With:

Thought Bubble Festival Ltd.

Fair Pay for Artists Project: 2019 Research

LOTTERY FUNDED

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During Thought Bubble 2019 a questionnaire to establish important factors associated with the demographics, employment status and assuredness in business skills held by creators of comics was circulated by the event organisers. The primary objective of the questionnaire was to obtain a better understanding the pay and conditions of employment of those involved in the business of making comics. In conjunction with the UK Centre for Events Management at Leeds Beckett University, the questionnaire obtained 131 response – a response rate of around 25%. The report used the data from that questionnaire, and the programme SPSS 26 (Statistical Software for Social Scientists: Version 26), to present its findings. Base line data suggested that income levels in the industry are relatively low and that several factors may be at work to maintain that low level of income. Through a process of cross-tabulation, combining the data captured by more than one questions, further results were obtained. Using that combined data indicated a gendered difference in the income and career progression of comic creators. In addition to further, more qualitative, investigation into factors impacting fair pay in the industry the report recommends the development of new services and structures to advocate and support those working in this part of the creative and cultural industries.

Acknowledgments:

Thought Bubble would like to thank Arts Council England for the financial support for this report.

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1.0 Introduction

Beginning as a one-day event in 2007, Thought Bubble has grown to become a week-long celebration of comics, illustration and more. Created by the renowned comic artist Tula Lotay (aka Lisa Wood), its concentration on comics and the people who make them have made Thought Bubble a unique kind of festival; beloved by comics creators, its annual comic con draws in a consistently high calibre of talent. A central belief of the festival organisers is the power of comics to inspire, educate and bring people together. It is that belief, and the invaluable contribution that comic book creators make, which lies at the heart of commitment to ensure the work of those creators is properly recognised. An essential aspect of that recognition is working towards fair pay and treatment for the talented people that work tirelessly to bring comics to others, whether they be lifelong fans or people who have only just ventured into the myriad worlds and ideas presented through sequential art.

2.0 Methodology

At the Thought Bubble Festival, 2018, a pilot questionnaire of comic creators was trialled. An interim report, covering response to the questions of the questionnaire, was produced by Thought Bubble in early 2019. Following a successful application to Arts Council England, Thought Bubble asked the UK Centre for Events Management (UKCEM) at Leeds Beckett University to work with them on deepening the inquiry into issues associated with establishing fair pay for comic creators.

Using the basic format of the questions developed by Thought Bubble in 2018, UKCEM attended the festival during its two-day comic con on Saturday and Sunday the 9th and 10th November, at the Harrogate Convention Centre. This generated a response from 67 comic creators/ delegates. Further to this Thought Bubble issued their questionnaire to delegates via email, this generated a further 64 responses. Altogether 131 responses were generated from a total population of 520 delegates. A response rate of approximately 25%.

Due to slight differences in the mode through which the questionnaires were distributed (online or face-to-face) there are some small discrepancies between how face-to-face respondents addressed the questions from how online participants responded. These differences are minor but do mean that for some questions the sample is less than 131. In all cases the valid sample is used – this being the sample most appropriate for the question/questions being considered. Only the *valid sample* figures are used to generate the figures; the *valid population* size is mentioned directly afters each figure, where that population is less than the full 131 responses (this is stated as "N = " followed by the number of respondents used in the generation of the chart or graph).

Section 3 will present the findings for single questions in the questionnaire; this will be split into 3 sub sections: demographic profile of participants; employment and income data, and rate setting data. Though this affords us an insight into some of the issues emerging in the data, it lacks the detail that can be drawn from the data when we cross compare some of the responses obtained.

Section 4 will present a selection of data from the questionnaire that emerges when we cross reference responses from different questions. Such cross tabulation enables us to dig more deeply into the responses and, in doing so, highlights some of the key issues facing comic book creators. This section is split into three further sections, which are:

1. Gender Identity (GI) with …
2. Age with …
3. Combining three sources of data

The data was analysed using SPSS 26 (Statistical Software for Social Scientists: Version 26). All graphic representations of the data were generated using Excel in Microsoft Office 360.

3.0 Introduction to single question findings

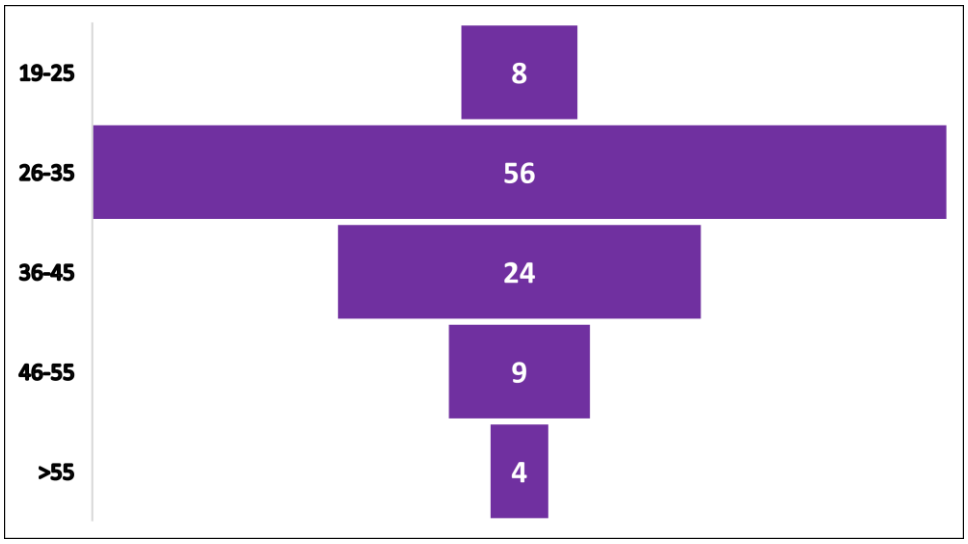
The questionnaire was composed of 13 closed questions and a small number of open questions, where participants could go into a little more detail on some of their responses. Questions could be roughly grouped into three categories covering 1) demographic details; 2) questions about employment and income, and 3) consideration around work rate setting and other core competencies associated with administering a career as a comic creator.

This section addresses each of those categories in turn; this will be in the format of presenting a graphic presentation of the data. Each category will then be discussed before moving on to the next.

In conclusion, Section 3 will draw together its key findings before marking a transition to section 4.

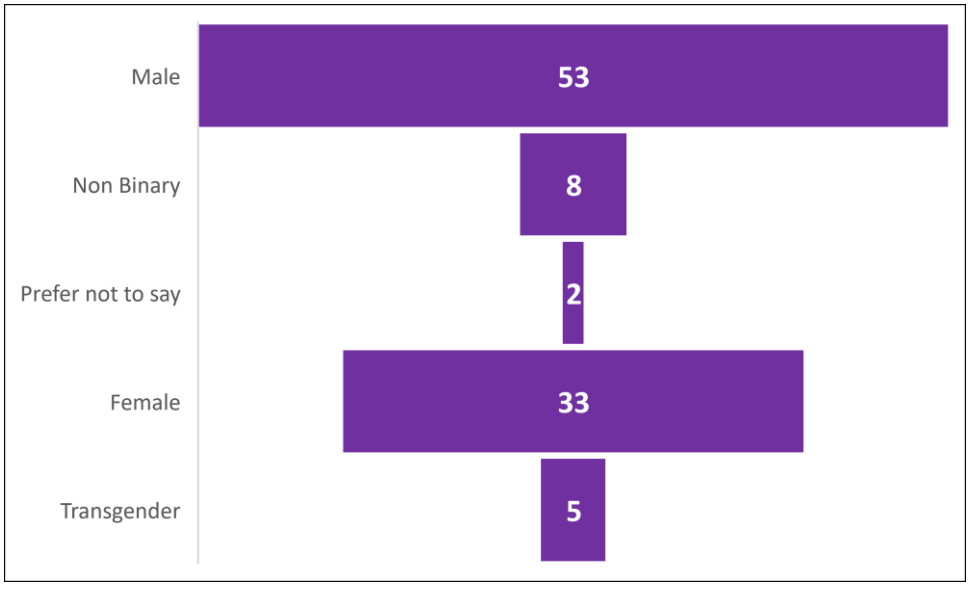
3.1 Demographic profile of participants

Age



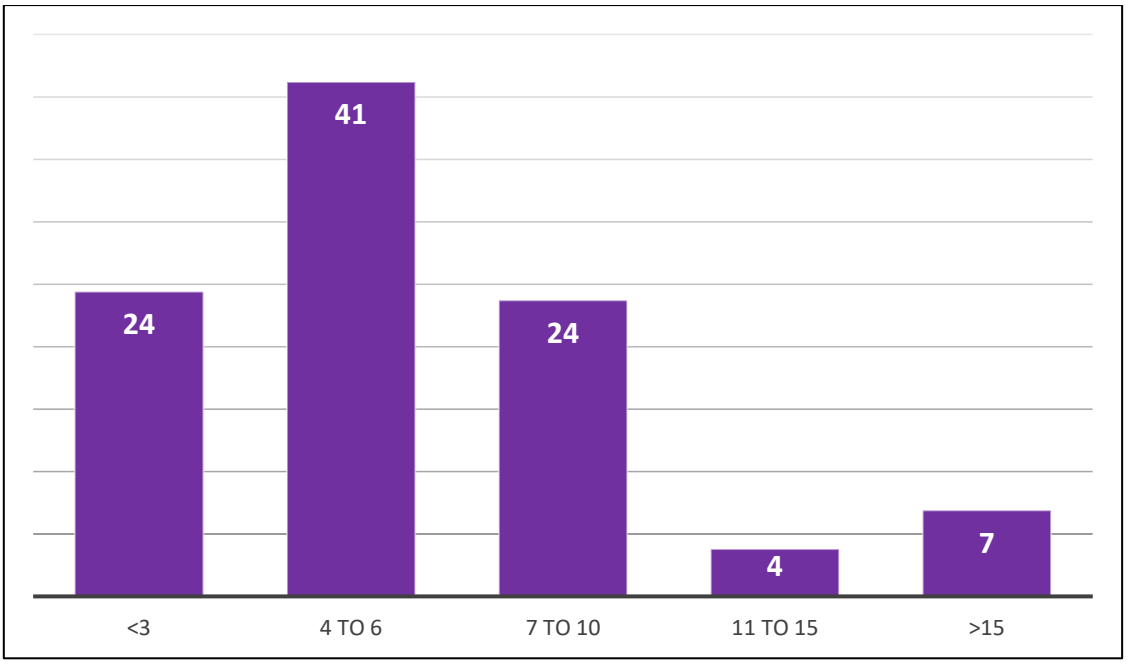
[NB: Percentages rounded to whole number]

Gender



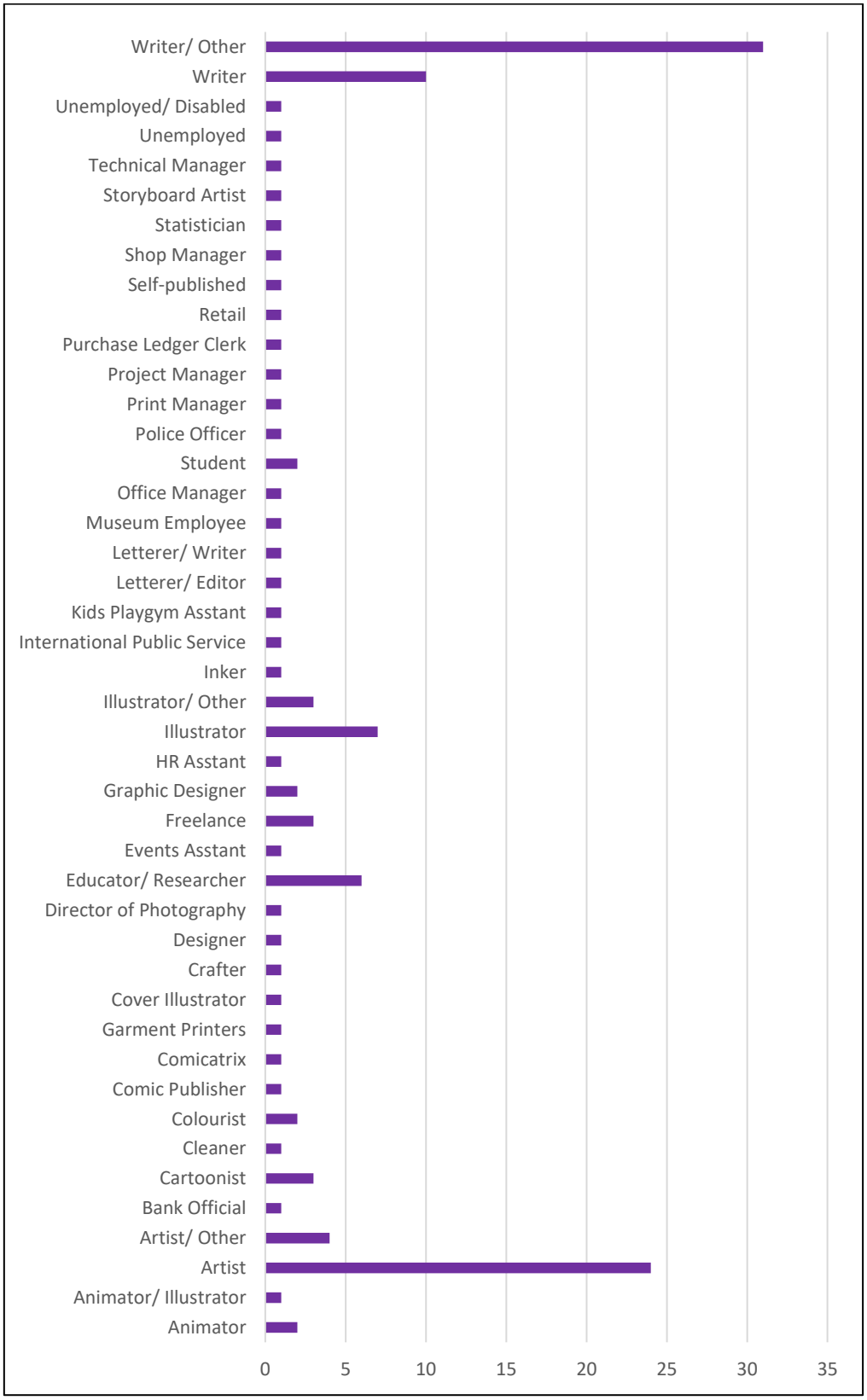
[NB: Percentages rounded to whole number]

Years in the industry



[NB: Percentages rounded to whole number]

Occupation



N = 130

[NB: Values presented represent frequency: More than one option could be identified]

This baseline demographic data tells us that the majority of respondents were aged between 26 and 35, with a significantly fewer, though substantial, number of participants aged 36 to 45. Those aged 19 to 25 and 46 to 55 were roughly equivalent, with only a small number of participants aged over 55. The data would suggest comic creators are either moving into the field after previously engaged in other areas or following some form of postgraduate education.

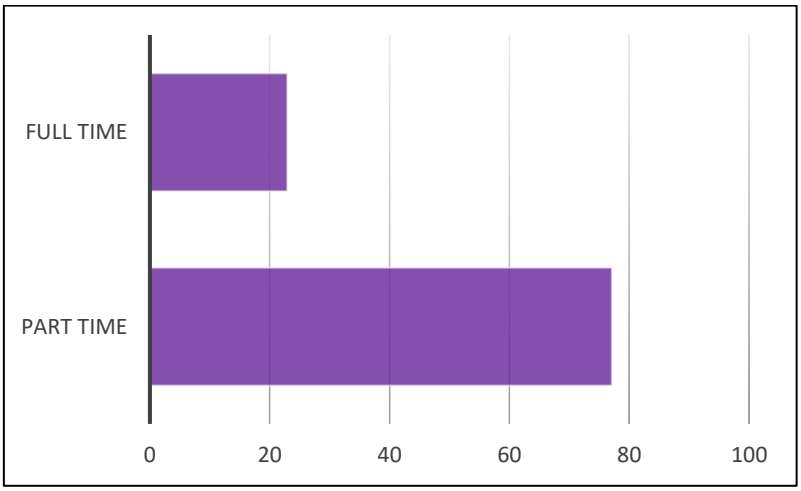
Most participants gender identity (GI) was listed as Male, with a smaller, but substantial, number identifying as Female. Only 2 participants preferred not to state a GI, with roughly equivalent numbers identifying as Trans or Non-Binary. Whilst this would seem to suggest a Male dominated sector, the presence of Female comic creators is significant. It is difficult to account for the lower number of participants as Trans or Non-Binary, though this may reflect social rather than industry-based barriers around articulating GI in the public domain.

A significant number of participants had been working in the industry for 4 to 6 years, with equivalent numbers indicating they had worked either less than 3 years or between 7 and 10. The lowest count was for respondents working 11 to 15 years, with only a small additional number indicating they had been in the business for over 15 years.

Response to the question regarding occupation was mixed, combining participants that listed their occupation in the industry and those that listed a non-industry occupation. In addition, some respondents listed more than one occupation. Consequently, interpreting this data is difficult. What is clear is the wide range of occupations both within and without the industry. The number identifying as a Writer first, with another occupation, formed the most frequent response, with Artist closely following. Though significantly fewer identified as simply a Writer, as an Illustrator, or as an Educator/ Researcher, they are significantly higher than the majority of occupations listed. It is unclear from the responses how many of those listing Educator/ Researcher identified as having this occupation within the industry, and how many saw this role as one they had outside the sector.

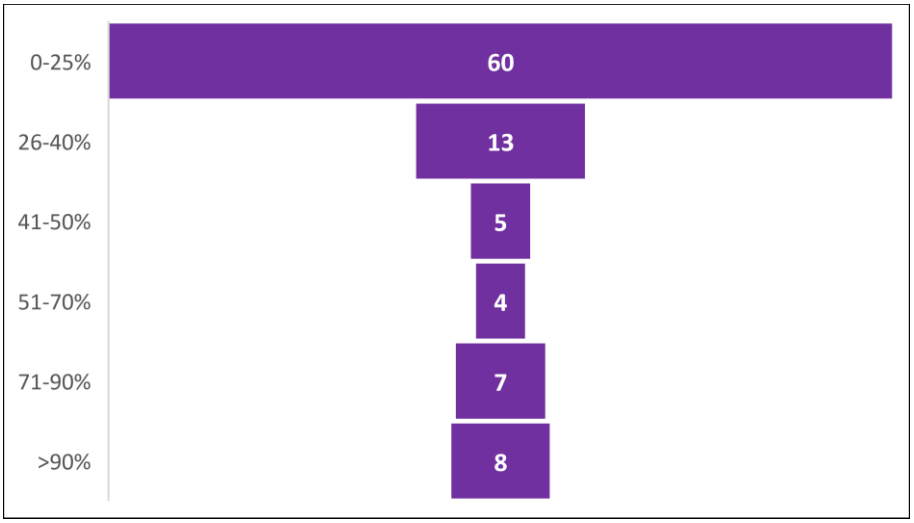
3.2 Employment and income data

Full or Part Time working in comics



[NB: Percentages rounded to whole number]

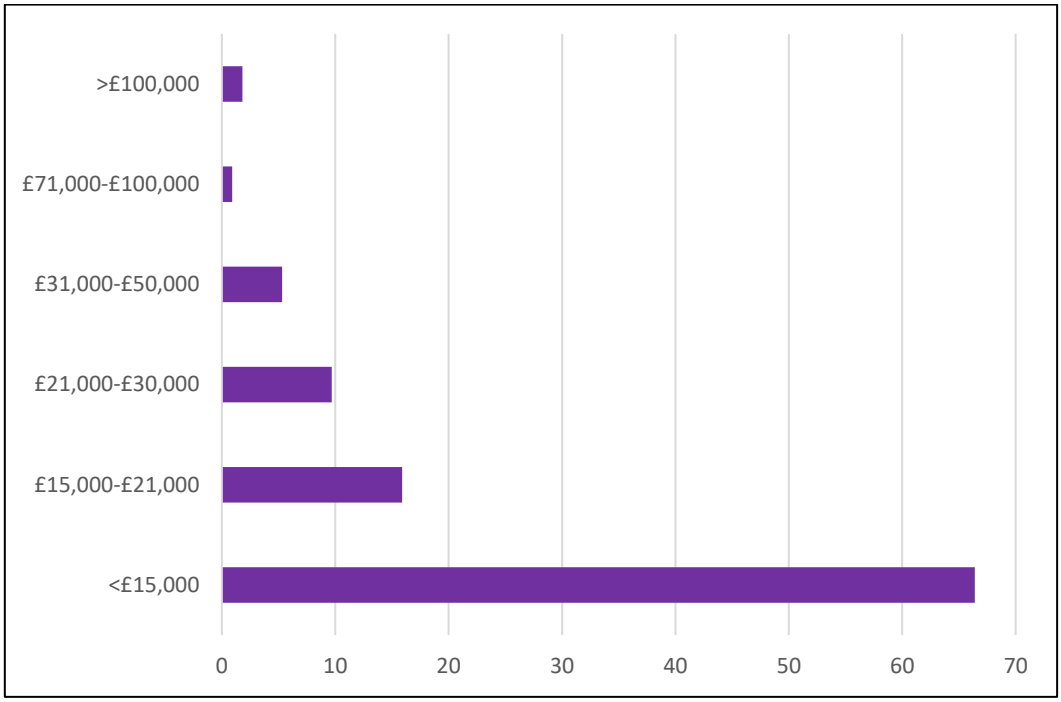
Percentage of total income generated from comics



N = 126

[NB: Percentages rounded to whole number]

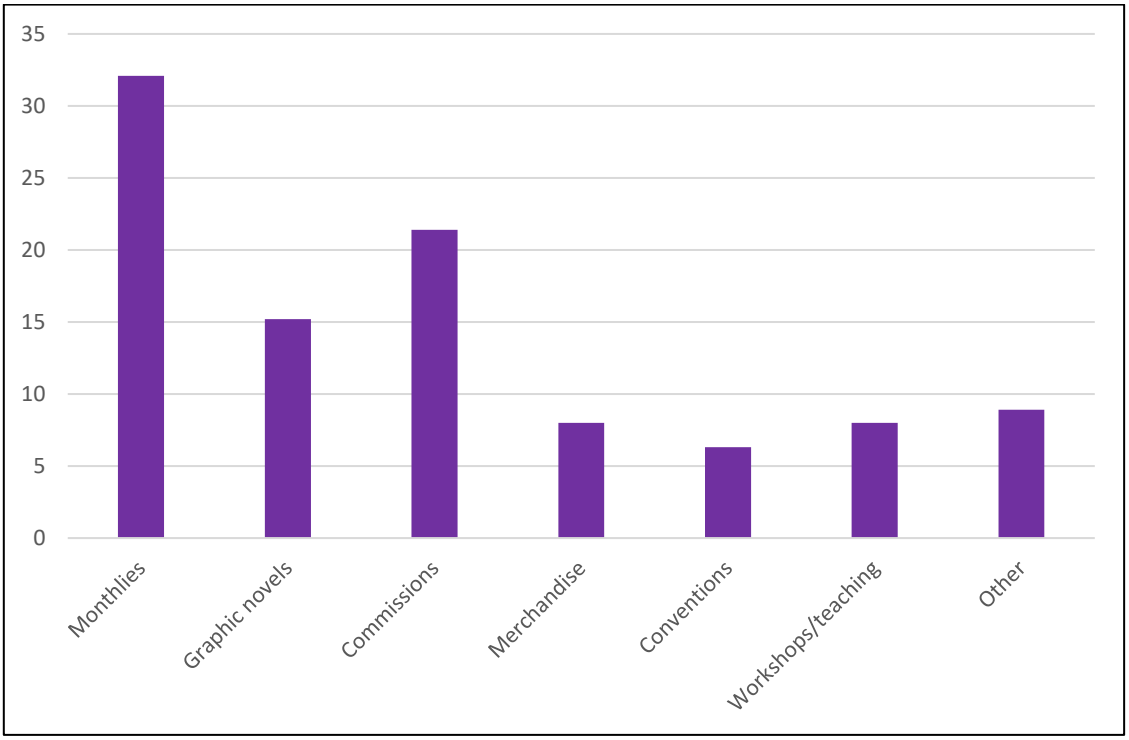
Approximate annual turnover from comics



N = 113

[NB: Percentages rounded to whole number]

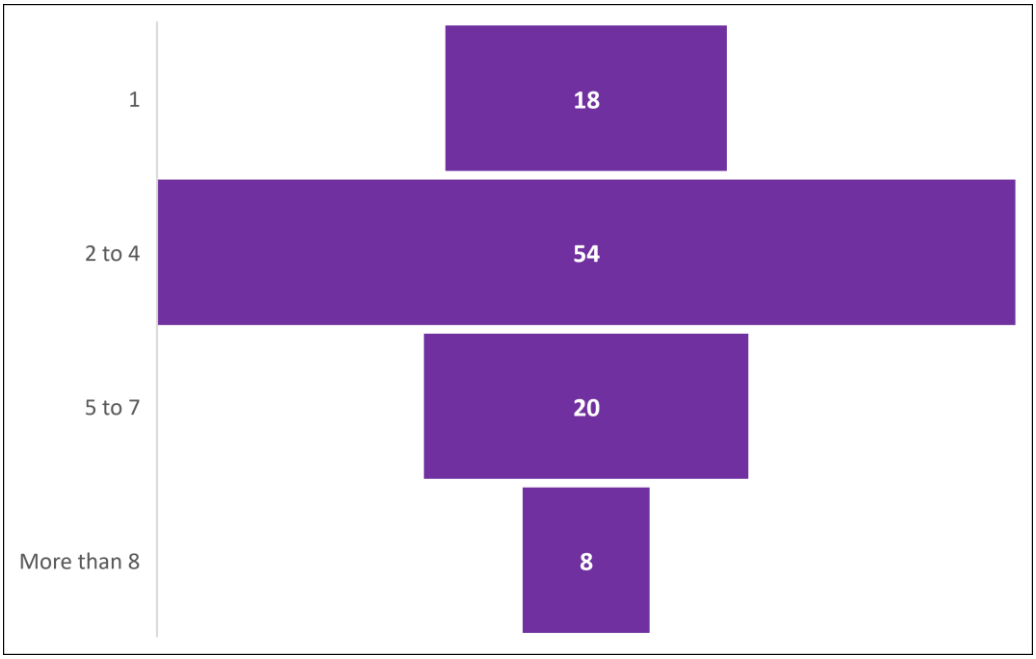
Most important source of income: From Comics



N = 112

[NB: Percentages rounded to whole number]

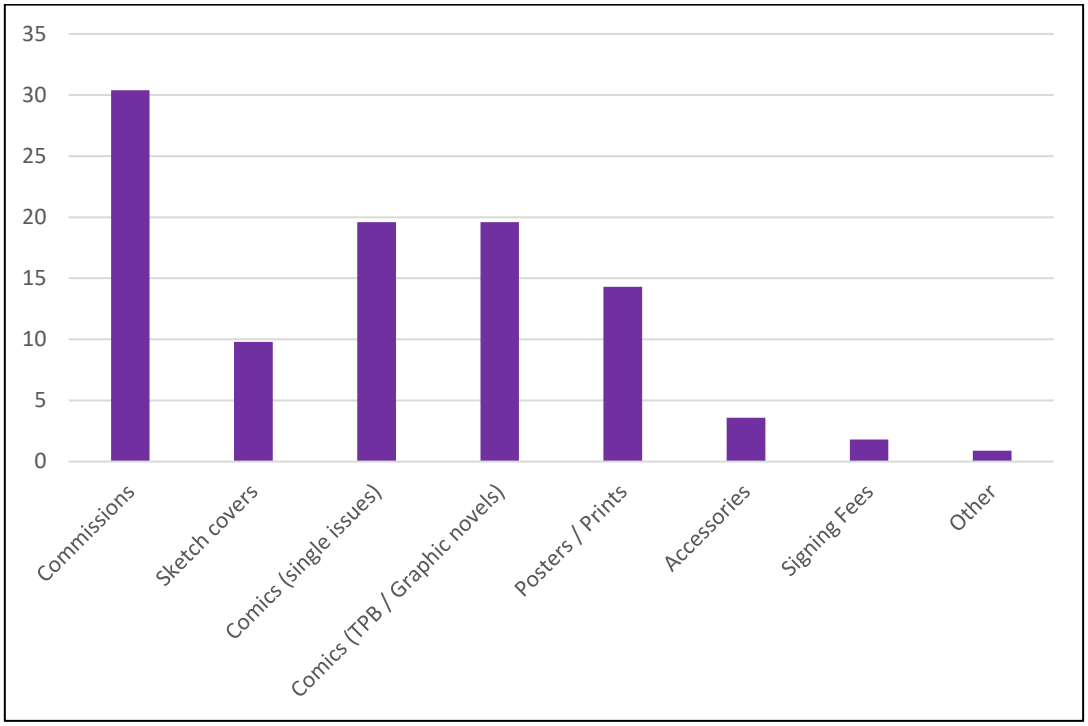
Number of conventions attended



N = 113

[NB: Percentages rounded to whole number]

Most important source of income at conventions



N = 112

[NB: Percentages rounded to whole number]

Employment and income data formed the central focus of questions within the questionnaire. Significantly more respondents indicated they saw their work in comics creation as part-time, with a little more than a fifth indicating they worked full-time. This is consistent with 60% indicating that comics creation only accounted for 0 to 25% of their total income, and around 67% suggesting that less than £15,000 of their annual income came from comics.

The three most important sources of income from comics were Monthlies (the most important income source); Commissions and Trade Paperbacks (TBP)/ Graphic novels. In the response Other, the most frequent responses were Patreon subscriptions; Kickstarter (Crowd) funding) and Sponsorship. It was not possible to establish from the responses whether some participants saw crowd funding or patreon subscriptions as a source of sponsorship, or as a completely different form of income.

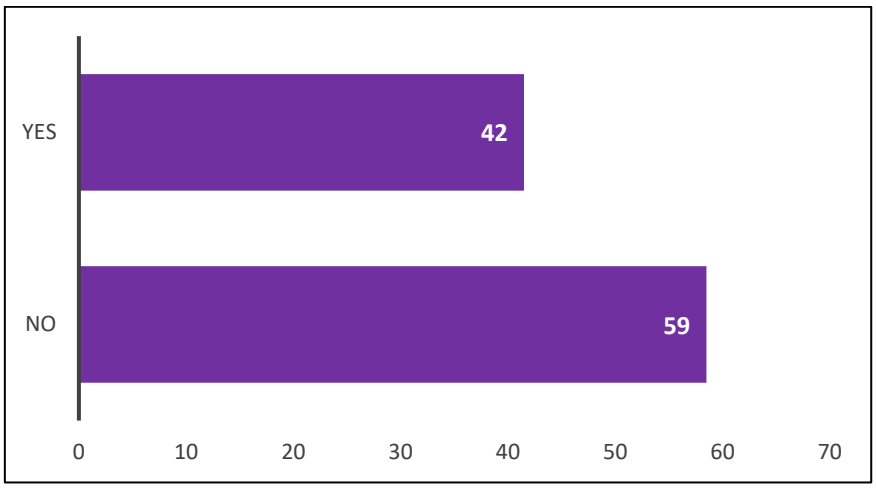
Most of those responding to the question about the number of conventions they had attended as between 2 and 4, with roughly equivalent numbers saying this was either their first or between 5 and 7. A smaller number suggesting they had been to more than 8.

Commissions formed the primary source of income at comics conventions, with the percentage of those that drew income from single comics and TPB/ Graphic Novels being the same. Sale of Posters/ Prints was also significant, closely followed by Sketch Covers.

Accessories, Signing Fees and Other represented significantly lower sources of convention income.

3.3 Rate setting data

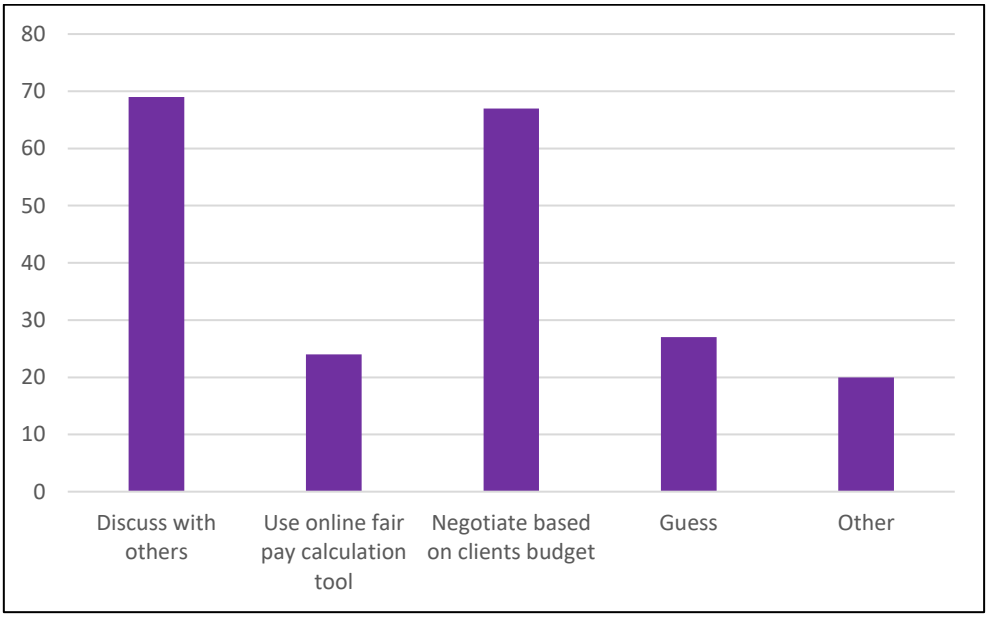
Do you set your rates?



N = 130

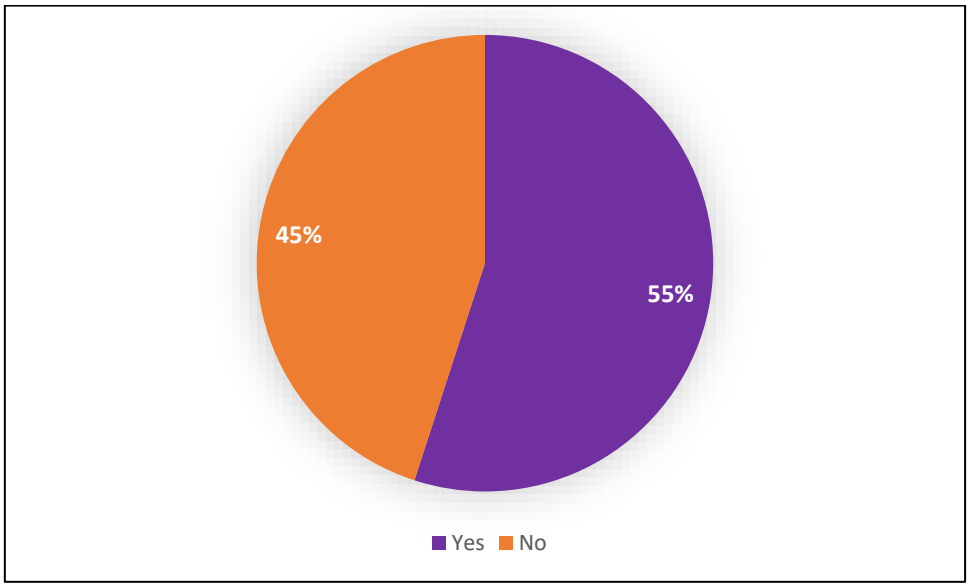
[NB: Percentages rounded to whole number]

How do you set your rates?



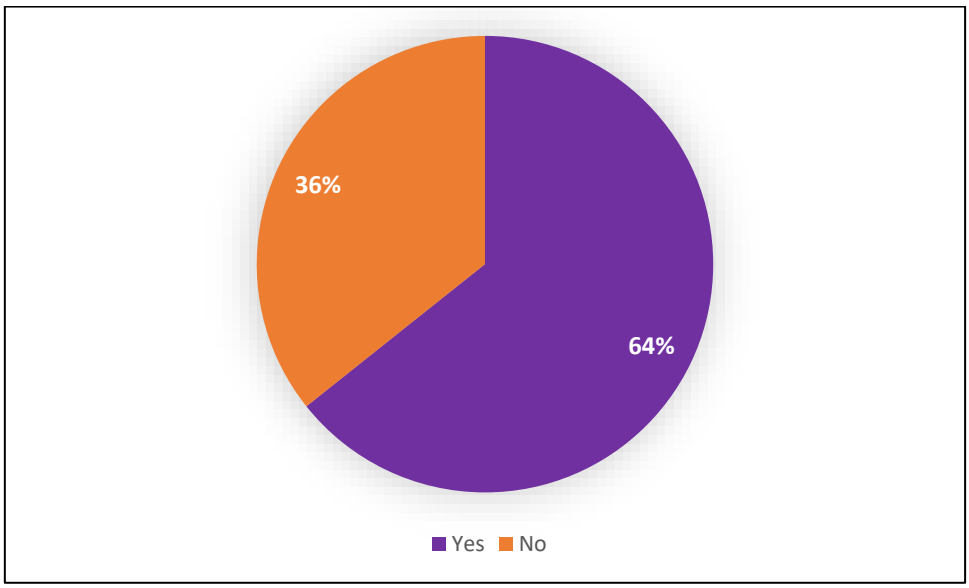
[NB: Values presented represent frequency: More than one option could be identified]

Are you confident in setting your own rates?



[NB: Percentages rounded to whole number]

Are you confident in other administrative tasks associated with your comics work?



N = 129

[NB: Percentages rounded to whole number]

The last few questions address issues associated with business management, specifically the setting of rates for work associated with comics creation and the confidence participants

had in different aspects of operating as self-employed within the comics industry. Whilst most respondents indicated that they did not set rates for their work, the difference is slight and may reflect that either the questions was not understood, or that not all participants work solely on a self-employed basis.

When asked about how rates for work were determined a significant number of those selecting Other added comments such as “a combination of those listed”. As such, it is difficult to draw any substantial conclusions from this data – it not being possible to know how best to allocate responses that suggested multiple answers but did not indicate where those answers might sit. However, Discuss with others and Negotiate based on client’s budget seem to be the most common approaches. Although nearly 18% of respondents suggested they used an existing Online fair pay calculation tools, this is dramatically less than the two main approaches, and slightly lower than those indicating they guessed.

In terms of confidence in different aspects of the administration of operating as self-employed within the comics creation sector most expressed confidence in both setting rates and in other administrative tasks associated with their comics work. There does seem to be a distinct contrasts between Confidence in setting rates and whether participants set their own rates or not. However, this may reflect their confidence in either the people they discuss rates with, or their capacity to negotiate with possible clients. A greater proportion of respondents also indicated they felt confident in other administrative tasks associated with their work in comics. Despite that, the percentage that were not confident in either setting their rates, or in other administrative tasks associated with their comics work, was high.

3.4 Section Conclusion

Section 3 has given us an overview of the characteristics associated with comics creators identified within the questionnaire. Most are aged between 26 and 35, are Male, have worked in the industry for 4 to 6 years and are primarily working as a writer (with other activities), though many work as an artist.

The majority of respondents work part-time in the comics business, with the largest proportion of them earning less than £15,0000 a year from their comics work; this representing 25% or less of their total income. Monthlies and Commissions formed the main sources of their comics work, with Commissions and the sale of comics (Single issues or TPB/ Graphic novels) being the main source of income from conventions. For most participants Thought Bubble 2019 was not their first Comic Con, though they may have only been to between 1 and 3 other conventions.

The data on Rate setting proved difficult to interpret, with most saying they did not set rates yet were confident in setting them. Most respondents established how they charged for their work by either discussing it with others or negotiating with clients – based on the client’s budget. The relatively limited use of online fair pay tools could indicate a number of

things, including availability and access to such tools; level of confidence in the provider of the tools or the background data informing them; an individual's limited confidence in being able to use the figure generated by the tools algorithms as part of a discussion with potential clients, or greater confidence in the collective experience of others in the industry that are more familiar with how the business operates. In order to ascertain which of these, or other, factors are at work, more in-depth/ qualitative investigation than can be achieved through a relatively simple questionnaire is required.

As a snapshot this section has provided some insight; however, it is difficult to draw from these findings any substantive issues that need addressing. In order to facilitate a deeper understanding of some of the issues facing comics creators it is necessary to look more closely at how the responses to different questions intersect, that is what shall be covered in section 4.

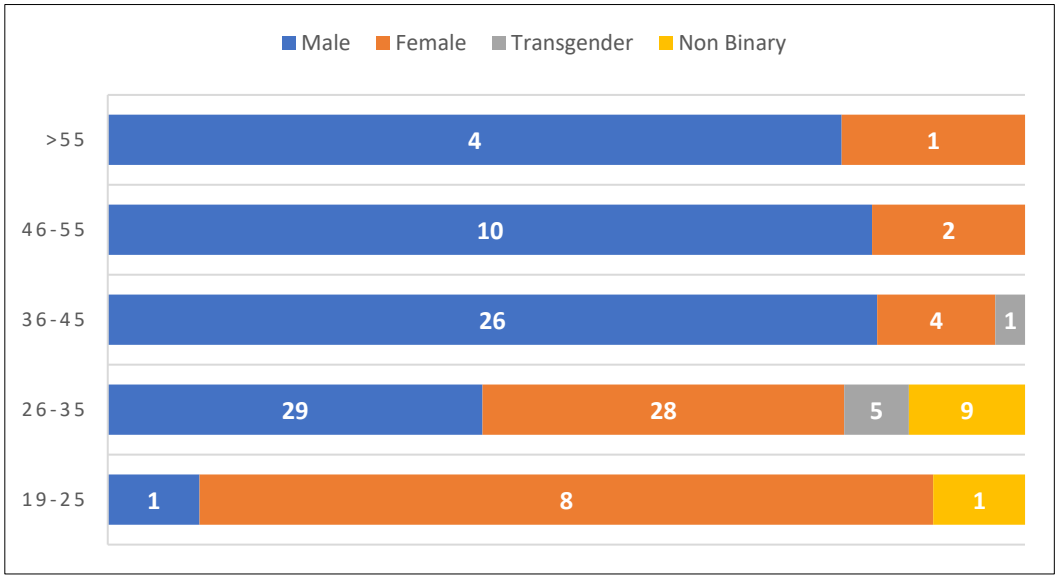
4.0 Introduction to selected cross tabulation findings

In this section a series of cross-tabulated graphs are presented. A full presentation of all cross-tabulated graphs would not be appropriate. The full list of two-category chart would produce 156 graphs and three-category charts would number 1,716, the majority of which would tell us very little. The selection presented in this report represent some of the key finding from two and three category comparisons. In the first set, the focus is on gender identity (GI), comparing this with response for Age; Years in the industry; Most important source of income in comics, and Approximate annual turnover. Age is the focus for the second set; that will be compared with Percentage of total income; Confidence in setting rates for comics work, and Confidence in other administrative roles associated with comics work. In the final section three categories will be considered; they are GI with Years in the industry and Percentage of total income from comics work, and GI with Confidence in broad business tasks (covering both rate setting and other administrative tasks associated with comics work).

Graphs in this section are presented with two ways of reading the findings. The numbers within each bar is the frequency of responses. This is the raw data number captured from the questionnaire. The bar itself covers all valid responses in the listed category. The difference in colour indicates the proportion of the total response that can be attributed to the categories listed at the top of the graph. Presenting the data in this way makes comparison between the different categories easier – as we are comparing proportions rather than frequencies (the process is commonly referred to as *normalisation*).

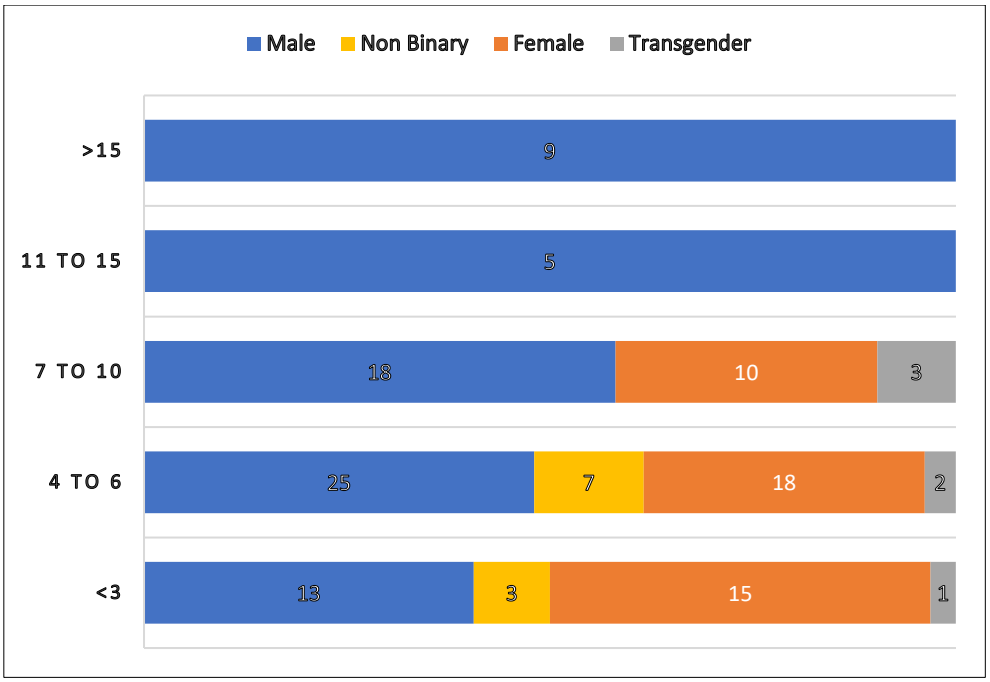
4.1 GI with …

GI with Age



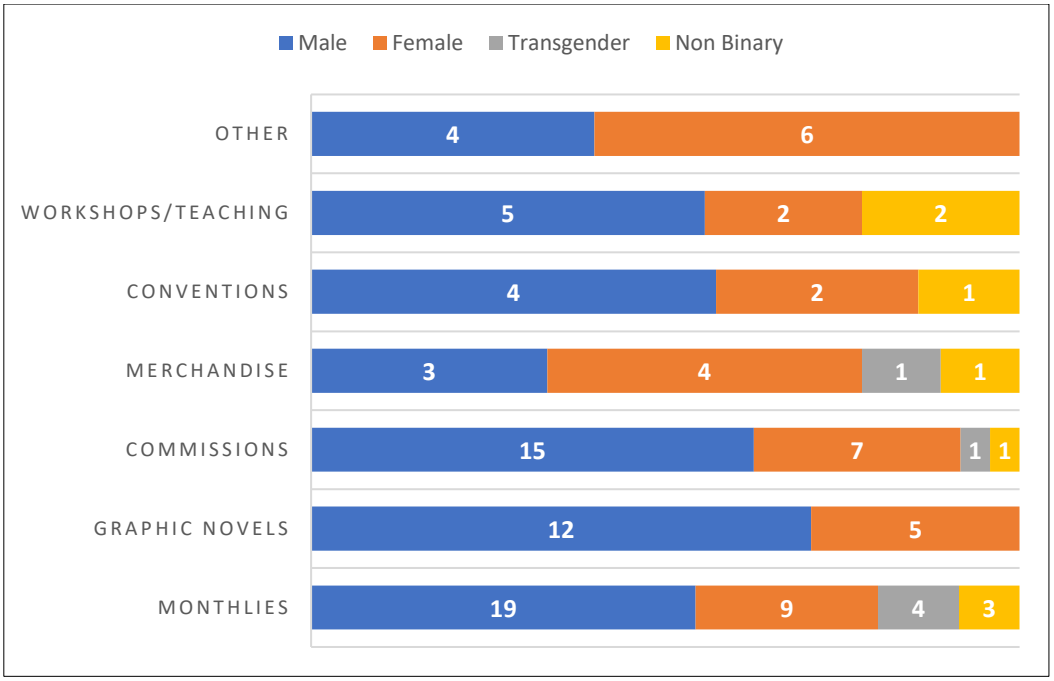
N = 129

GI with Years in Industry

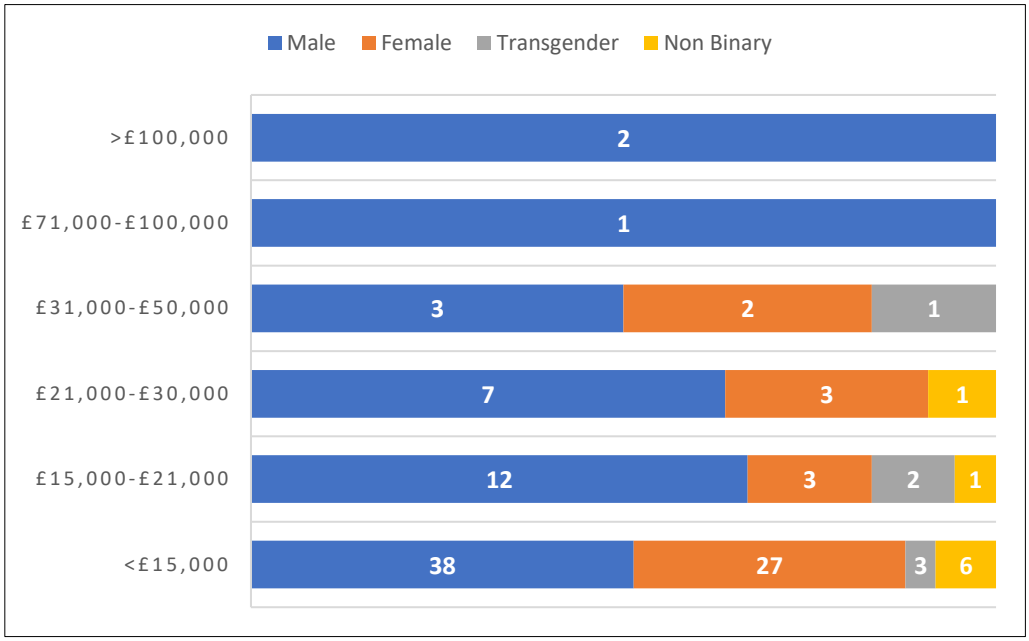


N = 129

GI with the Most important source of income



GI with Approximate annual turnover



N = 112

When we consider the relationship between age and GI we find the largest proportion of respondents, at the range 19 to 25, were Female. From that point on the proportion declines as the age range increases, though the proportion of Female to Male respondents at 26 to 35 is roughly equivalent. As such it would seem to suggest a significant interest in Female engagement with the industry as an early employment choice. Male engagement is significantly higher than all other GIs for ages from 36 to 45 to over 55. Whilst Female participation is present for all age ranges the proportion is consistently low against that of Male comic creators. Regarding respondents that identify as either Trans or Non-Binary, the participation is consistently low; though, in combination, they have a significant impact in the 26 to 35 range. There are no respondents identifying as Trans or Non-Binary over the age of 46. This may reflect wider social changes, as a comic creator aged 46 would have been 15 in 1988, the year of the infamous Local Government Act, whose Section 28 outlawed the 'promotion' of LGBT+ identities.

The view that we are seeing growth in Female engagement with the comics industry, and in the number of creators who identify as Trans or Non-Binary, is reinforced in the graph presenting data that cross-tabulates GI with Years in the industry. All respondents that have been in the industry 11 or more years identify as Male, whilst the proportion of non-male GIs is around 42% for those in the industry 7 to 10 years, with female, Trans and Non-Binary respondents forming the majority for those with 6 or less years in the industry.

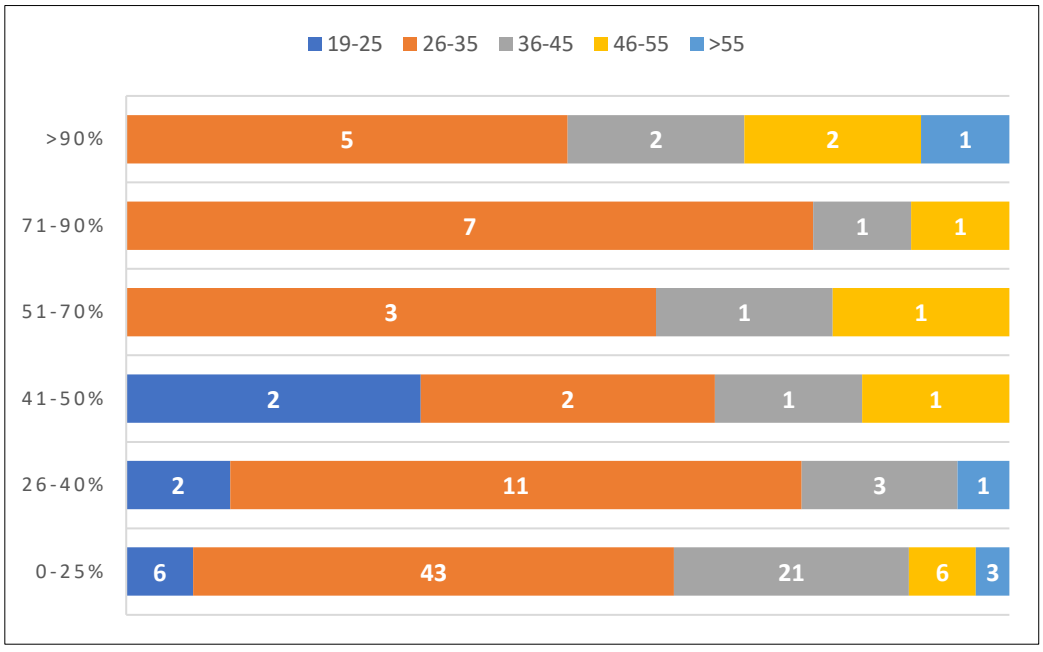
In respect of the relationship between GI and Important source of income, Males present the main recipients of all source bar Merchandise and Other, with rough equivalence with non-male GIs in Workshops/ Teaching; Conventions and Monthlies. Female respondents represent the largest non-male group in all categories bar Workshops/ Teaching, in which

they have an equivalence with respondents identifying as Non-Binary. Trans comic creators only appear in Monthlies; Commissions and Merchandise, whilst Non-Binary creators appear in all bar Graphic Novels and Other. The sample is too small to make conclusions that are overly general; however, the data does suggest a male dominance, with significant in-roads being made by female creators, whilst hinting that Non-Binary, and more particularly Trans, creators may be requiring support to develop their presence more in the industry.

Possibly one of the most telling graphs is that for GI and Approximate turnover. Male respondents form the main GI at all income ranges. There are only Male respondents at the highest income levels, and only when non-male GIs are combined is there equivalence in the Les than £15,000 and £31,00 to £50,000 ranges. In part, this may reflect the length of time respondents have been in the industry; however, it does strongly suggest a gendered income gap. Further work into gendered barriers to income equivalence and progression in the industry is required before this can be definitively established. In addition, the presence of a possible gendered income gap indicates the importance of mentoring, role models and advocacy to support non-male creators.

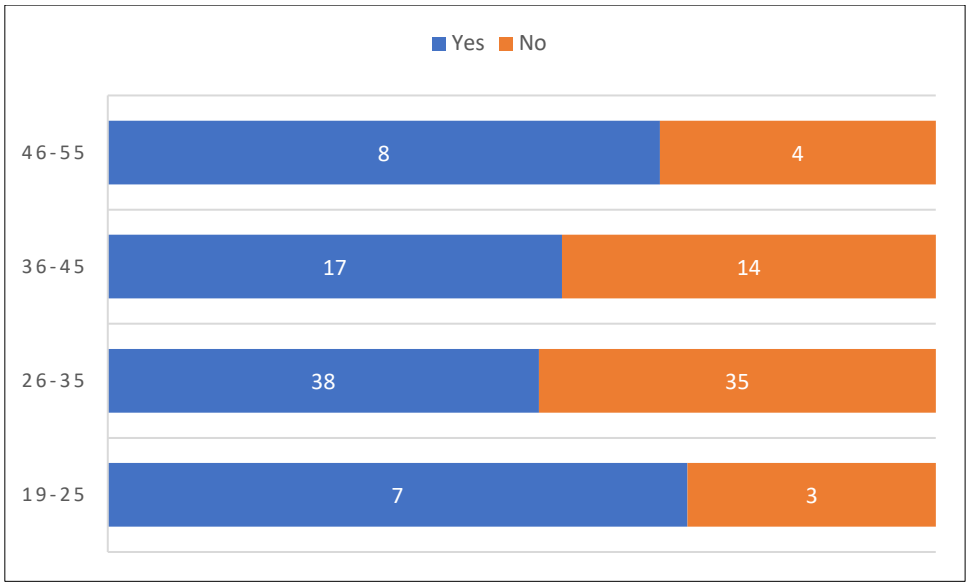
4.2 Age with …

Age with Percentage of total income



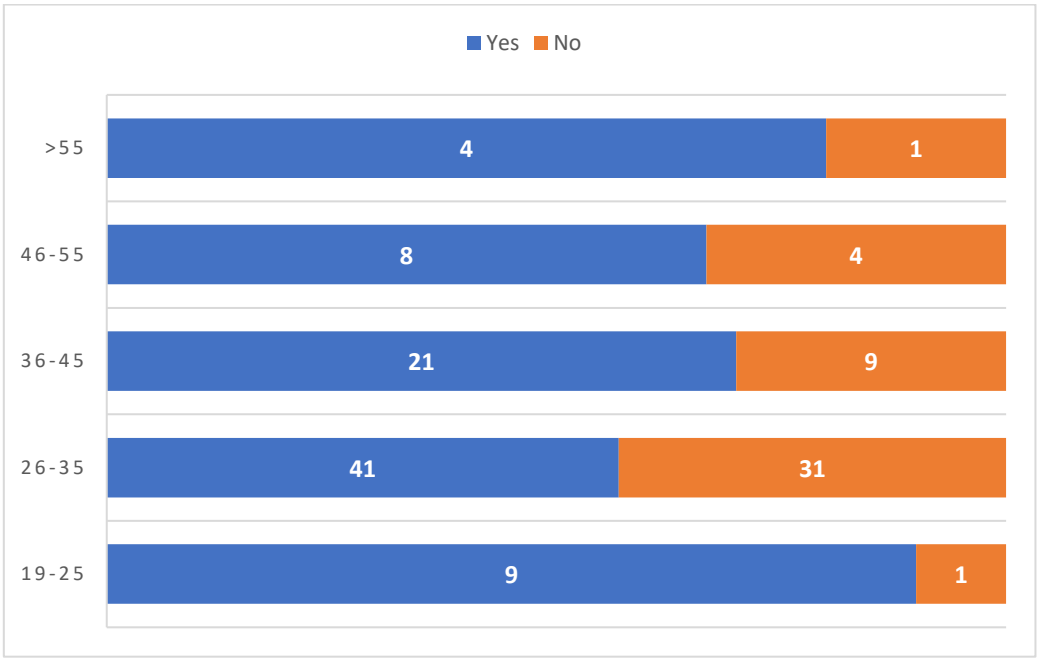
N = 126

Age with Confidence in setting rates



N = 126

Age with Confidence in other administrative roles



N = 129

As well as gender identity, age seemed to have a significant association with a number of variables. Having identified gender as related to Years in the industry and Income one might be led a position that Age may relate to the Percentage of total income generated from work in comics. However, this does not seem to be the case as there is roughly an

equivalent proportion of those aged 26 to 35 who are earning less than 25% and more than 90% of their income from the industry. Respondents aged 26 to 35 are the only group to appear at all levels, dominating them all bar 41% to 50% , where they are equivalent to younger respondents. It is only where older bands are combined that other areas of equivalence appear, such as the near equivalence at 51% to 70% and the direct equivalence at greater than 90%. Whilst it is not surprising to find younger participants in the lower percentages of total income scales, as one would anticipate someone seeking to establish themselves in an industry to supplement their emerging income with other sources, the dominance of those aged 26 to 35 at all levels would seem to suggest this age band is dominating the industry, and why that should be warrants further inquiry. Though older age bands (i.e. 36 to 45 and 46 to 55) are a significant proportion of those earning at all levels, why the proportion of them should be lower than younger bands also warrants further investigation.

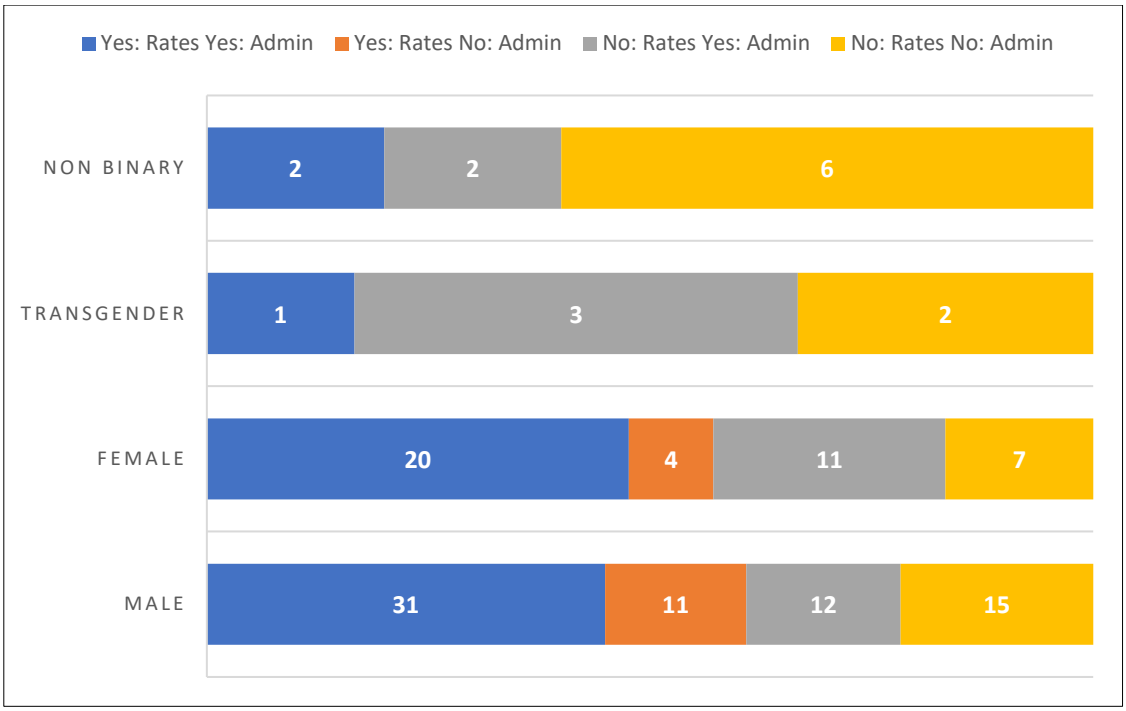
Confidence in business tasks (covering both Confidence in rate setting and Confidence in other administrative tasks) was quite mixed. There seems to be a rough equivalence for those aged 26 to 45 in rate setting, with more confidence in the younger and older age bands (there were no responses from creators aged over 55). Though slight, it would be interesting to know why confidence is higher in those two age bands. To an extent, that pattern is echoed in the Confidence in other admin task, with the older and younger respondents expressing higher confidence. In both categories the lowest level of confidence was in those aged 26 to 35. This is curious given the dominance of this age band in the first graph.

4.3 Using three sources of data

Combining three data source brings with it difficulties in graphical representation. The graphs presented here illustrate a number of interesting findings from the data captured and, for ease of reading and interpreting, have been kept as simple as possible. Three of them consider confidence in broad business tasks. In the first, that combined category is placed alongside GI. Age is considered in the second, and the third cross-tabulates it with whether respondents identified their role in the industry as an artist or a writer. That later restriction brought the sample population to 93. The final graph returns us to questions of gendered differences in longevity in the industry and proportion of income.

GI with Confidence in broad business tasks

(Being a combination of data from Setting Rates and Other Admin Tasks)



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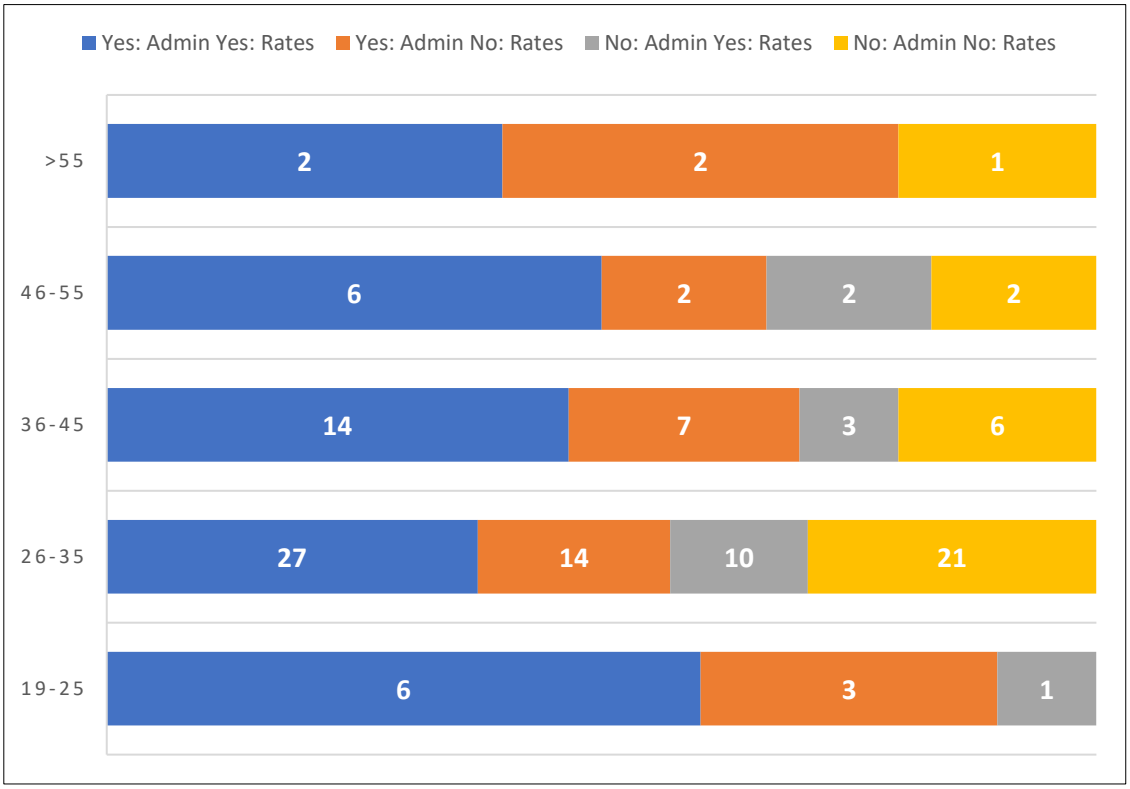
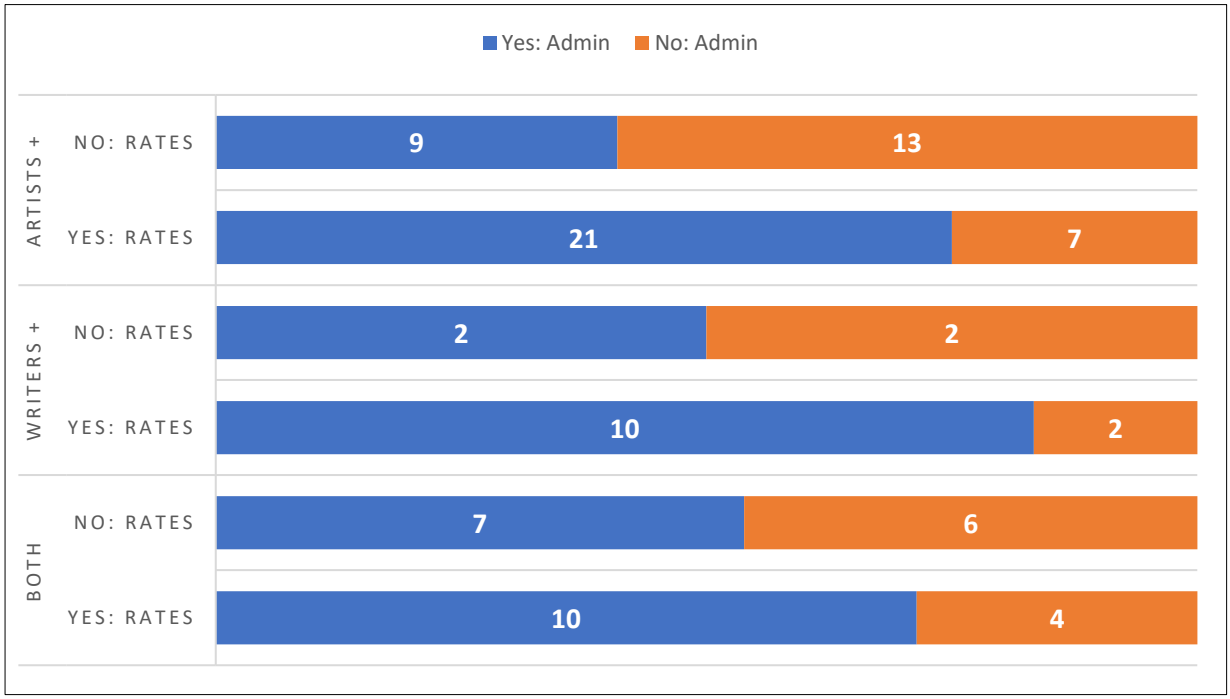
Age with Confidence in broad business tasks

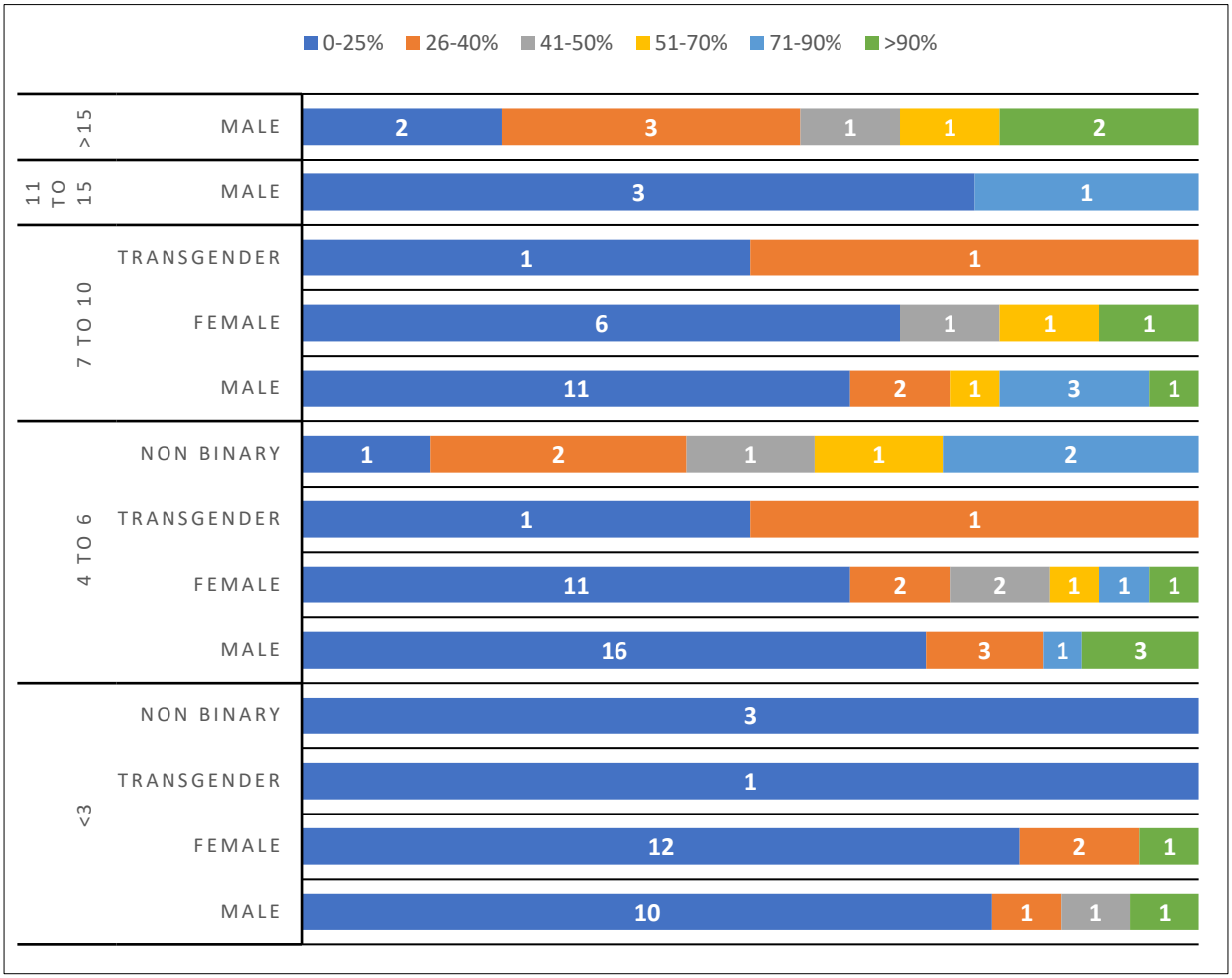


N = 129

Comparing Artists and Writers with their Confidence in broad business tasks



N = 93



GI with Years in the industry and Percentage of total income

N = 124

By combining the two categories for Confidence set by the questionnaire we are able to obtain an insight into the general level of confidence different variables have when associated with a broad range of business tasks. The first graph take GI as its variable; that graph would seem to indicate a number of potential areas for mentoring and training/ support. Such programmes could encourage respondents to develop their overall business management skills. Proportionally, Male and Female respondents seemed to have equivalent confidence in their skills in both rate setting and other administrative tasks, though in both cases, this was less than 50%. Trans respondents felt significantly less confident in setting rates for their work while those identifying as Non-Binary were least confident in all aspects of business management identified in the questionnaire. Female respondents were significantly less confident in rate setting than Males, while Male respondents were more likely to say they were unconfident in any aspect of business management than Females. These gendered difference may be connected to the broad Male dominance of the industry suggested in the second graph at 4.1, but the data we currently have available is insufficient in being able to test such a conclusion.

If we consider Age as a variable against confidence in broad business tasks there seems to be a greater level of overall confidence, though it is only in those aged 19 to 25 that exhibit a higher level of confidence across both measure than lacking confidence in at least one of them. It is not possible to tell, from this data, why that might be; whether a general youthful exuberance, a lack of experience in the industry meaning they have encountered fewer knocks and setbacks, or some other reason. In those respondents aged between 36 and 55 the proportion is almost evenly split between people confident in both and those lacking confidence in at least one. In all ages, a lack of confidence in at least one identified aspect of business management is high; that suggests training, mentoring, or some other activity to support those working in the comics industry, would benefit many.

The third graph cross-tabulates the two factors identified as indicators of Confidence in broad business tasks with respondents that identified as Artists or Writers. These are consolidated categories, derived from the occupation list presented on page 9. As a consequence, the categories draw together a number of occupations that can be drawn into wider clusters. The first cluster is headed “Artists +”. That cluster combines respondents who identified themselves as artists; as artists first, followed by another occupation; or who identified as having an artist aligned occupation (e.g. illustrator). In the second cluster, the same principle as has been applied to “Artist” was applied to “Writer”; “Writer +” thus incorporates more than just those respondents that listed their occupation as “Writer”. In the “Both” cluster we have included those respondents that put both Artist and Writer in their list of occupations. Because of that abridgement of the data, only 93 of the 131 respondents could be included in the data set. All of the clusters seem confident in both categories included in our consideration of Confidence in broad business tasks. With the Writers+ cluster being very slightly more confident in both than the Artists + or the Both+ cluster. There is a reversed echo of this in those clusters where there is a lack of confidence in both, with Artists+ seemingly the least confident, followed by the Writers+ cluster and then Both.

Across all three variables (GI; Age; Occupation) there is a clear lack of confidence in at least one aspect of business management. Whilst GI seems to have the greatest impact, Age and Occupation also seem to be factors. Establishing mentoring programmes and/or training opportunities would seem to be a way forward in supporting Artists and Writers in developing key business management skills.

When considering the complex relationship between GI, Years in industry and Percentage of total income the conclusion that the industry is currently dominated by Males that have a substantial amount of experience in industry seem unquestionable. Although respondents that identify as Non-Binary, that have been in the industry for 4 to 7 years, seem to have significantly outperformed all other GI categories, Trans and Non-Binary respondents are generally clustered around the lower end of the spectrum: as such, further investigation is warranted. Though Males, that have worked in the industry for 4 or more years, consistently out rank Females in earning more than 50% of their total income from Comics there is close equivalence for those that have been in the industry for 4 to 6 years.

Broadly GI, longevity in the industry, and the percentage of total income generated from comics creation, seems to reinforce gendered differences. As such, it suggests more detailed and in-depth work around qualitative experience of working in the industry is required if we are to provide meaningful support for creators.

4.4 Section Conclusion

This section has highlighted a number of key issues emergent from the data captured. For the most part those issues are centred on gender identity. Whilst age and longevity in the field of comics creation has a discernible impact it is GI that seems to most profoundly effect a creator's capacity to progress a career in the industry, sustain that career and obtain a reasonable level of financial security from their expertise. It is those issues that will form the backbone of the overall conclusions and recommendations outlined in section 5.

5.0 Conclusions and Recommendations

The high likelihood of barriers to establishing a sustainable career in comics creation has appeared as a central finding of the questionnaire. Those barriers are ones of gender identity and age with non-male respondents emerging in the sector whilst seeming to struggle to sustain a career in the industry or obtain a reasonable income from that work pathway. Female respondents doing disproportionately worse than their male counterparts in terms of longevity and income, whilst Trans and Non-Binary respondents were broadly less confident in managing their business. All these issues raise concerns about the sector that require further, more in-depth, investigation if we are to establish the factors that are influencing the patterns and relationships that have been identified. Further, more qualitatively driven, inquiry in regard to those topics is central to developing an understanding of the most appropriate response to the concerns raised; however, some interim recommendations are also necessary to being addressing those issues.

It is our recommendation that some form of virtual panel be established that encompasses the diversity of comic book creators, with a view to setting forth frameworks for the provision of:

- Training programmes in business management skills – such programmes should be led by individuals with considerable experience in supporting micro and single trader creative businesses, so as to better match the profile of those that work as comic creators.
- Mentoring schemes - so that emerging creators, of any age and gender identity, can acquire a richer understanding of how they can be effective within their chosen industry.
- Advocacy clusters – which can be used to work alongside larger comics business to ensure better pay, conditions and support is offered to highly skilled professionals working in the industry.

The report itself also has a number of limitations and addressing those limitation in further inquiry is also of vital importance. There currently is no data captured around ethnicity or disability; those two omissions alone represent a substantial gap in the research that future inquiries should address.