

Dark Side Of Flow: An Explorative Study On Cinema Creatives

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Abstract

Flow, conceptualized by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, is widely understood as an optimal psychological state characterized by deep immersion, intrinsic motivation, and enhanced performance. This study aims to explore the negative aspects of flow within the context of cinema creatives. The research is grounded in Flow theory given by Csikszentmihalyi and Burnout theory by Maslach. Although previous research has highlighted the significance of flow, its positive implications and negative aspects such as burnout, limited attention has been given to variables such as disconnection, emotional strain and paradoxical relationship between creativity and burnout in flow some of which are given by the burnout theory in the professional field of cinema. For the course of the study, a qualitative research design was employed. Participants including directors, editors, writers, rappers shared their lived experiences and data was collected using semi structured interviews and analysed through Braun and Clarke's analysis. With the emergence of 6 broad themes, the findings expect to contribute to the field of positive psychology and cinema studies. The study offers practical implications for cinema creatives and schools, organisations and production houses.

Keywords: Burnout, Cinema Creatives, Flow

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I. Introduction

The creative industries, particularly cinema, are widely recognized for their ability to generate exceptional artistic outputs through intense periods of focused engagement that transform imagination into compelling visual narratives. Professionals such as directors, cinematographers, editors, and designers frequently rely on deep psychological immersion to achieve creative excellence. However, the same intensity that fuels creativity—including the pursuit of perfection, emotional vulnerability, and sustained cognitive engagement—may also contribute to psychological distress, professional exhaustion, and reduced well-being. This paradox raises important questions about whether the pursuit of optimal creative experience can inadvertently lead to burnout among cinema professionals.

This study is grounded in two primary theoretical frameworks: Csikszentmihalyi's Flow Theory and Maslach's Burnout Theory.

Flow Theory provides the foundational understanding of optimal experience.

According to Csikszentmihalyi's framework, flow occurs when there is a balance between challenge and skill, clear goals are present, immediate feedback is available, and the individual experiences a merger of action and awareness, loss of self-consciousness, and transformation of time. The theory emphasizes eight core characteristics: complete concentration on the task, clear goals and immediate feedback, balance between challenge and skills, merger of action and awareness, loss of self-consciousness, transformation of time, intrinsic motivation, and sense of control.

Burnout Theory, as developed by Christina Maslach, conceptualizes burnout as a psychological syndrome characterized by three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization (or cynicism), and reduced personal accomplishment. This framework helps explain how prolonged exposure to work-related stressors, including potentially excessive flow states, can lead to psychological and physical depletion.

The integration of these theories suggests a complex relationship where the same psychological mechanisms that produce optimal experience (flow) might, under certain conditions or when experienced excessively, contribute to the development of burnout symptoms. This theoretical synthesis forms the basis for understanding how cinema creatives might experience both the benefits and potential dangers of flow states.

Despite the importance of this issue, research has largely treated flow and burnout as separate

constructs, leaving a gap in understanding how they interact in real-world creative work. Cinema professionals represent a population in which this relationship is particularly salient due to the simultaneous demands of artistic vision, technical complexity, emotional labor, and commercial pressures. Understanding how creatives subjectively experience the shift from beneficial flow to harmful overengagement is essential for developing interventions that preserve the positive aspects of creative immersion while promoting sustainable well-being.

The present study aims to explore the negative aspects of flow as subjectively experienced by cinema creatives and to examine how these experiences may contribute to burnout. By investigating the lived experiences of professionals across creative roles within the film industry, this research seeks to inform interventions that support sustainable creativity, enhance mental health, and promote long-term career well-being while maintaining the transformative potential of flow in artistic practice.

II. Method

This explorative qualitative study aims to explore the experiences of cinema creatives including designers, directors, editors, actors, and singers etc. when immersed in the state of flow or complete immersion. Using in-depth, open-ended interviews, and analyses through Braun and Clarke's model, the study aims to understand how flow relates to burnout.

Participants

The participants for this study, typically ranging from the age groups of 20s to 50s, consists of 10–12 cinema creatives, carefully selected. Individuals who are actively engaged in creative roles within the cinema industry such as direction, editing, design, and singing were chosen through purposive sampling as this ensures rich data from those who work at the epicenter of intense creative processes, high emotional and cognitive, making them ideal for exploring the dynamics of flow and burnout.

Sample

For this study the sampling technique employed is purposive sampling as this ensures rich data from those who work at the epicenter of intense creative processes, high emotional and cognitive, making them ideal for exploring the dynamics of flow and burnout.

Inclusion. The inclusion criteria for the study is minimum one year of experience in cinema-related creative work and those who have experienced flow at work.

Exclusion. The exclusion criteria is individuals without creative responsibilities and those unfamiliar with the concept of flow or unable to recall such experiences of flow or burnout at work.

Data Collection Methods

The data is collected through in-depth, semi structured, open ended interviews which aim at gaining not only an in-depth understanding of the negative aspects of psychological flow but also it's relationship with burnout among cinema creatives.

Before the starting of the study, it was ensured that participants received a pamphlet defining flow and the interview questionnaire was reviewed by panel members who expertise in the field of flow and positive psychology.

Procedure

Participants were identified through contacts, industry connections, and social media outreach. Informed consent, voluntary participation and briefing was ensured before the participation of each participant, with a clear explanation of their right to withdraw at any given point of time and voluntary nature of the study.

The interviews were conducted online, based on the convenience, presence and preference of the participant, ensuring comfort.

Braun and Clarke's, a 6 stage systematic way to find patterns or themes in qualitative data guided the data analysis in the study.

Anonymity and Confidentiality was strictly maintained throughout the study. The participants were debriefed and offered emotional support if any psychological discomfort arises or is seen to arise during the course of the study.

III. Results And Discussion

Through in-depth, open-ended interviews analysed using Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis, the findings reveal how experiences of flow intersect with burnout particularly following the larger themes of Fatigue post Flow, Anxiety post Flow,

Exhaustion-Fulfillment Paradox, Disconnection post Flow, Emotional Strain on Functioning, and Cognitive Strain of Functioning.

Exploring Flow: From the Lens of the Participant

Participants describe *flow* as a state of deep absorption and intense involvement in their creative work, where attention becomes fully absorbed and awareness of time and surroundings fades away. Many articulate this as losing track of hours, working continuously without noticing physical needs, and experiencing a narrowed focus that feels rhythmic and sustained. This absorption is often described as effortless yet powerful, marked by heightened concentration and precision, where distractions recede into the background and the task at hand feels all-encompassing. “I don’t even notice how many hours have passed,” “I completely lose sense of time,” and “Often lose track of time completely” captures this recurring and repetitive experience of uninterrupted engagement and temporal distortion.

Flow is also described as a profound sense of immersion that involves feeling dissociated in a neutral or even positive way, as though they are no longer separate from the work but instead exist within the world they are creating. This experiential merging is emotional as much as cognitive, with participants reporting that they stop performing and begin genuinely feeling the work. Expressions such as “I felt dissociated not in a bad way but like I was part of the world I was creating,” “I wasn’t myself; I was inside the story,” and “I don’t just forget time I forget myself a little” illustrate how flow entails a deep psychological and emotional absorption.

Additionally, participants describe that flow produces intense focus and productivity alongside physical and emotional consequences once the state ends. It is experienced as rewarding and necessary for creative output. “It feels like a switch turns on. I become focused, confident” participants also note the aftermath, acknowledging fatigue, sensory overload, and emotional emptiness: “when I finally stop, I realize how tired I am... it’s a mix of feeling productive and feeling overwhelmed afterward.”

Table 1: Table 1 describes the Participant and their Occupation details

Participant	Occupation
P1	Rapper
P2	Director and Cinematographer
P3	Editor
P4	Cinematographer
P5	Actor
P6	Editor
P7	Actor, Editor and Filmmaker
P8	Editor
P9	Editor and Writer
P10	Filmmaker
P11	Director and Editor
P12	Writer

Details about the participant and occupation are listed in Table 1.

Theme 1: Fatigue post Flow

Table 2: Table 2 describes the Subthemes and Codes for the theme, Fatigue post Flow

Subthemes	Codes	Excerpts
Physical Fatigue	Exhausted	“Exhaustion without Fulfilment” (P4)
	Drained	“Your body and mind feel completely drained.”(P5)
	Lack of Sleep	
Mental Fatigue	Burnout	
	“Physical fatigue goes away in a day or two. Mental fatigue takes much longer.” (P2)	
	Mentally Exhausted	
Recovery Lag		

	<p>“I was exhausted for a couple of days after that.” (P10)</p> <p>“Not on the first day. But once the project was finished, the next day I felt very sleepy and tired....not exactly burnout, but I was exhausted—both mentally and physically. My stamina was low and there was mental fatigue.” (P3)</p>
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“I took two days off afterward” (P10)

“After coming out of it...” (P4)

The theme, Fatigue post Flow describes how cinema creatives, including directors, cinematographers, editors, filmmakers, and writers, feel a sense of Fatigue post being deeply engaged or immersed in their work. The theme shows that being immersed in flow can be very absorbing, but it often leads to both physical and mental fatigue. This is shown as being drained, lack of sleep, and burnout. Mental fatigue includes feeling burnout and mental exhaustion. Moreover, the theme includes a strong subtheme about Recovery Lag. This shows that spending a long time in creative work can slow down recovery. Fatigue stood out as one of the most common experiences, consistently mentioned in all twelve interviews.

The excerpts and codes from the subtheme, Physical Fatigue under the larger theme of Fatigue post Flow describes the Physical exhaustion and feeling of drain experienced post immersing self in creative tasks such as of cinematography and acting. The participants P4 and P5 describe these experiences as "Exhaustion without Fulfilment" and "Your body and mind feel completely drained" respectively. Participants also reported having physiological effects such as lack of sleep during the state of flow making them more sleepy post the experience.

“Physical fatigue goes away in a day or two. Mental fatigue takes much longer” reports P2 with other participants using words such as Burnout and Mentally Exhausted. This helps us describe the second subtheme of Mental Fatigue that is how post engaging in an immersive and engaging experience, participants reportedly felt mentally tired.

Different participants showed signs of delayed recovery from a flow-enhanced work experience. Participants reported that after “coming out” of the work (P4), they did not experience a rapid state of relief following completion of the project, as they instead were subject to extreme exhausted calmness at the end of the task. Participants reported extreme fatigue for several days after completion of their projects, and this fatigue took shape in the form of high levels of exhaustion daily and inability to recover; additionally, they experienced mental fatigue and lack of mental or physical (P10) stamina. One participant indicated being “exhausted for a couple of days after that” (P10), while another explained that fatigue was only present after the project was completed (P3). The delays of extreme fatigue may require resting days (P10) from work to recover from extreme fatigue, making a clear distinction between recovering from exhaustion and a direct link between the completion of a project and a new level of state of mental and physical exhaustion.

These findings also suggest that recovery lag can be defined as a period of time between the end of a flow-generating experience and the return to state of baseline functioning in terms of physical and psychological exhaustion becoming visible only after withdrawing from the intense immersion.

Aust et al. (2022)’s Systematic Review where the findings revealed a dual nature of flow that while moderate and well-managed flow experiences consistently associated with reduced burnout symptoms, excessive or prolonged flow states without sufficient recovery were found to contribute to emotional exhaustion and burnout, this study was in parallel with the findings here where not only did the prolonged state of flow lead to burnout but a possible recovery lag was also observed.

This is supported by Koval's (2021) theoretical analysis, which presents creativity and flow as two-edged phenomena in creative occupations that simultaneously promote engagement and intrinsic motivation while failing to prevent burnout in high-demand, structurally misaligned settings.

Theme 2: Anxiety post Flow

Table 3: Table 3 describes the Subthemes and Codes for the theme, Anxiety post Flow

Subthemes	Codes	Excerpts
Screen induced Anxiety		
		“Prolonged screen exposure has affected me in the past... spending excessive hours in front of screens over several years contributed to visual strain and anxiety-related symptoms.” (P11)

The theme of Anxiety Post Immersion reflects how the participants experienced anxiety and too much worry after engaging in immersive flow states.

The sub-theme of Screen-Induced Anxiety refers to the anxiety related to excessive screen exposure over periods of time. Although P11 only reported this as their experience, it is possible to hypothesise that this

is a common experience and could apply to many people based on the way the brain processes and retains enough information from continued visual input. P11 described their experience as having extended periods of time on computers over a period of years resulting in cumulative effects, resulting in both physical symptoms such as eye strain, and as well, anxiety-related symptoms. As we explored more in-depth, their anxiety-related symptoms of excessive worry that were uncontrollable combine with other physiological symptoms of discomfort. These symptoms affected P11's ability to function in their daily living, particularly in their social and work lives, indicating how screen-based work impacts the psychological function of the individual on a broader scale.

Theme 3: Exhaustion-Fulfilment Paradox

Table 4: Table 4 describes the Subthemes and Codes for the theme, Exhaustion-Fulfilment Paradox

Subthemes	Codes	Excerpts
Exhaustion-Fulfilment Duality		"Then it's more exhausting and less fulfilling. I feel drained but not creatively satisfied. So yes, my own projects bring burnout plus fulfillment." (P4)

The theme, Exhaustion-Fulfilment Paradox illustrates that both exhaustion and fulfillment exist at the same time for each participant who engaged in a creative immersion.

Although participants experienced creative immersion as both exhausting and fulfilling, they identified different projects that created the same experience of feeling both creatively fulfilled and physically exhausted, as highlighted by the statement of subject P4 who stated that creative work was experienced as a combination of "burnout plus fulfillment." This paradox highlights the complexity of feeling exhausted and fulfilled at the same time during flow, and that even when people feel exhausted due to their immersion in creative activities that generate energy and fulfillment, the experience of being fulfilled does not change the experience of being exhausted. It's through the paradox of being able to experience both exhaustion and fulfilment at the same time that creates the rich, complicated and often ambiguous feelings people experience after coming out of a creative immersion experience.

The current study's paradoxical experience of creative immersion as both draining and rewarding is consistent with studies on creativity and flow. According to Thomson and Jaque (2023), situational and cognitive-emotional factors influence state flow, suggesting that flow can be rewarding while still being physically and mentally taxing. Lucznik, May, and Redding (2020) similarly defined flow in dance improvisation as an extended, pleasurable immersion that necessitates sustained physical and mental effort. Further evidence that flow mediates relationships between interest, curiosity, and creativity was provided by Dan (2020) and Schutte and Malouff (2020), indicating that deep engagement boosts creativity while depleting cognitive resources. This overlap is contextualized by Roles and Kim's work on creative burnout, which supports flow immersion as a complex state by demonstrating how extended creative engagement can lead to both fulfillment and depletion.

Theme 4: Disconnection post FLOW

Table 5: Table 5 describes the Subthemes and Codes for the theme, Fatigue post Immersion

Subthemes	Codes	Excerpts
Social Disconnection	Disconnect	"After finishing a film, I want to be alone. I don't want to talk to anyone." (P2)
		"I want to be alone. I don't want to talk to anyone." (P1)
	Social Withdrawal	"One thing I notice is that after a deep flow state, it takes me time to become socially active again." (P4) "Friends or family expect me to be present, but I feel withdrawn." (P4)
Emotional Disconnection		
	Not emotionally available	"I wasn't emotionally available to her...I couldn't listen properly." (P2)
	Indifferent	
	Emotionally Blank	

Disconnection from Self	Disconnection	"I feel disconnected from my surroundings. It's like I need time to come back to who I am." (P5)
	Not present	
	Missed out	
	Loss of Self	
		"There's definitely a temporary loss of self that happens." (P10)
Disconnection from the Project		"When I'm too tired, my mind disconnects from the project automatically." (P3)

Disconnection Post Flow, theme, is described when people feel emotionally and socially detached after being intensely engrossed in a flow state. After being in an intense state of flow while working on a creative project, participants reported feeling briefly disconnected from friends and family, unable to feel emotions, unaware of themselves, and, in some instances, disinterested in their creative work. This disconnection may be viewed as a post flow immersive state where individuals exhibit a reduction in social, emotional, and cognitive availability as they transition back to baseline functioning.

The subtheme, social disconnection, addressed that most participants reported feeling the urge to distance themselves from others as well as the strong desire to withdraw into themselves after becoming immersed and deeply focused on the task at hand. Many indicated an explicit commitment to limit their physical and/or verbal contact and interaction with anyone, including family members and very close friends. Statements such as wanting "to be by myself" and not wanting "to speak to anyone" (P1, P2) were commonplace among many of the participants and demonstrated a conscious decision to maintain physical and emotional distance from other individuals and social activities. Additionally, Participants recognized a delay in their ability to socially re-engage and indicated that they were not ready to resume social connections because they remained withdrawn, and thus regarded as socially uninvolved by family and friends. (e.g., P4). Thus, the data support the notion that following flow, individuals have a momentary reduction in the energy and responsiveness required for socializing with others and perceive this as an increased distance between themselves and others.

Another example of post-flow indicators is emotional disconnection post being immersed in flow. Participants indicated that after immersion, they encountered emotional barriers that make them less able to connect with or respond to others at the same level they had when they were immersed. This reduced connection is demonstrated in many of the participants by their inability to listen attentively, be responsively empathetic, or be emotionally engaged with others for a period of time. P2's comments regarding not being "emotionally available" to others demonstrated the impact of immersion on participants' emotional responsiveness. Indifference and emotional blankness are the two major codes that describe this emotional disconnection. Participants experienced less affect and emotional engagement following a lengthy cognitive and emotional investment in the activity in which they were immersed.

Some of the participants expressed a more deeply rooted form of disconnection. They referred to it as a loss of self-awareness, presence, and experience—an absence of "being present," "missing out," or needing "time to get back to who I am" (P5). This expression indicates a temporary feeling of being disconnected from the individual's self and surroundings, which was often exacerbated by statements about experiencing a "temporary loss of self" (P10). This suggests that sustained immersion may create a greater degree of disconnection between a person's perception of themselves and their sense of self and their surroundings; thus, it requires time to reconnect or reintegrate after exiting the flow state.

Disconnection, however, is not limited to either an external or internal domain. It also includes disconnecting from the creative work. When participants were fatigued, they reported that they could no longer think about the project in automatic recognition. The cognitive detachment and protective/self-regulatory response is said to occur (P3). This type of detachment may indicate an inherent limit on how long an individual can remain immersed in a project before experiencing fatigue and the need to create some psychological distance from the task.

Sustained high flow in cognitively demanding occupations can coexist with increased emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and decreased personal accomplishment, especially when recovery is insufficient, according to Dholariya's (2025) empirical analysis of the "Flow Paradox," which suggests a gradual depletion of psychological resources.

Theme 5: Emotional Strain on Functioning

Table 6: Table 6 describes the Subthemes and Codes for the theme, Emotional Strain on Functioning

Subthemes	Codes	Excerpts
Irritability and Emotional Reactivity	Irritable	

		"I tend to get irritable or frustrated when people try to interrupt me." (P6)
	Frustrated Indifferent	
	Not emotionally available	"Even small things start feeling heavy."(P5)
	Emotionally Blank	
Emotional Exhaustion	Heavy	
		"After very heavy scenes, I don't want to talk to anyone." (P5)
	Lack of Empathy	
		"I wasn't emotionally available...I couldn't listen properly. I lacked empathy at that moment." (P4)
	Numb	"My mind was numb."(P4)
	Emotionally Flat	
		"Emotionally, I feel very flat and indifferent." (P2)
Behavioral Shift due to Emotional Strain	Forgetting to eat	
	Avoiding chores for weeks	
		"For me, flow feels like tunnel vision. Everything else becomes background noise. I know there are messages I haven't replied to, people I should probably update, or basic things like eating properly—but they don't feel important at that moment." (P12)
	Lack of Sleep	"I do experience fatigue and lack of sleep." (P11)

The Emotional Strain on Functioning Theme refers to the emotional burden resulting from the prolonged use of "flow states," and how it affects the common functionalities of individuals on a daily basis throughout their psychological and behavioral functioning. Many of the participants reported that the intense emotions and cognition required for creative endeavors led to increased emotional reactivity, emotional depletion, and a disruption to their day-to-day routines and interactions with others.

Many participants described having increased levels of irritability and frustration during and after their immersive experiences. Often, minor interruptions or requests for their attention from those outside were experienced as disproportionately distressful to the participant, which would cause them to react with irritability and emotional reactivity. One participant noted that she would get frustrated and irritated when others tried to interrupt her during her immersive experience (P6); another participant described experiencing a sense of emotional indifference, a state of emotional blankness, or a decreased state of emotional availability, where "Even small things start feeling heavy" (P5). This subtheme demonstrates that when there is a consistent emotional investment of time and energy, the ability to manage and regulate emotions becomes diminished due to an increase in sustained attention.

A prevailing sense of emotional intensity and exhaustion can be found in all interviews with participants. After being involved with very emotionally challenging content for long periods of time, many participants said they became emotionally exhausted, numb, and emotionally unresponsive to the experiences of others. Most participants experienced an inability to socially engage, communicate or emotionally respond after viewing this emotionally intense material. Reports of emotional overwhelm and numbness from two participants, P2, P4, further support the fact that prolonged involvement with heavy content resulted in individuals exhausting their available emotional resources temporarily.

Moreover, a sense of emotional exhaustion coupled with wanting to not talk to others, "After very heavy scenes, I don't want to talk to anyone." (P5) along with feeling of numbness was also observed in the participants. "My mind was numb." (P4)

Many participants acknowledged that building their empathy became more difficult after extended exposure to emotionally intense material. Emotional fatigue affects some individuals' ability to empathize while listening, connecting with others' experiences and responding appropriately. P4's statement, "I wasn't emotionally available...I couldn't listen properly. I lacked empathy at that moment." Losing empathy

demonstrates how an overwhelming emotional experience can deteriorate one's ability to empathize with others and engage socially with them and thereby influence strained relationships and connection.

Participants reported the emotional strain created as a result of their involvement in this material created significant behavioral changes impacting their ability to function in daily life. Participants stated that they were unable to take care of themselves adequately, such as eating regularly, responding to messages or cleaning their homes. P12 explained that when they were immersed in this type of experience, they were in a state that they referred to as a “tunnel vision” where their outside responsibilities became less important, less than those viewed ahead of their experience. Participants also addressed sleep deprivation (P11) as a common consequence, further compounding emotional fatigue and subsequent overall impaired functioning.

Sustained high flow in cognitively demanding occupations can coexist with increased emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and decreased personal accomplishment, especially when recovery is insufficient, according to Dholariya's (2025) empirical analysis of the "Flow Paradox," which suggests a gradual depletion of psychological resources.

Theme 6: Cognitive Strain on Functioning

Table 7: Table 7 describes the Subthemes and Codes for the theme, Cognitive Strain on Functioning

Subthemes	Codes	Excerpts
Cognitive Overload	Mind constantly working	“Mentally, the exhaustion comes from continuous cognitive engagement. Even though the body is stationary, the mind is constantly working...” (P11)
	Autopilot	“There’s definitely a temporary loss of self that happens. You go into an autopilot mode, especially in collaborative environments where the work demands constant output.” (P10) “But I do feel like I go on autopilot when I think of it.” (P6)
Forgetfulness	Mind went Blank	
	Forgetfulness	
		“I forgot basic things like how to take a simple shot.” (P4) “I forget things easily after a long stretch of working.” (P6)
Task Difficulties		
		“I struggle with everyday tasks—doing laundry, washing dishes, or completing small online responsibilities. These things get completely pushed aside. During one writing phase, I avoided basic chores for weeks.” (P10)
Sensory and Attentional Overload	Reduced Attention Span	
	Overwhelmed Senses	“...I briefly lost my vision for a minute or two, I had been staring at a screen in a dark room for hours, and fast paced visuals overwhelmed my senses.” (P10)
	Cognitive Strain Exhausted Overwhelmed Sensory Overload	For me, flow feels like tunnel vision. Everything else becomes background noise. I know there are messages I haven’t replied to, people I should probably update, or basic things like eating properly—but they don’t feel important at that moment. When I’m writing, I get emotionally pulled into what I’m creating. If I’m working on something intense, my mood starts matching that intensity. (P12)

Cognitive Strain on Functioning theme describes the mental overload and cognitive fatigue experienced by participants as a consequence of prolonged and intense immersion in flow states.

It was observed that while participants often remained seated at their place, they experienced sustained cognitive effort and strain, borrowed attention, and sensory overload, which subsequently impaired memory, attention, task performance, and everyday functioning.

Many participants in their interviews revealed being "always mentally engaged" and that their brains were constantly active for long time periods without resting. According to P11, "Mentally, the exhaustion comes from continuous cognitive engagement. Even though the body is stationary, the mind is constantly working..." (P11). This state of "mind constantly working" leads to the experience of operating on 'automatic pilot' in high-pressure environments or situations where collaboration occurred (P10/P6). Being in 'automatic pilot' mode relates to individuals being more likely to function without consciousness.

Cognitive overload also leads to forgetfulness and moments of mental blankness. In addition, the participants indicated difficulties with recalling very basic information and performing basic tasks from time to time, P4 noted, "I forgot basic things like how to take a simple shot." P4 mentioned that after a period of not mentally engaging in a job, they noticed increased cognitive deficit regarding forgetting to do something, they also noticed increased forgetfulness the longer they worked (P6). This finding supports the idea that an extended period of flow leads to temporary deficits in working memory and cognitive clarity.

In addition to cognitive strain leading to cognitive overload, participants experienced difficulty managing routine activities, such as their homes (cleaning/doing laundry), online and day-to-day maintenance behaviours were neglected/avoided for extended periods. P10 noted that these responsibilities were "completely pushed aside," meaning that the residual of flow was observed in the non-work domains.

Participants frequently identified sensory overwhelm or overload and attentional narrowing as key factors of cognitive strain. Codes and discussions included reduced attention span, overwhelmed senses, and visual strain, particularly during prolonged screen exposure. P10 described having a fleeting visual disturbance after several hours of staring at a computer screen in a dark environment while viewing images with fast-moving features.

Participant 12 described how, as a result of becoming highly focused on one thing, he/she developed a form of tunnel vision that causes him/her to lose sight of everything else around him/her (i.e., any other people/objects). In either case, both cognitive and sensory overload were evident from these examples of cognitive strain. P12 says, "For me, flow feels like tunnel vision. Everything else becomes background noise. I know there are messages I haven't replied to, people I should probably update, or basic things like eating properly—but they don't feel important at that moment. When I'm writing, I get emotionally pulled into what I'm creating. If I'm working on something intense, my mood starts matching that intensity." (P12)

Partington and Partington's (2009) qualitative investigation of elite surfers extends this discussion beyond the workplace and academic setting by demonstrating how, despite transient euphoria and improved performance, intense flow experiences in extreme contexts can promote dependence and functional impairment.

Coping

While flow was described as a state of deep absorption and intense involvement in creative work where attention becomes fully absorbed and awareness of time, participants also acknowledged its demanding nature and the physical, emotional, and cognitive costs that often followed prolonged engagement. "Even during burnout, my brain is still planning the next steps somewhere in the background." (P2) The themes that are Cognitive Strain on Functioning, Emotional Strain on Functioning, Disconnection post Flow,

Exhaustion-Fulfilment Paradox, Anxiety post Flow and Fatigue post Flow along with their vast and comprehensive subthemes, codes and excerpts beautifully capture the need of fruitful coping strategies.

Across 12 interviews the participants were asked to describe a range of coping mechanisms that are exercises, activities and habits that they adopted both during and after periods of flow to balance creativity, well being, flow and emotional and occupational demands. The key coping strategies found were Behavioral, Sensory and Environmental, Creative, Social, Avoidant, Time and Meaning based.

IV. Limitations

Due to the smaller number of participants and the presence of multiple contextual factors, this study does not establish a causal relationship between flow and challenges in creative work. However, it is reasonable to suggest that an association exists between prolonged immersive states and subsequent psychological and functional strain. Notably,

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi himself acknowledged this complexity in his mature reflections on flow theory, emphasizing that while flow is undeniably a powerful and enriching psychological state associated with deep engagement, intrinsic motivation, and personal growth, it is not inherently "good" and can occur during destructive, addictive, or ethically neutral activities. By raising awareness of the need to consider the

dichotomous consequences of flow, this research highlights the importance of examining both its benefits and potential costs. Future research should therefore focus on exploring the interaction between different dimensions of flow and creatives working within cinema and other art forms to better understand how immersive engagement can be sustained without compromising well-being.

V. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study highlights that while flow is often conceptualized as an optimal and desirable state within creative work, it may also carry significant psychological, emotional, and cognitive costs when experienced in high-pressure professional contexts such as the cinema industry. By exploring the subjective experiences of cinema creatives, the research brings attention to the darker dimensions of prolonged immersion, including fatigue, anxiety, disconnection, emotional exhaustion, and cognitive strain. These findings challenge the traditionally unidimensional positive framing of flow and emphasize the importance of balance between deep creative engagement and recovery. Ultimately, the study underscores the need for increased awareness, supportive practices, and targeted interventions that can help creative professionals sustain both their artistic performance and mental well-being over time.