in the domain of creative work as a specific type of nonstandard work, and how context shapes its emergence. Within this model, we emphasize that calling emerges through the enactment of creative workers' passion; this is intertwined with and mutually reinforced by multi-layered validation, commencing in formative years of creative workers and persisting throughout their careers. In doing so, we demonstrate that context plays a pivotal and dualistic role in the emergence of calling for creative workers, showing that it can act as both a limitation (e.g., through precariousness and negative perceptions of the professions)—and as an enabler, when it provides critical social resources that validate their efforts (e.g., through social, professional, and continuous validation).

Second, we bring to the fore the criticality of passion as the catalyst for the emergence of creative workers' calling. While we identify passion as the driving force behind creative workers' proactive efforts toward becoming called professionals, we delineate a distinction between passion and calling, inviting deeper reflection on their differences as well as their points of convergence. Against this backdrop, we also prompt considerations about whether passion might become a double-edged sword in the world of work, potentially leading to abuse and exploitation.

Finally, our study broadens understanding of the contextualized nature of calling, responding to calls for evidence from within less understood work domains and sociocultural settings (Lysova et al., 2019; Schabram et al., 2023). Through the case of manga artists, we shed light on the challenges of creative work due to its nonstandard nature, explaining how context—in the form of a) the opportunities it provides in a professional environment, b) social setting, and c) the nonstandard nature of employment—can have a significant impact on the emergence of creative workers' calling.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. The emergence of calling and the role of context

Despite its initial definition as a sense of duty and sacrifice resulting from God as an external caller (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Novak, 1996), calling is now seen as a modern and secular concept associated with work that aligns with an individual's sense of self, inner fulfillment and passion (Dik & Shimizu, 2019; Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2012). Calling results from an introspective journey marked by deep reflection and self-discovery (Berg, Grant, & Johnson, 2010; Duffy & Sedlacek, 2007; Wrzesniewski, 2002; Wrzesniewski, Dutton, & Debebe, 2003) that allows for the exploration of purpose (Dalla Rosa & Vianello, 2020; Fontana, Frandsen, & Morsing, 2023; Hall & Chandler, 2005). Although the debates on the conceptualization of calling continue to prevail (Dik & Shimizu, 2019; Thompson & Bunderson, 2019), given the focus on creative work that is often grounded in one's creative passion, we draw here on Bunderson and Thompson's (2009) definition of calling as a belief that one is destined to engage in a particular domain of work to leverage their unique gifts, passions, and talents. In this way, calling remains distinct from simply having a job (Wrzesniewski, 2002) because it is tied to a work domain that is performed as an end in and of itself (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009) and needs to be lived to create personal and career meaningfulness (Buis, Kluemper, Weisman, & Tao, 2024; Duffy & Autin, 2013; Feiler, 2023; Lysova & Khapova, 2019).

Scholars highlight that workers who live their calling experience important positive outcomes, including greater job satisfaction (Duffy et al., 2012), wellbeing (Dobrow et al., 2023), and lower turnover intentions (Cardador, Dane, & Pratt, 2011). Due to its relevance, scholars have investigated the difficulties workers encounter when they are unable to live their calling. Berg et al. (2010) for example, introduce 'unanswered calling' and distinguish "missed callings"—when workers identify their calling but are not able to pursue it—from "additional callings"—when workers feel they are living their calling but also feel drawn to other work domains. This distinction is significant because workers with missed callings often experience a strong desire to fulfill them, leading to dissatisfaction in their current occupation, whereas workers with additional callings seek fulfillment in complementary activities beyond their main occupation.

Despite the evidence on the implications for workers who live their calling, scholars have long asked for more theorizing on how calling emerges and it is shaped by context, especially for workers involved in nonstandard professions (Lysova et al., 2019). Concerning the emergence of calling, existing research insights highlight that calling may emerge through sensemaking (Schabram & Maitlis, 2017; Sturges et al., 2019) or a process of identity construction (Bloom et al., 2021). Specifically, in their study of ministers of religion, Sturges et al. (2019) suggest that calling often begins to manifest during childhood, shaped by the extraction of cues and periods of reflection. They observe that while some individuals quickly interpret these cues as an attraction to a specific work domain, others experience "a growing feeling" that gradually unfolds into their calling, involving "a sequence of cues, and protracted sensemaking over years" (p. 65). Through their example of animal shelter workers, Schabram and Maitlis (2017) also indicate that calling emerges in association with emotional responses informing workers' sensemaking of their professional identities. Hence, calling is substantiated by emotions as part of a "guiding purpose" (p. 584). In turn, Bloom et al. (2021) study workers from various occupations and emphasize that calling emerges through either a destiny-focused path or an active exploratory path. For 'discerners'—those who believe their calling is tied to destiny and that they are drawn to a singular, true professional identity—calling emerges through self-discovery and introspection. Discerners view their calling as unchangeable, and any deviation from it can have negative effects on their well-being. They may feel distressed if they commit to what they believe is their true calling without fully developing their professional identity. In contrast, 'explorers'—those who see calling as the result of lived experience—believe that calling is discovered through trial and error, by engaging with different types of work until they find what resonates most with them. For explorers, professional identity is more flexible, and missing one calling is not problematic, as calling can always be rediscovered through further exploration.

To examine the emergence of calling, scholars have also analyzed the predictors of calling (Dalla Rosa et al., 2019; Dobrow, 2013; Esteves & Lopes, 2017), emphasizing the triggering role of life events, especially disruptive or serendipitous ones. Predictors include times of hardship (Afiouni & Karam, 2019), critical life occurrences (Ahn et al., 2017), and transformative experiences (Sturges et al., 2019). Personal inclinations, such as possessing natural talents or an aptitude for a specific type of work, have also been identified as key factors (Ahn et al., 2017; Conklin, 2012; Sturges et al., 2019). These predictors typically emerge earlier in life, supporting the idea that calling may be rooted in childhood experiences, with an interest in work that deepens over time through education, life experiences, and reflection (Conklin, 2012). More to the point, scholars have studied the outcome of working in domains that individuals do not see as their calling, including testing new professions (Ahn et al., 2017; Bloom et al., 2021; Esteves & Lopes, 2017).

Studies on the role of context in the calling literature remain scarce. A few scholars hint that calling develops when individuals find themselves in a context that enables them to immerse themselves in the calling domain (Dobrow, 2013; Sturges et al., 2019), often in childhood (Bloom et al., 2021; Sturges & Bailey, 2023), and when they receive social support (Dalla Rosa et al., 2019; Sturges et al., 2019). For instance, Afiouni and Karam (2019) pinpoint that facing contextual hardships and adversities trigger emotional reactions that impact the development of calling. Some insights on role of context are also presents during conversations of validation of calling identity (Bloom et al., 2021), especially for groups of workers where context has an important influence on their professional roles (Ibarra, 1999; Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006).

Despite the relevance of these insights, we know little of the role of context in influencing the emergence of calling, and the limited evidence is derived from the analysis of more traditional occupations, where professionalization paths are well-defined, such as for hospital staff, teachers, veterinary doctors, and animal shelter workers (Bloom et al., 2021; Esteves & Lopes, 2017; Schabram & Maitlis, 2017; Sturges et al., 2019). It is less clear how calling emerges for workers doing nonstandard work.

Work is traditionally defined as nonstandard when it has limited contractual obligations, flexible schedules, and decentralized work

environments (Ashford et al., 2007; Broschak & Davis-Blake, 2006; Okhuysen et al., 2013; Olsen & Kalleberg, 2004). In other words, it is nonstandard when it involves limited contractual relationships, more flexible physical locations, and it is often outsourced decision-making as opposed to being directly controlled by organizations (Ashford et al., 2007; Okhuysen et al., 2013; Spreitzer et al., 2017). While autonomy is often heralded as one key benefit (Olsen & Kalleberg, 2004), nonstandard work is often accompanied by precariousness (de Cuyper, Notelaers, & de Witte, 2009; Spreitzer et al., 2017; Spurk & Straub, 2020) and fewer opportunities for workers to address their insurance, housing, and food needs (Karpman et al., 2022). Moreover, nonstandard work often requires working beyond traditional 9-to-5, Monday through Friday schedules, with arrangements "that result in longer work shifts" (Bolino et al., 2021, p. 188).

Beyond the traditional definition, an alternative approach to conceptualizing nonstandard work could involve assessing the maturity of the work domain. This conceptualization treats nonstandard work as not only precarious but also lacking a clear career path, requiring natural talents, and offering an opportunity for individual self-expression.

Unlike nonstandard occupations such as Uber drivers (Beigi, Nayyeri, & Shirmohammadi, 2020), creative workers like influencers (Trittin-Ulbrich & Glozer, 2024), or video game designers (Lysova & Khapova, 2019) adopt nonstandard work arrangements in ways that challenge traditional understandings of occupations by being both their calling and helping them to derive a sense of meaningfulness. Therefore, we argue that examining the emergence of calling within the domain of creative work allows for a more profound understanding of nonstandard work, where precariousness, such as unstable income or fame, intersects with undefined career structures, the need for natural talents and the opportunity for self-expression.

2.2. Calling and creative work as an example of nonstandard work

Creative work often spans the realms of culture and performing arts (Taylor, 2012, p. 41) and fields such as "music, crafts, architecture, fashion and publishing" (UK Government, 2023, p. 42). At the same time, creative work is often categorized by scholars from different disciplines as "exemplify[ing] nonstandard employment" and involves nonstandard work arrangements (Adler, 2021, p. 208) because of its connection with precariousness (Gotsi et al., 2010; Lingo & Tepper, 2013; McRobbie, 2002). Creative workers often face unstable income, and the need to seek additional monetary sources for survival (Gotsi et al., 2010; Lingo & Tepper, 2013; McRobbie, 2002), and creative work is often linked to 'bad jobs' (Adler, 2021; Kalleberg, 2011). Alacovska, Fieseler, and Wong (2021), for instance, describe the difficult lives of creative freelancers who relocate to marginal places to sustain their work roles. Despite these challenges, creative workers are increasing in the United Kingdom (UK Government, 2023) and across major European and Asia Pacific economies (Deloitte, 2021). One key driver behind the growth of creative work is that it offers exceptional benefits to those engaging in it. While some sociologists refer to creative work as a "labor of love" (Menger, 1999, p. 554), scholars illustrate how creative workers feel especially attached to their work and careers for its fulfilling aspects (Bennett & Hennekam, 2018; Hoedemaekers, 2018; Lysova & Khapova, 2019). For instance, Brooks and Daniluk (1998) highlight how women artists' struggles ultimately lead to deep career satisfaction and a stronger sense of self.

In line with it, research on musicians (e.g., Dobrow, 2013; Dobrow & Heller, 2015; Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2012) describes calling toward music work as "a consuming, meaningful passion people experience toward a domain" (Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2011, p. 2002). Scholars link musicians' calling to success (Dobrow & Heller, 2015) and their tendency to disregard discouraging career advice (Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2012).

Calling of creative workers has also been explored with video game founders, and discussed as "an enduring, compelling, and meaningful urge to engage in creative work (e.g., designing video games) that delivers the best possible and valuable experiences for other people" (Lysova & Khapova, 2019, p. 36). Lysova and Khapova (2019) reveal that with limited career structures and job resources, video game founders live their calling through individual improvisation—via emergent entrepreneurship—and collective improvisation—by connecting with like-minded individuals—and is sustained through anchoring to either an idealized work identity—emphasizing the importance of working as independent and autonomous artists creating unique games—or a crafted work identity—adapting an early and idealized view of themselves to the realities of the work. Despite the insights, Lysova and Khapova's (2019) contribution is mostly focused how a calling is lived as opposed to how it emerges.

Importantly, evidence around creative work discusses calling by alluding to the presence of a genuine passion shared by creative workers toward their work. Video game founders, for instance, experience a deep passion for video games since childhood (Lysova & Khapova, 2019).

While understanding the link between creative work and calling has theoretical potential, studies on the emergence of calling for creative workers are limited, as is the role of the context in the process of calling emergence; as a result, most scholars focus on the implications of calling once it has already emerged. We address this knowledge void by delving into the quotidian work and career experiences of Japanese manga artists.

3. Research methods

3.1. Manga artists' careers between creativity, instability, and the desire to help others

Manga refers to Japanese serial comics, a literary medium and a cultural resource with widespread international appeal (Moscato, 2017; Tanaka, 2020). Manga combines different genres, such as *shounen manga* (boys manga) or *shoujo manga* (girls manga), and bundles Japanese art (e.g., woodblock prints like *ukiyo-e*) with American cartoons (MacWilliams, 2009; Matanle, McCann, & Ashmore, 2008).

Drawing manga is creative work that requires talent and sensitivity. Manga artists often have a "unique personal vision" capable of capturing the audience's attention (Schodt, 1996, p. 136). This creative work provides manga artists with an avenue to showcase their personalities and articulate deep emotions (Shamoon, 2009), including cultivating *moe*, and a sense of affection with fictional characters (Galbraith, 2019; Schodt, 2011).

Nonetheless, the career of manga artists often remain precarious, it lacks a clear career path and requires exceptional skills. Most manga artists require years of practice before and after being recruited by publishing houses (Schodt, 1996; Tanaka, 2020) where they seek inspiration to develop new ideas (Tamaki, 2011). Monetary rewards often remain minimal, with only very few succeeding financially. In turn, many manga artists in Japan lead relatively obscure lives and grapple with semi-poverty; they face harsh conditions, marked by short-term contracts and long working hours as they strive to gain and sustain recognition (Kinsella, 2000). Schodt (1983) reports that: "it is not uncommon for [manga] artists to sleep only four or five hours a night" (p. 138) and "most agreements between artist and publisher are still based on trust, not contracts" (p. 139). Fujiko F. Fujio, the creator of *Doraemon*, a children's manga, captured well the essence of manga work in an interview: "The manga artist as a profession is glamorized, but it's unstable work. When your work doesn't sell, you have no money. When it sells, you have no time to use your money […]" (Schodt, 1996, p. 220).

However, many manga artists love their work as a medium for self-expression, and want to help others. Many connect with readers emotionally, using narratives and aesthetics to discuss social issues (Takahashi, 2009), like gender diversity (Galbraith, 2019), and environmental issues (Drazen, 2014). For instance, the 2014 edition of *Oishinbo,* a cooking manga series, drew attention to the health hazards from the 2011 Touhoku earthquake, sparking debate in Japan (Moscato, 2017). Due to these characteristics, the career of manga artists can offer important insights into how calling for creative workers emerges, and how context shapes its emergence.

3.2. Research design

This article responds to the research question by adopting a qualitative research design. Qualitative studies are well poised to advance theoretical constructs and investigate complex data that reflect multiple existing realities (Gehman et al., 2017; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A qualitative research design is especially suitable for studying less understood phenomena, such as the emerging of calling (Ahn et al., 2017; Bloom et al., 2021; Conklin, 2012; Sturges et al., 2019) and nonstandard work (Ashford et al., 2007; Okhuysen et al., 2013; Spreitzer et al., 2017).

We collected data through formal interviews and notes from informal interviews between August 2018 and November 2023. We conducted individual and semi-structured online interviews with 27 manga artists for about 55 min on average (Table 1). Except for the interviews with Takeshi and Yukino (Table 1), conducted via messaging and email due to their schedules, all other interviews were recorded with the consent of the manga artists. We also did online interviews with five more manga artists who asked us not to record

Table 1
Sample of manga artists.

#	Name (***)	Education	Experience (years)	Age	Modality
1	Yuta	Undergraduate (Art - Manga)	10	34	Full time
2	Daisuke	High School	35	56	Full time
3	Haruki	Technical school (Design)	30	67	Full time
4	Saori	High School	25	46	Full time
5	Kenji	Undergraduate (Not Art)	35	57	Full time
6	Rintaro	Undergraduate (Not Art)	36	58	Part time
7	Aoki	Technical school (Art - Manga)	18	45	Full time
8	Yumi	Undergraduate (Not Art)	35	59	Full time
9	Ryohei	High School	40	60	Full time
10	Noriko	High School	(*)	55	Full time
11	Yoshio	Undergraduate (Fine Art)	13	37	Part time
12	Tomoyasu	Undergraduate (Not Art)	21	48	Full time
13	Ayako	Undergraduate (Fine Art)	30	60	Full time
14	Kiminari	Undergraduate (Not Art)	38	65	Full time
15	Yasutaka	Undergraduate (Fine Art)	41	61	Full time
16	Naomi	High School	38	55	Part time
17	Misako	Undergraduate (Not Art)	44	(*)	Part time
18	Hiromi	Undergraduate (Fine Art)	6	42	Full time
19	Manabu	Undergraduate (Not Art)	24	52	Part time
20	Makiko	Undergraduate (Art - Manga)	4	25	Full time
21	Takeshi	Undergraduate (Not Art)	31	50	Part time
22	Yukino	Undergraduate (Art - Manga)	4	25	Full time
23	Shoichi	Undergraduate (Art - Manga)	13	35	Full time
24	Ayame	Junior College (Fine Art)	24	52	Part time
25	Tomotake	Undergraduate (Not Art)	30	58	Part time
26	Motoshi	Undergraduate (Not Art)	25	53	Part time
27	Harue	Undergraduate (Fine Art)	5	30	Part time
			25.1(**)	*49.4(**)*	

(*) Preferred not to answer; (**) Based on 26 of 27 inputs; (***) We adopted pseudonyms in compliance with nondisclosure agreements.

their voices. We did not include these five manga artists in the sample, but they permitted us to take notes that we used to inform our analysis.

The length of these unrecorded interviews was comparable to the recorded ones. We also had five informal discussions with four editors from prominent manga publishing houses and a professor in Japan teaching manga, where we took notes about manga artists' work. One of us, a native Japanese speaker, completed the interviews in Japanese.

3.3. Theoretical sampling

To show rigor and establish an internally valid sample (Yin, 2013), we employed a combination of purposive and snowball sampling methods. Our inclusion criteria (Robinson, 2014) focused exclusively on professional manga artists, defined as individuals for whom drawing manga is their primary occupation, either on a part-time or full-time basis (Table 1). While manga is "deeply embedded in Japanese life," with many Japanese enjoying drawing and reading manga (Matanle et al., 2008, p. 642), only a few successfully pursue and sustain careers as manga artists (Schodt, 1996). To closely examine how calling emerges for creative workers, we focused on manga artists while choosing as important exclusion criteria not to consider amateur artists—such as teenagers, students, or manga enthusiasts—who engage in drawing manga as a leisure activity but do not pursue it as their primary occupation, whether due to personal choice or other reasons.

Purposive sampling was instrumental in making our sample more heterogeneous by recruiting manga artists with distinct backgrounds and experiences (Patton, 2002). This approach ensured diversity in terms of sex, education, career experience (years), and age, facilitating varied perspectives. For example, Yuta, a male manga artist with 10 years in the profession and an undergraduate degree in manga studies, offered different insights compared to Saori, a female manga artist with 25 years in the profession and a high school diploma (Table 1). Before officially inviting manga artists for interviews, we administered an 8-page preliminary questionnaire to each participant with the aim of ensuring rigor and the reliability of the sample. Using Dobrow and Tosti-Kharas's (2011) 12-item scale for measuring a sense of calling in artists, we calculated a score for each manga artist. We focused on the average score across the 12 items for each participant evaluated on a score per item between 1 and 7, ensuring it was higher than 4, as suggested by Dobrow and Tosti-Kharas (2011, p. 1014). Most participants had an average score closer to the higher end of the scale at 6, confirming that drawing manga was indeed their calling.

During the interviews, we employed the snowball sampling approach to contact a higher number of manga artists (Yin, 2013). As Table 1 shows, our final sample of manga artists consisted of 16 individuals identifying as male, 15 identifying as female, and one as 'other.'

On average, these artists had around 25 years of professional experience and were approximately 49 years old. Seventeen engaged in manga drawing as a full-time occupation, while 10 did so part-time. Their education varied, with some attending junior college, high school, technical school, and undergraduate studies. Five artists specifically studied manga, 6 studied fine art more generally, 10 pursued other subjects unrelated to art, and one (Haruki) studied design.

3.4. Data collection process

We divided the project into three phases. We dedicated the initial phase, spanning between August 2018 and April 2019, to project planning and compiling a participant list. Our first step involved gathering publicly available contact information from major manga publishing houses—e.g., *Weekly Shōnen Jump*, and *Ribon*. In December 2018, we contacted 7 editors from different manga publishing houses through phone calls. We engaged in 4 informal conversations with them, maintaining ongoing communication via email. Through these contacts, we secured the commitment of 1 manga artist. A prominent manga publishing house association consented to connect us with a more extensive pool of manga artists involved in manga production and teaching. We also informally conversed with a university professor in Japan who specialized in manga.

During the period from May to October 2019, we employed Qualtrics, an online survey tool, to implement the questionnaire designed by Dobrow and Tosti-Kharas (2011) and to complete the initial interviews. While we offered the questionnaire online from May 1 to July 16, we collected responses from 18 manga artists, and we interviewed 12 of them. We conducted recorded interviews with 7 manga artists and unrecorded interviews with 5 of them during this timeframe.

During the intermediate phase of the project between November 2019 and January 2020, we employed the snowball sampling method to enlist additional manga artists. Some like Saori, who had previously taken our questionnaire and sat for an interview, facilitated access to her network. This enabled us to administer the online questionnaire to 9 more manga artists and to interview them. With a total of 16 manga artists interviewed at this point, we temporarily paused the project in 2021 and 2022 to review the calling literature, provide an initial data analysis, and discuss between ourselves our research question.

During a final phase from May to November 2023, we continued to use the snowballing sampling approach then to reach out to 11 more manga artists. After administering the questionnaire and verifying their calling, we did interviews with them. We concluded the project upon reaching a point of theoretical saturation (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006) where data collection became unnecessary for explaining the emergence of calling in the domain of creative work, a type of nonstandard work.

3.5. Interview template

The initial phase of the project enabled us to develop a draft of the interview template, which we tested and refined based on feedback from informal conversations and interviews (Gehman et al., 2017). To facilitate a progression from descriptive inquiries

about the manga artists' upbringing and past experiences to more specific questions about their work and professional aspirations, we adopted three sets of questions, as visible in Appendix 1.

Similar to other studies (Lysova & Khapova, 2019) and due to the open nature of our research, we did not ask the manga artists about their calling. We started with broader inquiries about personal experiences that might have shaped their calling. These included questions like: "when did you start thinking of becoming a professional manga artist?" and "was there anything in your earlier years that made you want to become a professional manga artist?" We also directed questions toward their past aspirations to understand the emergence of their calling. We asked: "what was your dream before becoming a manga artist?" and "what talents, skills, and abilities needed for manga creation did you already have before you became a professional manga artist?"

Toward the middle of the interview, we asked the manga artists to elaborate on their career journey and the influence that family, friends, or colleagues might have had on these journeys. This is also where we acquired more information about the role of the context. We asked: "can you talk of how your career as a manga artist unfolded over time?" and "can you tell us more about the role that people, family, friends, or colleagues had on you during your career?"

Lastly, we inquired about the motivations that continue to drive manga artists in their creative work, exploring potential challenges and perceptions of the future. We included questions like: "How do you experience your current work? (e.g., challenges and satisfaction)" and "What social impact would you like to accomplish with your work going forward?" We took notes during and after the interview, capturing both relevant information and our own impressions.

3.6. Data analysis

The cultural diversity in our team—with Japanese and non-Japanese members—played a key role in maintaining field proximity while ensuring professional distance (Langley & Klag, 2019).

Upon reviewing the literature on the emergence of calling (Ahn et al., 2017; Bloom et al., 2021; Conklin, 2012; Sturges et al., 2019), we found a scarcity of evidence regarding the emergence of calling in the domain of nonstandard work, especially creative workers as a specific type of nonstandard work. Acknowledging this gap, we followed a three-step process of thematic analysis involving open coding—e.g., breaking down textual data into discrete parts—axial coding—e.g., drawing connections between codes and establishing relationships across the data—and selective coding—e.g., singling out central categories that encapsulate the essence of the data (Saldaña, 2021). The unique interview data provided us with insights into the lifelong experiences of manga artists, unraveling the factors contributing to the emergence of their calling and the role of context. We ensured intercoder reliability by coding the data independently before sharing our interpretations (Campbell, Quincy, Osserman, & Pedersen, 2013). We started by reading the interview passages iteratively and constructing a shared understanding of the data. Employing open coding, inspired by Alvesson and Kärreman's (2007) emphasis on what is 'surprising' in the data, we paid special attention to the manga artists' comments regarding their creative engagement with drawing manga. The resulting empirical themes mirrored the data as they were "associated with particular passages in interviews" (Dunne & Dougherty, 2016, p.140). For instance, our attention to recurring incidents in the data led to the identification of the empirical theme 'the manga artists have fond memories of drawing manga as children,' as they recounted positive childhood experiences with manga.

As we iterated between the interview data and continued to analyze the textual excerpts, it became evident that context played a crucial role, not only in shaping the manga artists' early aspirations to work in the manga industry, but also in how they evaluated their own abilities to draw. This pattern led us to cluster excerpts that spoke to the artists' perceptions of economic precarity, which often led to feelings of discouragement, and the intense competition within the Japanese manga industry, which fueled skepticism about the adequacy of their skills.

Building upon our initial empirical themes, we used axial coding to transition to a more theoretical level of interpretation. This step aimed to clarify abstract themes by identifying repetitions, excluding isolated incidents from the data, triangulating the raw data with our notes, and highlighting specific statements made by manga artists.

At this stage, as is usual in intercoder reliability processes (Campbell et al., 2013) we encountered differing interpretations of the data. We agreed on the recurring empirical themes from the interviews, but our views diverged on abstract themes, especially between the interviewing researcher and the authors primarily engaged with the analysis of the textual data. To reach an intercoder agreement, we followed the approach where "two or more coders are able to reconcile through discussion whatever coding discrepancies they may have" (Campbell et al., 2013, p. 297). Instead of favoring one interpretation over another, we sought complementary insights, considering all perspectives. For instance, the interviewing researcher emphasized the theme of a profound childhood craving to pursue a career in manga. This early desire not only illuminated the artists' intrinsic motivation toward their craft but also revealed how such sustained dedication contributed to the formation of their calling. Meanwhile, the other authors, while reviewing the data, noted childhood difficulties—particularly pervasive doubts shaped by the structural features of the manga industry, which stood in stark contrast to the manga artists' early aspirations—as an ongoing pattern in the artists' life, equally significant in constraining the earlier emergence of their calling. Ultimately, we reconciled our interpretations through discussion and combined them into two distinct abstract themes: 'Aspiration to work with manga' and 'lack of self-confidence.'

During the selective coding, our reference to the interview data enabled us to extrapolate new categories, and it became evident that the manga artists had a strong passion that was key in the emergence of their calling since their earlier years. This recognition converged for instance with some of Lysova and Khapova's (2019) findings from video game founders, which also hint at the importance of passion in creative work. Nonetheless, we also noted that, despite the adverse influence of their context, the manga artists proactively harnessed and sustained their existential passion for drawing manga over time. This insight led us to conceptualize two interrelated categories: the 'enactment' of the artists' existential passion for manga and 'multi-layered validation.' Both help

explain the timely emergence of their calling, and the role of context in offering importance social resources and in validating the manga artists' efforts.

The categories derived from selective coding contributed to the formulation of a model, subsequently discussed in Fig. 1. This model illustrates the step-by-step process by which calling emerges in the domain of creative work, a type of nonstandard work. Table 2 presents an overview of our thematic analysis.

3.7. Findings

Our study traces the career journey of manga artists, highlighting how their *existential passion* for the art—rooted in childhood and carried into adulthood—shapes this journey. We begin by uncovering the negative influence of the context of the Manga industry. As a highly *disputed context*, the manga industry in Japan often discourages young aspirants from viewing manga as a legitimate career path, framing it instead as an *elusive dream*. Despite these barriers, we show that the artists' *existential passion* for drawing manga is so central to their everyday lives that it drives them to continue creating manga, irrespective of external discouragement. The manga artists enact their existential passion and engage in a process of *multi-layered validation* through proactively reaching out to those in their context. From them, over time, they receive recognition, which enables their calling to gradually emerge and ultimately allows them to become *called professionals*. We provide more illustrative quote in Table 2.

3.8. Disputed context

Despite the cultural prominence and global reach of manga, our findings reveal that the context of the Japanese manga industry acts as a significant deterrent for aspiring artists. We identify two key factors that contribute to positioning manga work as disputed: first, the *precarious nature* of the manga industry itself, and second, the *negative perceptions* associated with manga as an exploitative profession.

3.8.1. Precarious nature

The nature of the Japanese manga industry was consistently described by the artists we interviewed as a significant deterrent, primarily due to its perceived precarity. A central feature of this precarity is the widespread association of manga labor with slim chances of financial stability and the expectation that pursuing a career as a manga artist entails a life marked by ongoing economic hardship. Several manga artists revealed their early awareness that choosing manga as a profession would not offer financial stability: “To put it bluntly, you don't have any money as a manga artist. It is quite difficult to make a living with a series of works (Harue).” and “If you easily feel financially insecure, you can't do this kind of work (Yasutaka).” Beyond financial insecurity, the manga artists also described a constant fear of competition that defines the manga industry. Even for those with exceptional drawing skills, the highly saturated nature of the field creates a pervasive sense of instability: “Everyone wants to be a manga artist and competition is high. In Japan, this is a job where you can't see the future. In that sense, you never know what will happen (Kenji).” These narratives highlight how the precariousness of manga work is not simply a side effect of early career struggles, but it is seen in Japan as a structural and enduring condition of the profession that artists must be prepared to endure throughout their careers. Tomoyasu's comment emphasizes the unfeasibility of survival without external support:

> I often heard the general opinion that you could not really make a living as a manga artist. My parents seemed worried, they asked me if I could actually survive by drawing manga. Looking back now, I think the idea that it would be difficult to make a living this way was ingrained in me.

3.8.2. Negative perceptions

The interviewed manga artists highlighted the negative perceptions of manga work in Japanese society, which contributed to their hesitation in pursuing it as a professional path. The manga industry was described as exploitative, demanding extreme working hours and placing artists under physical and psychological strain: “In Japan, people see professional manga artists as having to put a lot more physical effort (Kiminari).” The artists spoke of the accumulation of fatigue and deterioration of physical health due to the overwork that often accompanies a career in manga. Noriko offered a stark example, describing the broader cultural understanding that manga artists are expected to sacrifice their health for their art:

> Manga artists have a reputation for dying of stress, suddenly, at a young age. The exhaustion comes from constant sleep deprivation, the body does not have a chance to recover. While drawing manga has always been considered a tough job in Japan, it's also seen as physically punishing. You are expected to push your body beyond the limit.

These negative perceptions, compounded by the precarious nature of the manga industry, reinforced the idea that manga is an unsustainable and marginal form of labor. Importantly, these perceptions were further shaped by social expectations that prioritize stability, respectability, and conformity—values that render creative careers, and especially manga work, socially suspect. Many artists recalled being discouraged by family members, teachers, and peers when expressing their aspirations to become manga professionals. In here, the desire to work in manga was frequently dismissed as naïve or childish, rather than recognized as a serious career path: “I felt like I could not do it because I was told I should get a stable, normal job, not drawing manga (Tomoyasu).” Similarly, Misako described how her ambitions were publicly ridiculed and equated with low-status, morally questionable labor:

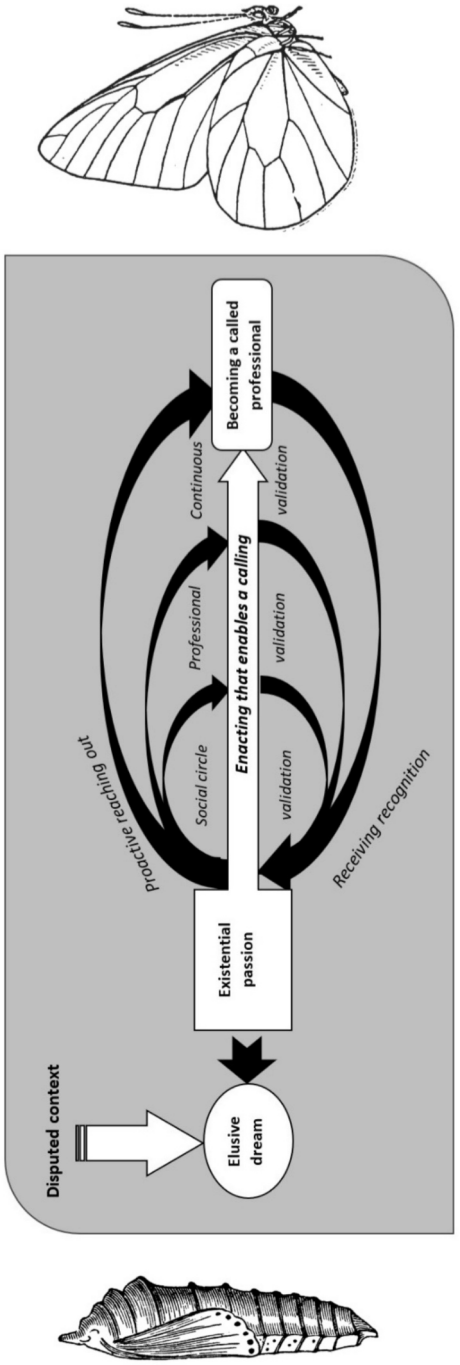


Fig. 1. The emergence of calling for manga artists, and the role of context.

Table 2
Thematic analysis.

Categories (selective coding)	Abstract themes (axial coding)	Empirical themes (open coding)	Representative quotes
Disputed context	Precarious nature	The manga artists are deterred from pursuing manga professionally due to its association with economic insecurity and high competition in Japan.	- The first thing you must do is switching your brains from the world of receiving hourly wages to the world of art [without salary]. Otherwise you won't be able to become a manga artist in Japan. (Daisuke) - Any company job can be unstable, but as a manga artist, competition is high and remuneration is uncertain. It is much tougher to be a manga artist in Japan [than doing any other work]. (Hiromi) - Before you can talk about dreams, you have to be able to eat. I just think that, if you are able to make a living [outside manga work], it can become a viable profession. But this is not a viable profession for many Japanese that don't already have some money. (Misako)
	Negative perceptions	The manga artists are discouraged from pursuing manga professionally due to its physically exhausting lifestyle and negative reputation in Japan.	- It's considered much more difficult than other jobs in Japan. Drawing manga is far more physically exhausting than, say, doing manual jobs like making bread. It feels pretty unreasonable for Japanese to work much harder and being rewarded less. (Ryohei) - When I graduated from high school, my parents told me I could not make a living by drawing manga. This put a lot of pressure on me (Manabu) - Japanese think it's bad to be different, and most Japanese manga artists are seen as out of place. If you worry about whether you are seen as strange, you cannot be a manga artist. (Misako)
Elusive dream	Aspirations to work with manga	The manga artists aspire to pursue a professional career in drawing manga since childhood.	- I think I had a latent desire to become a manga artist (Rintaro) - I always admired becoming a manga artist, so I thought that if I could become one, it would be the best (Aoki) - When I was in elementary school, I was asked about my dream [job] and I wrote that I wanted to be a manga artist (Haruki)
	Lack of self-confidence	The manga artists feel uncertain about their ability to pursue a professional career in drawing manga due to the perceived lack of skills.	- Since I was little, I thought it was natural to draw manga, but I did not have any confidence to become a manga artist because of my technique and abilities (Ayako) - I did not think I was good at drawing, and there were other children better than me […] A part of me thought that this [becoming a manga artist] could not happen in reality (Saori) - I was never satisfied with my work […] I loved drawing manga, but I didn't think I was particularly good at it (Rintaro)
Existential passion	Innate love	The manga artists feel that their passion for drawing manga has been with them for as long as they can remember.	- As far as I can remember, I have been thinking about becoming a manga artist. I talked with my father; he told me that I had already been talking about it even before elementary school (Makiko) - I think it's more like a coincidence. I was always in love with manga and started drawing (Yoshio) - I have longed to be a professional [manga] artist since I was a child (Ayame)
	Childhood memories	The manga artists have fond memories of drawing manga as children.	- Since I was a child, I liked drawing pictures […] Drawing is a pleasure for me. It was there from the beginning (Kenji) - I loved drawing in the first place, and my favorite class at school was drawing. Because I wanted to draw, one day I told my mother that I wanted all the tools, so she took me to buy them (Yasutaka) - Since I was little, I always drew pictures. I was the kind of child who was either drawing pictures or reading books (Noriko)
Enactment	Evading adversities	The manga artists experience challenging upbringings and drawing manga provides them with a sense of solace.	- When I was in elementary school, I was hospitalized due to a traffic accident […] An iron bar was inserted through my bones. I was bedridden. All I could do was get up and read books, write, draw pictures, draw manga […] I wanted to see the [manga] characters, and I could not

(*continued on next page*)

Table 2 (*continued*)

Categories (selective coding)	Abstract themes (axial coding)	Empirical themes (open coding)	Representative quotes
			help but want to read manga more and more (Daisuke) - The best time I had was when I drew manga, because I felt I didn't have to hurry, and I could relax (Ryohei) - When I was at home, I read books, listened to the radio, watched TV, and read manga. I just felt the connection. I spend a lot of my free time on the other side, the dreamlike world of manga, the world I admire. I was very impressed as a child that there is something that makes me feel liberated and let me enjoy myself (Saori)
	Cultivating a sense of specialness	The manga artists start to see their drawings as uniquely their own, enhancing their sense of significance.	- I stopped blaming myself for what [negative events] happened. It's kind of funny but I turned myself into one of those stupid characters. Laughing at yourself is rewarding, it makes you feel special (Ayako) - I felt a sense of specialness and pleasure as if what I wanted to express was taking shape, and I was drawing with joy for the first time with new materials (Hiromi) - When I drew a picture, all the people praised me. After all, isn't that what makes you happy? People started talking about how amazing this kid was (Daisuke)
Multi-layered validation	Social circle validation (first-layer)	The manga artists find the courage to display their work to friends and classmates who praised their abilities and helped them to gradually recognize their artistic talent.	- After high school, the number of people with the same interest in manga increased considerably, so I got comments [from my drawings] when we talked, like "I like this too", "something improved", or "let me see it again next time". This made me very excited (Aoki) - There was a third grader who drew a beautiful [manga] manuscript with pencils, it was really amazing […] At that time, I thought that I could make my debut despite the difference in ability and experience. It was the first manga work I had ever penciled and drawn, and for some reason, I started to think I could do it (Ayame) - I joined the Manga club at the university because I wanted to have time for manga […] I chose to be in an environment where professional manga artists were right in front of me and where I could reach out to them. This helped me make me aware of my skills and the world of manga (Manabu)
	Professional validation (second-layer)	The manga artists make a concrete effort to showcase their drawings in public spaces and reach out to manga editors and magazine companies until they eventually receive job offers.	- I continued to draw and joined the competitions. I accumulated a lot of work, and I made my own website to make everyone see [my work], as a repository of my pictures. I also posted there my own comics for others to see. Then a manga editor saw my work and approached me (Yoshio) - There were times when I thought that I might not be able to draw manga, that I might not be suited for it, but it was only at those times that I would get a call from an editor […] I cried when I got noticed that my work was selected as a semifinalist, I was very happy. I felt like I could make a new start (Makiko) - After contributing to doujinshi (fanzine), one editor asked me if I wanted to make my debut […] I met many experts at exhibitions [after contacting them] who made me excited. I was approached by seniors who offered me jobs. I met friends in such places, and if I did not participate, I probably would not be able to continue such hard work on my own (Saori)
	Continuous validation (third-layer)	The manga artists seek feedback from fans, whose positive responses encourage them to continue their drawing pursuits and strive for improvement.	- I want to deliver my work to people who are intellectually curious, so I reach out to know if my readers are enjoying my manga and take their comments (Tomotake) - When people appreciate my work, I praise myself […] Some people read my manga and are stimulated by it, they get excited. When this happens, I feel my mission is accomplished, and I can do a fist pump (Yuta) - I am very happy to know that something so personal of mine [manga drawings] can encourage others. It's a feeling that is usually hard to get. Whenever I feel like quitting, I remember this, and it inspires me to continue

(*continued on next page*)

Table 2 (*continued*)

Categories (selective coding)	Abstract themes (axial coding)	Empirical themes (open coding)	Representative quotes
			[…] I am happy to know that there are people who think much of me (Hiromi)
Becoming a called professional	Sense of destiny (for themselves)	The manga artists, after leaving the manga industry and exploring other domains of work, realize that they excel in drawing manga and they are born to draw.	- After getting a [corporate] job, I wanted to draw manga. I ended up coming back to manga […] I was able to make my debut because of some kind of fate that brought me back here (Ayame) - A few years ago, I was cut off from the manga industry and couldn't draw for three years. No matter how hard it was, I realized that drawing was the happiest thing I could do […] If I don't draw, I feel bad (Takeshi) - I was there for about six months [work unrelated to manga], and I quit because I thought that staying there would probably ruin me as a person. It was just too unfulfilling (Tomotake)
	Self-love (for themselves)	The manga artists draw manga to nurture self-love and continue living.	- I am doing it for the supreme joy I feel […] that kind of joy is what keeps me going. I always remember the love I feel myself after my work is finished, published, and appreciated, even when I'm having a hard time (Hiromi) - I don't have many fans, I have some, but when I think that there are people out there who receive what I worked so hard to create and are encouraged by it, it makes me feel glad to be alive (Manabu) - I draw manga for self-satisfaction, to live with a sense of love and satisfaction for myself. I think I'm having fun doing it (Harue)
	Social Purpose (for others)	The manga artists realize that they have a purpose to benefit society by positively impacting the lives of their readers.	- After I started to distribute my manga, I grew a very strong desire to convey my own message. The message was already there, but I wanted to put it in my manga, to show the world what I created inside myself (Saori) - Wanting to make the world a better place is not a big deal. I draw manga to spread the word, but at least it's good if the people who read my manga are happy (Naomi) - When the true feelings of the reader come out, I sometimes think that I can make the world a better place (Misako)

> Japanese people are used to discriminate against manga artists, saying that drawing manga is like working in a nightclub. It's a really tough world […] Everyone is against it. For most Japanese, you have no opportunities with manga [work]. My university professor was also against it, he made fun of me.

In sum, these accounts reveal how the negative perceptions of manga work were widespread in Japan. These perceptions, added to the expectations for unique drawing skills and the already precarious nature of the industry, construct context as a major barrier to becoming a manga professional and shaped how the young manga artists were viewed by others and saw themselves.

3.9. Elusive dream

Many manga artists expressed an enduring desire to pursue a career in manga. However, this desire was accompanied by growing hesitation, as they became increasingly aware of the constraints imposed by the context of the manga industry. We introduce the notion of "elusive dream"—the fragile state in which manga artists found themselves trapped in their early years. While drawing manga represented their most compelling dream, such dream was consistently challenged by concerns about the viability of a career in the manga industry. Hence, the artists reported feeling torn: on the one hand, they were driven by their dream, and on the other, they were held back by the fear that professional growth in the manga industry might forever remain out of reach. Elusive dream is central to understanding how the emergence of their calling was constrained during childhood. We unpack elusive dream as being marked by *aspirations to work with manga* and *lack of self-confidence*.

3.9.1. Aspirations to work with manga

For many manga artists, the desire to draw manga professionally represented their highest and most enduring aspiration—a goal present from early childhood. Becoming a manga artist was not seen as a hobby, but as a dream, repeatedly described as their most ambitious and emotionally significant pursuit. Most manga artists reiterated that: "I just wanted to become a manga artist and I always dreamed of it (Yuta)." When reflecting on their childhood, many artists were unequivocal about the clarity and persistence of their aspiration: "When I was in kindergarten, the teacher asked about my future dreams, what I wanted to be. I said I wanted to become a manga artist (Saori)." Similarly, Yumi offered a vivid example of how manga functioned as both a dream and a creative outlet

throughout her early life:

> I just admired manga, and when I was a child, I drew manga all the time. However, becoming a manga artist was like a dream. I could not help; I liked it so much that it was too much of a dream.

3.9.2. Lack of self-confidence

Although becoming a professional manga artist was a cherished dream for many, they often saw it as out of reach and were plagued by serious doubts about their artistic abilities. Many lacked self-confidence owing to the competitive nature of the manga industry, which reinforced feelings of inadequacy and conveyed that artistic success was reserved for a select few. As a result, the aspiring manga artists internalized the belief that pursuing such a career was unrealistic, if not impossible, and feel particularly skeptical about their future. In discussing their skills, some manga artists specified that: "I believed that I could not become manga artist because I was bad at drawing […] I knew only a few experts can draw manga professionally (Yumi)" and that: "I didn't feel like I could become a manga artist because of my skills (Ryohei)." Such lack of self-confidence was prevalent among manga artists in the earlier lives, and many chose to keep their artistic aspirations private, opting to share and discuss their dream only with intimate family members and friends. Yuta's comment illustrated the lack of confidence of many aspiring manga artists, and how his earlier self-doubt had posed a significant obstacle to his career:

> I did not think I was good at drawing at all. Many people were better at drawing than me […] when I looked at the drawings of other people, I thought that's amazing. I always wished I had their ability to draw […] I did not think that drawing could become my work.

3.9.3. Existential passion

Despite the constraining influence of the context of the manga industry, what sustained the manga artists' commitment to drawing was an existential passion for manga. This passion ran so deep that many artists could not envision themselves doing anything else in life; for some, it even symbolized a fundamental reason for living. Their existential passion not only fueled their long-term dedication to drawing from a young age but also represented a crucial starting point that would eventually enable their calling to emerge and shape their career journey as manga artists. We identify two key foundations that underpin their existential passion: *innate love* and *childhood memories*.

3.9.4. Innate love

The manga artists found it challenging to pinpoint the exact origin of their existential passion for drawing manga. Many expressed the feeling that they had always loved the manga, describing this love as a permanent aspect of who they are. Against this backdrop, some manga artists elaborated that: "I've been drawing manga for as long as I can remember (Ayako)," that: "I always had a deep passion for drawing manga (Daisuke)," and that: "[…] before I even realized, I was already loving manga (Ryohei)." Innate love, in this setting, was not a fleeting emotion but a deep-seated sense of affection that defined the manga artists' existential passion for drawing throughout their lives and remained unchanged. Innate love became evident through the comments shared by the manga artists that we interviewed, including Haruki:

> I have always wanted to draw manga, or rather, I fell in love with it without even knowing what it was.

3.9.5. Childhood memories

The manga artists, despite being unable to outline a specific reason for their existential passion for manga, unanimously indicated that their career journey into drawing manga started during childhood. Childhood memories were marked by persistent experimentation with drawing techniques and avidly reading manga stories. The recollection of these childhood memories evoked a strong sense of enjoyment, signifying a fundamental period in the development of their existential passion. Multiple manga artists explained that: "since I was a child, I have had the desire to draw (Rintaro)," that: "as a child, if there was white paper at home, I would always draw manga (Takeshi)," and that: "I've always liked writing, and I was quite obsessed with stories as a child (Kiminari)." Saori pinpointed the importance of childhood memories in cultivating their existential passion for manga:

> My mother often says that I actively drew things on my own, rather than being asked by her to draw. She said that my parents never asked me to draw because I would do it anyway. I drew something and showed it to them.

3.9.6. Enactment to enable calling

The manga artists emphasized their ability to enact their existential passion for drawing manga by harnessing their unwavering commitment to continuous creation and enabling their calling to gradually emerge. Our data reveal that the enactment of their existential passion continued throughout these artists' lives. During childhood, the artists channeled their existential passion for manga—through constant reading and drawing—to escape from reality and search for new meanings. As they transitioned into adolescence and adulthood, the enactment of their existential passion helped them find the courage to be more proactive in showcasing their work. The enactment of manga artists' existential passion finally enriched their lives and formed the base for their calling to emerge. We focus here on how the manga artists successfully enacted their existential passion at a young age by *evading adversities* and *cultivating a sense of specialness*.

3.9.7. Evading adversities

Numerous manga artists recounted experiences of challenging upbringings, marked by familial conflicts, school bullying, and serious health issues. In response to these negative realities, they drew and read manga enthusiastically as a means of psychological escape. Evading adversities by delving into the creative entertainment inherent in manga creation enabled them to insulate themselves from the hardships they encountered. These manga artists for instance explained that: "since I was in elementary school, I was bullied […] when I didn't want to hear people's words, I used to draw with all my might, and escape to my world of manga (Saori)," and that, as a result: "manga makes me happy. It makes me forget bad things, hard things, all negative experiences and worries (Naomi)." The manga artists thus leveraged the world of manga as a symbolic refuge, one that offered them meaning and emotional reprieve, further intensifying their existential passion for manga itself. The vignette of Ryohei exemplifies the efforts of many manga artists to take advantage of their existential passion for manga to mentally escape their realities, particularly as he employed manga to distance himself from the turbulent relationship between his parents:

> Every day at the bakery was a battlefield, and my parents were always fighting […] My father was a craftsman and had a rough temper. He would fight all the time, all year round. I was able to buy manga freely, and next door there was a barber shop, so I could read as much as I wanted. Reading manga was the only happy time when I could forget reality.

3.9.8. Cultivating a sense of specialness

Engaging in drawing and reading manga allowed the artists to cultivate a sense of specialness, and they started to see the results of their artistic production as a distinctive aspect of their life. This sense of specialness, cultivated through continual engagement with manga, enhanced their well-being and reinforced their feelings of personal significance. Many of them used this sense of specialness to transform mundane and challenging experiences and develop a greater sense of purpose in their everyday life. Hence, some highlighted that: "I used to draw manga, and I felt a sense of specialness when I did that. I think the strongest impression I had was the feeling of being able to draw, the feeling of using a tool to draw (Yoshio)." Similarly, Yuta expressed how manga became a source of empowerment and freedom during a particularly difficult period in his life. Reflecting on his prolonged hospitalization during adolescence, Yuta recounted how the sense of specialness he derived from fully devoting himself to manga during this time made him feel free and helped him manage the difficult circumstances of his life:

> When I was in high school, I was hospitalized. It was a cancer that grows in your bones. Somehow miraculously, I was cured. However, the people around me in the hospital were dying. I realized that we have limited time […] I felt like my time was special, and I wanted to feel free. I wanted to have the freedom to express myself, and I did that through manga.

3.10. Multi-layered validation

The emergence of the manga artists' calling was shaped by a process of multi-layered validation. As they remained dedicated to drawing manga and enacted their existential passion, such passion empowered them to proactively reach out to diverse social audiences in their context and present their work. In response, these social audiences often recognized their drawing talent through positive feedback. This recognition, in turn, strengthens the artists' confidence as they continued to enact their existential passion, propelling them to progress through successive stages of validation over time. Multi-layered validation, intertwined with and mutually reinforced by the enactment of the artists' existential passion, unfolded across three successive stages, each marking a progression in the manga artists' emergence of their calling: *social circle validation*, *professional validation*, and *continuous validation*.

3.10.1. Social circle validation

The manga artists recounted that their earlier lives were hesitant to share their drawings. Nonetheless, because of their existential passion for manga, they slowly built confidence in their abilities, eventually finding the courage to display their work to friends and classmates at school or university. Social circle validation manifested as these artists presented their drawings to peers, often comparing their skills and gradually recognizing their drawing talent. For instance, one artist noted: "I guess I started to realize that I was good when it comes to drawing manga. It's probably wrong to say that I was the best, but I wanted to show my skills (Ryohei)." Meanwhile, peer recognition and collaboration further influenced the development of their artistic abilities. Encouragement from friends and classmates in their lives helped challenge their self-doubt and motivated them to share their art more widely. Some explained that: "the excellence of the manga drawn by my [school] seniors helped me as a reader and to recognize the beauty of my own manga genre (Motoshi)." Social circle validation manifested from the many conversations that we had with the manga artists, including Makiko:

> When I was in the fifth or sixth grade of elementary school, I started to improve my drawing skills and present my work. Everyone [peers] would say: "You are good at that" or "You are good at drawing." I feel that this pushed me forward.

3.10.2. Professional validation

Empowered by the increasing awareness of their drawing skills and the positive feedback from their close social circles, many manga artists, while continuing to enact their existential passion, found the courage to showcase their drawings in public forums. Saori shared a turning point in her career: "[…] I started to think that I wanted to compete in different places, bringing my ideas and characters, the story images that came to my mind." At the same time, the manga artists started to proactively reach out to industry

insiders such as editors and fans. As Misako observed: "Manga artist is something editors or fans choose you to become." While participating in these forums—e.g., manga-related events, competitions, and exhibitions like Comic Market in Tokyo—the manga artists relentlessly started to submit their drawings to manga experts, editors, and magazine companies that assessed their skills, managing to connect with a broader audience. Irrespective of rejections, they persisted, continuing their efforts until eventually receiving offers. These experiences marked a crucial turning point for some manga artists, signaling the potential for manga to become their profession and helping many manga artists transform their career journey. As Misako again reiterated: "I was immediately offered to draw a series, and I was able to get attention for my work." An example of professional validation is illustrated by the experience of Tomoyasu, whose efforts to participate in manga competitions helped him gain the admiration of editors and build a viable career path:

> I went on and won the prize, and then got to the semi-finals. I honestly did not think I could do it. Since then, I have been getting many requests for my manga […] The publishers started to call me, I gained more confidence. I started getting calls from one company, two companies, three companies, and so on. I started to think I could make a living with this.

3.10.3. Continuous validation

The manga artists acknowledged that they felt a sense of value by maintaining a dialogue with their readers regarding the quality and development of their work. Continuous validation, always fueled by the manga artists' existential passion, involves their proactive efforts to connect with fans, both directly and indirectly, and gather feedback. Such feedback helps them stay attuned to audience preferences and maintain the relevance of their creative work. Ayame for instance outlined that: "I ask [readers] for advice. I cannot betray the opinions of the readers and the editorial department, so I always ask them about their views on the ending of my stories as I draw further." As Tomotake also commented: "What's most satisfying for me is to know that my work has reached my fans and they want to read and see my work." In parallel, continuous validation stems from the daily messages sent by fans; the encouragement received through these messages becomes a critical source of inspiration, motivating manga artists to continually refine and improve their craft. Ayako pinpointed that: "now my readers are telling me that I am really good, that I have improved a lot. Thanks to them, I want to grow further (Ayako)." Tomoyasu's experience highlights the importance of continuous validation as he proactively solicits and receives feedback from his readers. This allows him to gauge the reception of his work and strengthens his sense of worth as an artist:

> I'm always working out some ideas for new works, so when they take shape, I want to share them with the public before improving them again. It's a dream for the future to be able to hear the voice of many fans, and be told that my manga is fun and that they want to read it again […] When various readers around me find the result interesting, I convince myself that drawing manga is the right thing to do.

3.11. Becoming a called professional

The process of multi-layered validation, occurring alongside the enactment of manga artists' existential passion, leads the artists to further reflect on the significance of manga in their lives, culminating in the acknowledgment that their deep connection with the art transcends a mere job. This marks the pinnacle of the emergence of manga artists' calling, manifested in their career journey at the personal level for themselves through a *sense of destiny* and *self-love* and for others through a sense of *social purpose*.

3.11.1. Sense of destiny

During periods of financial challenges, some manga artists experienced redundancy and temporarily left the manga industry, leading them to seek alternative jobs to survive. In these jobs, they often felt out of place, realizing that drawing manga was the only work that made them feel fulfilled and where they could excel. Some explained that: "I realized that I could not do other work, I was bad at it (Yumi)," and that: "I am not good at anything aside from drawing manga [laughter] (Haruki)." These work experiences led them to go back to drawing manga and to realize that this was something they were naturally born to do, so that: "I felt that I was destined to be a manga artist (Manabu)." Developing a sense of destiny reinforced the belief manga artist' conviction that drawing manga professionally was their calling. Takeshi accentuated the importance of developing a sense of destiny for him as a called professional:

> When I draw manga, miraculous things happen. A line or a scene can become an important storyline; all parts connect together later in the story. Sometimes I feel some kind of unconscious power, not my superficial one. In these moments, I feel I am destined to draw manga, it is like my karma. I feel it is my destiny to work with manga.

3.11.2. Self-love

Many manga artists began to see themselves as called professionals in the manga industry because drawing manga helped them to cultivate self-love, even if that meant sacrificing certain material comforts enjoyed by others in Japan. Simultaneously, they recognized that their determination to enact their existential passion taught them how to love themselves more. They specified that: "If I stopped drawing manga, I wouldn't be able to love myself. I can maintain my satisfaction only when I draw. I feel like I'm honest to myself, that I have affection for myself (Ayako)," and that: "with manga, I came to love myself (Yukino)." Some went on to explain that drawing manga gave them a reason to continue to live. As a called professional, Kiminari reflected upon not giving up drawing manga to love

himself:

> I grew a sense of satisfaction as I did not give up and continued to improve. Rather than wanting to become a famous manga artist, I accepted that it was ok to live in a run-down apartment for the rest of my life, to draw manga in about 4.5 tatami mats […] I drew something that is unique in the world. Drawing manga gave me a reason to live and to love myself.

3.11.3. Social purpose

As the manga artists continued to draw as called professionals, they discovered that their engagement in creative work transcended personal fulfillment. Instead, they were anchored in a deep desire to positively impact the lives of their readers. The manga artists felt they had a social purpose to help others in society, based on the ambition to deliver happiness and positivity to the world through their creative work: "manga is a world where you can put sarcasm and make people smile […] I aim to create warm stories that make people who read them feel better (Ayako)," and that: "I want to be a sender rather than a receiver so, it's not enough to say that I have fun at drawing. I want to amuse others (Yasutaka)." The reflection of Rintaro on the importance of improving the lives of their readers by making them happy provides an example of the social purpose that most manga artists shared as called professionals:

> As a manga artist, you have to think that you have to make anything fun. That's why, when a bad event happens, a manga artist will turn that event into a positive story for others to feel happy. The wonderful thing about being a manga artist is that your job is to make the readers see that bad experiences can be fun.

3.12. Breaking from 'the shell': a model of the emergence of manga artists' calling

Fig. 1 unveils a model that summarizes the career journey of the manga artists we interviewed. This showcases how the calling for manga artists as creative workers emerges during their lifetime, supported both by personal and social desires as well as extensively shaped by the context that serves as a barrier as well as an enabler for the emergence of their calling.

Earlier in their childhood, and before their calling started to emerge, the manga artists are trapped 'in a shell'—a metaphor they use to describe their solitary life. During these earlier years, their context—shaped by the precarious nature of the manga industry and the negative perceptions associated with the manga profession in Japan—discourages the artists from envisioning manga as a viable future career, thereby constraining the early emergence of their calling. In particular, such contextual conditions contributed to them feeling less confident in their abilities, and the prospect of seeing themselves as professional manga artists remained an elusive dream. As a result, they primarily drew manga for personal and emotional gratification, remaining enclosed within a metaphorical shell that limited the pursuit of their aspirations.

Yet, the manga artists harbor an existential passion for drawing manga, which fuels their unwavering commitment to the craft. Because of such passion, however, the manga artists start enacting their existential passion, thus engaging in a process of multi-layered valuation that would progressively shape the emergence of their calling. As the artists enact their existential passion, they proactively reach out to multiple social audiences, seeking feedback and, in turn, receiving recognition for their ability to draw. In here, the context functions as an enabler of multi-layer validation by providing critical social resources. This is in line with prior research emphasizing that personal agency plays a major role in entering a calling, followed by a search for feedback and validation (Bloom et al., 2021). They draw and compare their work with close social circles, including friends and classmates at school, overcoming self-doubt. The growing awareness of their skills through what we refer to as first-layer (e.g., social circle) validation progressively helps to start dismantling the shell confining them. In this process, their calling starts to emerge.

Continuing to enact their existential passion and break their shell, the artists engage in public events and competitions, proactively reaching out to manga editors and magazine companies to display their work. Here, their drawings garner additional acclaim, securing victories in competitions, and offering additional recognition for their skills until they start receiving job offers. This marks the realization that the dream of building a career as a professional manga artist is not beyond reach. This is characterized as the second-layer (e.g., professional) validation.

The manga artists ultimately realize that drawing manga is their calling; they view it as work they are destined to do, an opportunity to cultivate love for themselves but also to have a purpose for society through their readership. This signifies the moment when the emergence of there is fully complete, and they exit from the metaphorical shell. Such full emergence is accompanied by ongoing efforts to enact their existential passion; they reach out to and receive comments from their readers as they continue with their creative work—the third-layer (e.g., continuous) validation. The model presented here illustrates the career journey of manga artists, progressing from being within a metaphorical shell—e.g., the cocoon—to breaking free from it—e.g., as a butterfly—with their calling finally emerging. This career journey was captured by the words of Saori, who described herself in her earlier years as an *otaku*, a disparaging term used to describe being introverted and nerd in Japan, before her life underwent a significant change:

> I used to draw my feelings; I concealed all my things from others. What was inside me as a person came out to society. For the first time, I felt like I was a member of society. Until that moment, I had been an *otaku*, closed in my shell. I used to draw nothing but manga. I could say it was like that: it felt like I was in a room, and then I exited it.

Tomoyasu also used the example of the shell to explain how he came to accept the potential repercussions of making his drawing publicly available:

I wanted to challenge myself, I wanted to break out of my shell. I wanted to draw, and I wanted to create manga, especially to express the concept of salaryman. There were certain times when people said that my challenge was too big, or that it would create a negative image for companies, but after some time things proceeded, and I came to accept these challenges.

4. Discussion

This article explored how calling emerges in the domain of creative work as a distinct type of nonstandard work, and how context shapes its emergence. While often involving atypical shifts and precarious arrangements similar to more traditional nonstandard occupations (Ashford et al., 2007; Bolino et al., 2021; Okhuysen et al., 2013; Spreitzer et al., 2017)—such as Uber drivers (Beigi et al., 2020)—creative work stands apart by lacking a clear career path, requiring natural talents, and offering an opportunity for individual self-expression (Lysova & Khapova, 2019; Trittin-Ulbrich & Glozer, 2024). We proposed a model illustrating the emergence of calling for manga artists as creative workers that shows the twofold role of the context as a barrier and enabler of this process. Hence, we outlined the importance for manga artists of enacting the existential passion, which is intertwined with and reinforced by multi-layered validation. This involved proactively reaching out to diverse social audiences to showcase their work and, in turn, receiving recognition. We found that manga artists' existential passion for manga serves as a catalyst, driving such enactment; this allows their calling to emerge and to grow as they gradually become called professionals. In this final section, we unpack the contributions of our study to the calling literature.

4.1. Creative workers' emergence of calling and the role of context

We extend knowledge by theorizing a model elucidating the process by which calling emerges, specifically for creative work. In doing so, we respond to calls for more evidence on the emergence of calling associated with novel types of work and the role of context in shaping it (Lysova et al., 2019, 2023).

Limited research on the emergence of calling has suggested the significance of sensemaking—e.g., through the extraction of cues, periods of reflection, and emotional responses (Schabram & Maitlis, 2017; Sturges et al., 2019)—and identity construction—e.g., through either destiny-focused or exploratory paths (Bloom et al., 2021). Furthermore, scholars have theorized the predictors of calling (Dalla Rosa et al., 2019; Dobrow, 2013), highlighting the importance of childhood experiences (Conklin, 2012). Nevertheless, past studies only signalled at the importance of context in the process of calling emergence without unpacking the underlying mechanisms driving this process. With little attention paid to exploring the context, past studies have often centered on more traditional occupations, where the path to professionalization is well-established, such as for hospital staff, teachers, veterinary doctors, and animal shelter workers (Bloom et al., 2021; Esteves & Lopes, 2017; Schabram & Maitlis, 2017; Sturges et al., 2019).

While drawing on the domain of creative work as a specific type of nonstandard work that remains precarious, lacks an established career progression path, requires natural talents while also offering an opportunity for individual self-expression (Lysova & Khapova, 2019; Trittin-Ulbrich & Glozer, 2024), we offer a model that contributes to the calling literature by showing that calling may emerge following creative workers' ongoing enactment of their passion. This can be both limited by the context of the creative industry (e.g., through precariousness and negative perceptions of the professions) and enabled when the context validates creative workers' efforts (e.g., through social, professional, and continuous validation). Therefore, we further unpack the dualistic influences of context, expanding the limited research addressing the role of context in the calling emergence (Afiouni & Karam, 2019; Dalla Rosa et al., 2019; Dobrow, 2013; Sturges et al., 2019). This is based on extracting value from work activities that are underpinned by a profound passion for the work itself, which serves as the foundation forthe emergence of calling.

Scholars have outlined various ways for workers to seek more meaningful careers (Feiler, 2023), including job crafting, which implies altering job tasks, shifting relational boundaries, and aligning work with personal interests (Berg et al., 2010; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). By introducing the significance of enacting passion to allow calling to emerge—a dynamic that, to the best of our knowledge, remains unaddressed in the calling literature—we complement conventional wisdom and find new ways through which creative workers can garner meaningfulness and improve their well-being as they craft their careers over time.

Perhaps more to the point, our model adds to the extant literature by specifying that enactment is enabled by what we refer to as multi-layered validation. Unlike the enactment of passion, validation has been discussed in the prior calling literature (Bloom et al., 2021; Sturges et al., 2019) and has been acknowledged as relevant for creative workers' calling (Sturges & Bailey, 2023). For example, prior research has shown that social support helps individuals grow more confident about their calling (Dalla Rosa et al., 2019; Sturges et al., 2019). This is perhaps unsurprising, considering that validation represents an important step in how workers build their professional identities (Ibarra, 1999; Pratt et al., 2006).

Our article adds nuance to existing research by underlining that, for workers to fully enact their passion, proactive engagement with different social audiences and recognition is essential as it can open opportunities for the context to enable the emergence of calling through validation. In our findings, we introduce the process of ‘multi-layered validation,’ highlighting three key stages: social circle, professional, and continuous validation. Progress along these validation stages occurs as the manga artists enact their existential passion, and their courage to continue to enact such passion is reinforced by multi-layered validation itself, helping them to exit the metaphorical shells that had confined them. More prominently, we illustrate that multi-layered validation allows calling to emerge because of a combination of proactive individual efforts, driven by passion, alongside external recognition from various influential audiences encountered throughout the career journey. This dynamic interplay between personal agency and external recognition ensures that enactment is not just about individual passion but also about how one's work is received by significant others. In turn,

external validation plays a crucial role in influencing creative workers' journey; it is through this dynamic process that creative workers' calling grows, ultimately helping them to become recognized as called professionals. Hence, the emergence of calling is dependent on creative workers' enactment of their passion, with this enactment being intertwined with and mutually reinforced by multi-layered validation. Our findings thus suggest the need to consider the number of stages involved in multi-layered validation, the sequential or parallel occurrence of these stages, and the potential unforeseen and negative consequences they may generate. In light of these considerations, we call for a more in-depth exploration that delves more granularly into the dynamics of multi-layered validation and how such process unfolds in relation to the enactment described.

4.2. Passion and creative work

Our article then makes a second contribution by placing emphasis on the significance of passion as a catalyst for the emergence of calling in the domain of creative work. Although it is established that "for those with callings, work is their passion" (Wrzesniewski, 2002, p. 233), our research provides further empirical support for the inherent difference between passion and calling, yet sheds light on how they are interconnected when it comes to the calling of creative workers. Prior research has identified at least three reasons to expect this conceptual difference (Astakhova, Cardon, Ho, & Kong, 2022; Wrzesniewski, 2002). First, passion lacks the prosocial orientation that is crucial for understanding calling. Second, due to its affective nature, passion is more malleable, whereas calling tends to remain relatively unchanged throughout one's career. Third, both passion and calling are associated with work activities that individuals love, but a deep sense of purpose is only attributed to work that is considered to be one's calling.

In particular, scholars offer different interpretations regarding whether passion lays down the foundations for calling (Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2011; Lysova & Khapova, 2019) or whether passion can also be an outcome of calling (Dalla Rosa & Vianello, 2020). While we acknowledge that there may be no definitive answer, our findings clarify that creative workers' passion is the driving force behind their proactive efforts. We show that passion needs to be enacted to allow their calling to emerge, helping them to become called professionals. As a result, with creative workers, we show that it is not their calling that sparks their passion; rather, passion is what enables their career journey to advance. Although we have studied manga artists, we believe that passion would function in the same way for other creative workers. This is because "passion is a key value in the creative economy of such strength that workers model their identity around this ethos" (Bosma, Loots, Stroet, & Witteloostuijn, 2024, p. 4) and it is their 'labor of love' (i.e., commitment and achievement being motivated by the inner drive that does not align to the monetary considerations of a market economy) that unites creative workers (Menger, 1999).

In line with this, we believe it is relevant to shift focus from exploring whether calling can lead to passion and what calling means for workers' passion (Dalla Rosa & Vianello, 2020) to explore how workers can tap into their existing passion more proactively to engage in work that they can view as their calling. We thus call for more research that tests and discusses the reciprocal relationship between passion and calling, exploring how it is shaped by the nature of the work under consideration.

Furthermore, we argue that it is crucial to acknowledge that passion, as a catalyst facilitating the emergence of creative workers' calling, might become a double-edged sword, susceptible to abuse and exploitation. Organizations might exploit workers' passion to perpetuate unethical and poorly paid working conditions, not only in the highly selective domain of creative work, where individuals are willing to do anything they can to secure a position (Dobrow & Heller, 2015) but also in other types of nonstandard work where passion becomes a requisite—such as zookeeping or animal shelter work (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Schabram & Maitlis, 2017). In essence, we argue that greater attention needs to be directed toward preventing organizations' abuse and exploitation of workers whose calling is supported by a strong passion and who would accept any condition to pursue such passion.

4.3. Examining calling in underexplored contexts

Our article finally contributes to calls for more evidence on calling within less known work domains and sociocultural settings (Lysova et al., 2019; Schabram et al., 2023).

Current research broadly acknowledges that building a career involves individual agency but is also confined by social and cultural geographies (Gunz & Mayrhofer, 2021). In particular, some researchers indirectly allude to the significance of workplace embeddedness—e.g., priests' quotidian activities in the church (Sturges et al., 2019)—and institutional conditions—e.g., perceptions of hardships and oppression for women in their career (Afiouni & Karam, 2019)—in influencing calling.

In this article, we extend earlier frameworks by proposing a new perspective that acknowledges how context—in the form of a) the opportunities it provides in a professional environment, b) social setting, and c) the nonstandard nature of employment—can de facto put the emergence of calling at risk.

First, our analysis confirms and extends the manifold challenges of many creative workers in acquiring and maintaining their positions. We do that by showing the competitiveness of the manga industry, the unfavorable social perception associated with drawing manga in Japan, the precarity of flexible work, the high expectations for exceptional drawing skills, and the uncertainty surrounding their income (Kinsella, 2000; Schodt, 1996; Tanaka, 2020). We show that the manga industry as a challenging context threatens the manga artists' calling, discourages them from drawing manga as a career path, and influences how they perceive their aspirations and work toward becoming professional manga creators. We use the term 'elusive dream' to convey the lack of confidence these artists experienced in their youth about their future careers because of the complexity of this context, which limits their belief that they can become called professionals.

Second, we identify that the negative impact of some creative industries is exacerbated by social perceptions and labels attached to it. In Japan, while conditions are arguably improving, the perceptions of the manga industry have historically pushed many younger

manga artists into metaphorical 'shells', undermining their passion, sense of self, and ability to garner meaningfulness. Breaking free from this shell, as our article shows, is a challenging endeavor. An interviewee in our study explicitly identified herself as *otaku*—a social label signifying 'nerd' and 'social outcast'—as the consequence of her love for manga (Azuma, 2009). A label such as this may decrease many younger people's willingness to turn their passion into a professional pursuit, hindering the emergence of their calling and effectively trapping them in a metaphorical shell. In extreme cases, this shell is discouraging to the extent of prompting some the manga artists to isolate themselves from social interactions, as seen in the phenomenon of *hikikomori*—with young people often choosing to live permanently within the confines of their home or room (Tamaki, 2013).

Lastly, our article indicates that the domain of creative work needs to be handled with great flexibility because of its nonstandard nature. Drawing on the flexibility types suggested by Spreitzer et al. (2017), our study pinpoints that most manga artists experience: a) flexibility in their employment relationships, as they are typically employed by publishers under fixed-term contracts; b) flexibility in scheduling, enabling them to draw manga outside traditional 9-to-5 shifts; and c) flexibility in their work environments, as they can draw in studios or cafés if they prefer. However, such flexibility may hinder manga artists' ability to effectively enact their existential passion. While such enactment provides some relief from their challenging experiences and prompts them to engage with multiple social audiences, it can adversely affect their well-being. For example, the demands of nonstandard work schedules may take a toll on their health (Bolino et al., 2021), ultimately slowing down the overall enactment of their existential passion.

Our study also indicates that contractual flexibility heightens creative workers' vulnerability, as they must continuously secure new contracts and engage with diverse employers and audiences. In our findings, the emergence of manga artists' calling heavily reliant on how 'fortunate' they must be in reaching out to publishers and receiving professional and continuous recognition. This highlights the stress involved, as they must engage in multi-layered validation and find recognition for their work. These factors are crucial areas for further exploration, particularly in understanding how different types of nonstandard work may impede and help workers turn their passion into their calling.

Taken together, we posit that crucial questions to address beyond "how calling emerges" are also "what context means for individuals who are or aspire to be in the domain of creative work" and "how context may hinder the emergence of calling." In our article, we exclusively focused on the stories of manga artists who successfully navigated the adverse influences of their context and were able to leverage its social opportunities. However, we speculate that a considerable number of individuals, potentially the majority, cultivate a passion since childhood that they are not able to enact and turn into their calling. Influenced by social perceptions, they may become casualties of their context, ultimately neglecting their passion and settling for less fulfilling occupations that fail to provide meaningfulness in their lives.

Our findings echo scholars' calls for more research on the emergence of calling (Bloom et al., 2021; Lysova et al., 2023) and to place emphasis on the need to understand the significance of context in different occupational landscapes, geographies, and work formats (Lysova et al., 2019, 2023). What's more, our article also holds practical significance. We argue that detecting the negative influence of context is crucial for devising new career policies and vocational training that can provide assistance, not only in acknowledging and embracing workers' passion but also in constructing career paths earlier in life that facilitate the emergence of their calling and allow them to find meaningfulness in their work.

4.4. Conclusion, limitations, and avenues for future research

In this article, by exploring the career journey of manga artists, we demonstrate how calling emerges in the domain of creative work and it is shaped by context. Creative work, while inherently flexible, diverges from other types of nonstandard work because it is not only precarious but also lacks a clearly defined career progression path, it requires talent, and offers an opportunity for individual self-expression (Lysova & Khapova, 2019; Trittin-Ulbrich & Glozer, 2024). We offered a model indicating that the emergence of calling emerges in line with the enactment of creative workers' passion that extends throughout their lives and careers, and that is enabled by multi-layered validation resulting from proactive individual efforts and external recognition from various influential audiences. We show that context can limit the emergence of calling (e.g., due to precariousness and negative perceptions of the professions) but it can also enable it by validating creative workers' efforts (e.g., through social, professional, and continuous validation). In doing so, we highlighted the significance of creative workers' passion and its relationship with their calling, finally responding to calls on the contextualized nature of calling (Lysova et al., 2019, 2023). We anticipate that the model that we identified in this study can be generalizable beyond the manga industry to include other workers involved in precarious arrangements typical of nonstandard occupations. This type of worker can be seen as belonging to one of the two images of Spreitzer et al. (2017) world of work, e.g., workers who have high skill levels, in our case artistic talent, who often sign flexible contracts to maximize control over their schedule. At the same time, the generalizability of our model is specific to the creative industry and other creative workers, such as video game founders (Lysova & Khapova, 2019). We argue that many creative workers are passionate for one artistic endeavor and are enthused to find work in line with their passion beyond just seeking a job.

Our study also presents some limitations that lay the groundwork for future research contributions. First, our sample is exclusively composed of independent artists of Japanese background engaged in drawing manga professionally. Although their underexplored creative work is well-suited to examine the emergence of calling—e.g., work requiring exceptional talent and sensitivity (Schodt, 1996; Shamoon, 2009), being characterized by precariousness (Kinsella, 2000; Schodt, 1983) and accompanied by a profound need for self-expression and a motivation to contribute to others' well-being (Galbraith, 2019; Takahashi, 2009)—calling remains a context-specific phenomenon (Lysova et al., 2019, 2023). This means that the calling of creative workers may manifest in diverse, nuanced ways depending on their specific context. Although similar to Lysova and Khapova's (2019) video game founders, the emergence of calling for Japanese manga artists was prompted by their passion, video game founders did not experience the same challenges as Japanese

manga artists in their earlier years. Subsequently, we encourage future researchers to explore commonalities and differences in the influence of context and in the enactment of different creative workers' passion.

Second, our research design also relies on a qualitative approach, primarily utilizing data derived from interviews. While qualitative methods are well-suited for developing theories from ambiguous phenomena (Gehman et al., 2017), interviews, although effective in understanding careers and the emergence of callings (Afiouni & Karam, 2019; Ahn et al., 2017; Bloom et al., 2021) may limit the generalizability of findings. To address this, future research could incorporate more quantitative data collected through surveys targeting a larger and more diverse sample of creative workers. Despite the complexity, aggregating such data may complement the results of our study, facilitating the establishment of causal relationships and providing further insights into the emergence of calling for creative workers.

Third, while our research has primarily focused on the calling of manga artists as creative workers, we recognize that calling may be susceptible to change over time (Dobrow, 2013). This evolution may be influenced by factors such as career stages or professional tenure (Fontana et al., 2023), and we cannot predict whether and how creative workers' calling will evolve or what implications this may have. Future research could explore how their calling may shape their identity, work attitude, productivity, and turnover intention over time. Also, it would be valuable to investigate whether a change in calling might lead to unintended consequences, potentially manifesting in negative outcomes as careers progress (Duffy & Dik, 2013).

Finally, as our research is centered on how calling emerges for creative workers, it is less concerned with how individual traits—e.g., "demographic, geographical, physical, psychological, or life history homogeneity" (Robinson, 2014, p. 26)—might shape their calling. Future research could delve deeper into how individual differences might influence how creative workers assign meaning to their calling. Future studies could also explore how heterogeneity in individual traits could impact creative workers' passion for art, the way they navigated solitary experiences earlier in life, and how they overcome hardships, achieved validation, or enact their passion. Such an exploration would provide even greater depth to the existing findings.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Enrico Fontana: Visualization, Project administration, Formal analysis, Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. **Evgenia I. Lysova:** Visualization, Project administration, Formal analysis, Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. **Kaori Sato:** Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Junko Araki:** Resources, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

We have no conflict to disclose.

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to all the manga artists who participated in the interviews, to those who kindly facilitated contact with the interviewees, and to the organizations that supported this research through their invaluable introductions. Their generosity, time, and openness made this study possible.

Appendix 1. Interview Protocol

Confirmation of background information

1. Could you please confirm your name and age? Do you have any academic degrees?
2. When did you first make your debut as a manga artist?
3. How many years have you worked as a manga artist so far?
4. How many comic books have you published so far?

Early years

1. When did you start thinking of becoming a professional manga artist? Why manga in particular?
2. Could you please elaborate on what your childhood was like?
3. Was there anything in your early years that made you want to become a manga artist?
4. What was your dream before becoming a manga artist?
5. What talents, skills, and abilities needed for manga creation did you already have before you became a professional manga artist?

Becoming a professional manga artist

1. How did you start drawing manga professionally?
2. Can you talk of how your career as manga artists unfolded over time?
3. Can you tell us more about the role that people, family, friends or colleagues had on you during your career?

4. Is there someone who encouraged you to become a manga artist? If so, how?
5. Have you ever thought about doing something else before? Why did you think that being a manga artist is better than working in other professions?
6. How did you develop your skills over time?
7. How did you build a relationship with an editing house?
8. What was your debut as a manga artist like?

Being a professional manga artist today

1. How do you experience your current work? What are the main challenges? What is the main source of satisfaction?
2. How does drawing manga make you feel today?
3. What is most meaningful to you about drawing manga professionally?
4. Could you think of doing a different type of work today?
5. What is your relationship with your readers like?
6. What is your relationship with editors and other manga artists like?
7. How do you envision your career going forward?
8. What social impact would you like to accomplish with your work going forward?
9. Is there anything you feel you have not achieved yet and you wish to achieve? If so, what is it?

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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Emergence of calling in the domain of creative work, and the role of context: the stories of manga artists

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2025-10-01
Elsevier
https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2025.104181
Fontana E, Lysova EI, Sato K, Araki J. (2025) Emergence of calling in the domain of creative work, and the role of context: the stories of manga artists. Journal of Vocational Behavior, Volume 163, December 2025, Article number 104181

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