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# Left Write Hook; a case study of producing a feature length documentary across and within the marketplace and the academy

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## ABSTRACT

Across the past decade significant shifts within the academy and non-fiction production sectors alike have resulted in a revised interest in an ethics of responsibility, growing expectations of project impact and increasingly dispersed financing models. While within the academy this is often felt as increased pressure to attract external income and prove creative practice research engagement, these shifts also open new possibilities for partnerships and expansive research dialogues. In 2020 the authors began developing the creative practice research project *Left Write Hook* with a view to moving towards the production of a feature length documentary film. The resulting film, currently in distribution, has enabled the filmmaker-researchers to bring together an assortment of financing partners from inside and outside the academy, along with emergent possibilities for expanded interdisciplinary research collaboration. This article presents a producers' case study of *Left Write Hook*, as a multi-modal creative practice research project and explores the affordances and tensions between producing across and within the marketplace and the academy.

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## Introduction

Social issue documentary is a powerful way to influence culture and knowledge and shape public policy (Borum Chattoo 2020; Borum Chattoo and Jenkins 2019; Martz-Mayfield and Hallahan 2009). The multi-faceted creative research project *Left Write Hook* stands at this nexus, serving as a confluence of theory and practice, intellect and artistry, academy and marketplace. In this paper, the authors, who are also producers and key creatives of a feature documentary film made as part of this project, unpack the filmmaking process behind *Left Write Hook* from the vantage of the producer.

The paper discusses the research, development, production and postproduction stages and how producing this film within and across the academy and industry afforded the

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project unique opportunities that may not have occurred if the film was made in a more traditional industrialised landscape. It shows how filmmaking creative practice research can benefit from an interdisciplinary research approach, while highlighting an ongoing tension within the academy to recognise creative practice research in its own right. Creative practice research is used here to describe the process of working with creative practice to produce and disseminate knowledge (Lyle Skains 2018; Oliver 2018). Research outputs can take the form of traditional text publications such as journal articles or books; as stand-alone creative works such as films or performances; or as in the case of *Left Write Hook*, a combination of both traditional academic papers and published creative works. The early idea for the documentary *Left Write Hook* emerged from a grassroots community project about a writing and boxing program that Lyon (one of the authors) was facilitating for adult survivors of child sexual abuse. The project was borne out of her lived experience as a survivor and a growing desire to connect with other survivors. Using her background in arts education along with her experiences as an amateur boxer, she developed a workshop template that combined creative writing and boxing as a way of connecting with other victim-survivors using memory, story, and movement. While delivering the first iteration of this project, she invited co-author Owen, a colleague and documentary practitioner researcher to observe the workshop space with a view to explore developing a film project. At the time, the authors were both undertaking their PhDs and beginning to locate themselves within the field of screen production and creative practice research. Identifying opportunities within the academy between their creative research practices and an institutional remit to develop interdisciplinary research, they sought institutional opportunities to pursue early-stage project development and gather initial data to support the social impact potential of the film.

The Research and Development phase of *Left Write Hook* was distinctly shaped by its academic backdrop. The documentary's initial concept was conceived and nurtured within the academy's intellectual boundaries, providing a comparative lens to evaluate how this environment diverges from conventional documentary development processes. As the project transitioned into the production phase, the academic setting continued to play a pivotal role. Here the creative practice research methodology engaged throughout early development continued, fostering iterative opportunities for creative expression and storytelling that deepened the filmic narrative while also developing social impact opportunities embedded within the production process.

Marked by ethical imperatives necessary to conduct research, expectations for substantive project impact, and multifaceted financing models, *Left Write Hook* embarked on its research journey in 2020 and has since transitioned from research concept to tangible industry facing creation. The research team has navigated the pressures of academia and industry to secure industry funding and distribution opportunities, whilst working to validate the project's creative research. Simultaneously, they have had to embrace the rigid and flux nature of the marketplace and ethics of representation relevant to marginalised people and social impact documentary making (Skattebol and Newell 2018). In this milieu, the *Left Write Hook* documentary serves as an important and living case study, illuminating the affordances and tensions inherent in such dualistic production environments.

This paper discusses the strategies deployed to strike this delicate balance, ensuring that *Left Write Hook* would resonate both within scholarly circles and beyond, without

compromising on the intellectual rigour, and filmmaking aspirations that underpinned its creation. It also demonstrates how our creative practice research sought research connections with more established disciplines. These enriched the research findings but also highlighted tensions within the academy toward non-traditional research outputs and epistemological understanding of knowledge creation within creative practice research.

Finally, while the distribution phase is still unfolding, initial reflections on the social impact opportunities are provided. The documentary's thematic resonance with academic and non-academic audiences alike is beginning to materialise, promising a diverse range of engagement and influence. The paper alludes to the distribution strategies being employed to maximise the film's impact, setting the stage for a broader conversation about the role of documentary film in social discourse.

### Film as case study and creative practice research

The utilisation of the case study as a methodology in research stands as a robust tool for in-depth analysis, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of complex phenomena within their real-life contexts (Crowe et al. 2011). This approach is commonly used in clinical and practice research as well as business settings to glean broader lessons from its findings. In creative practice research, the case study can be particularly salient in the exploration of creative methods and processes. Documentary film case studies allow opportunity to examine the interplay of various factors – such as funding, collaboration, and impact – and discuss broader lessons learnt.

Incorporating the case study methodology within the research context of *Left Write Hook* serves a dual purpose: it offers a comprehensive analysis of the documentary's production process and draws together empirical data from various production stages. By compiling and examining artefacts such as funding applications, pitch documents, correspondence, and production notes, the case study becomes a rich narrative that chronicles the evolution of the documentary from conception to distribution. It underscores the importance of context in evaluating the success and impact of a documentary film. It recognises that such creative endeavours do not occur in a vacuum but are influenced by a constellation of interrelated factors. The in-depth focus of a case study provides a structured framework to explore these factors, contributing valuable empirical insights to the field of documentary filmmaking and creative practice research.

Kerrigan and Callaghan (2018, 229) define filmmaking research as pushing 'at the boundaries of traditional filmmaking and traditional research methods by adopting distinct approaches to professional and critical practices.' They go on to say that the filmmaking researcher 'frequently choose the topics of their films, they research those topics and engage stakeholders and community and continue to refine their research process through the making of and dissemination of their film' (2018, 231). *Left Write Hook* serves as an exemplary case study that aligns with Kerrigan and Callaghan's definition of filmmaking research.

Throughout the developmental arc of the *Left Write Hook* project, the filmmakers demonstrate a commitment to refining their research process. This is evident in the progression from a community-based workshop to a structured research study, and later, the production of a book and documentary film. Each step is an iteration that pushes the boundaries of traditional filmmaking and research methods, allowing for an evolution

of understanding and practice that informs both the final output and the researchers' approach.

The engagement did not halt at the completion of the film; it extended into the dissemination phase. As the documentary is distributed, the filmmakers continue to refine their understanding based on the feedback and impact it has on audiences and stakeholders. The establishment of a registered charity and the launch of a social impact campaign further illustrate the ongoing process of research and engagement that characterises the project as a living case study.

*Left Write Hook* does not simply document an issue; it actively participates in the research of it, using the filmmaking process as a methodological tool that both informs and is informed by the subjects it portrays. This dynamic and reciprocal process underscores the documentary as a model of filmmaking research that continues to push at the traditional boundaries of the discipline.

## Overview of the *Left Write Hook* project and film synopsis

A synopsis for *Left Write Hook* documentary reads as follows.

The documentary film *Left Write Hook* offers a glimpse into the lives of seven women who responded to a call-out to participate in an eight-week experimental recovery program. Designed and led by survivor Donna Lyon, the program supports survivors of childhood sexual abuse by addressing both the physical and emotional impacts of trauma through a combination of boxing and creative writing. What begins as an eight-week program soon becomes much more as these survivors build bonds with one another and with their coach that lead to transformations they could only have dreamed of. With intimate and privileged access to this unique program, the film unfolds as a narrative of transformation. It is a story of how a group of individuals, connected by shared trauma, came together to write a new chapter – one of resilience, connection, expression, and healing – redefining survivorship within the Australian context and beyond.

Although the focus of this case study is on the *Left Write Hook* documentary, it is important to understand that *Left Write Hook* in the research context has evolved as a multi-layered project with a range of audiences and strategic directions. *Left Write Hook* began as an innovative grassroots recovery program for survivors of childhood sexual abuse, that sparked an idea for a documentary. As the documentary film began to develop so did opportunities for researching the impact of the workshop program itself. Further documentary development offered creative practice research outcomes, as well as a means of research translation by demonstrating how the program was positively impacting victim-survivors. Conversations about film financing pointed to questions about scaling up the program and formalising *Left Write Hook* as an organisation. This led to the establishment of *Left Write Hook* registered charity which is working to expand the workshop program alongside the films' release.

The evolution of the project showcases its innovative approach to leveraging various platforms for maximum social impact, highlighting the value of adaptable, interdisciplinary models in creative practice research and community engagement. The timeline below is presented to assist the readers understanding of collective aspects of the broader *Left Write Hook* research project.

**2019: Grassroots Program:** Initiated as an 8-week community-based trauma-informed workshop combining non-contact boxing with expressive writing for adult survivors of child sexual abuse and trauma.

**2020: Research Project:** Evolved into an academic mixed methods study to evaluate the program's impact on participants' well-being with published findings in a peer reviewed journal.

**2021: Published Book:** Culminated in an anthology collection of prose poetry and writings from participants, sharing their experiences during the writing and boxing workshops over three eight-week rounds held throughout 2020.

**2020–2023: Documentary Film:** Developed and produced a cinematic feature length documentary.

**2022: Registered Charity:** Established to sustain and expand the program's reach to more survivors.

**2024:** Film release and activation of the social impact campaign.

At times during the paper, the authors will refer to the various iterations of the project as outlined above. This is because the process of producing the documentary served to enhance these elements and similarly in reverse. When discussing the documentary, *Left Write Hook*, is written in italics and is otherwise non-italicised.

## Research and development

The research and development phase of *Left Write Hook* was markedly influenced by its academic breeding ground. This section will explore how the scholarly environment shaped the documentary's conceptualisation, contrasting it with traditional development processes outside academic institutions. The amalgamation of academic inquiry and cinematic craft in *Left Write Hook* exemplifies a confluence of knowledge and creativity. This part of the article will elucidate how this partnership informed the research trajectory and narrative direction, carving out a niche for the documentary that straddles academic interests and mass appeal.

### Early-stage development

In 2019, *Left Write Hook* project founder Donna Lyon ran a grassroots program at her local boxing gym. After an initial conversation with the project participants, she invited academic colleague and documentary maker Shannon Owen to attend a workshop with the intent of exploring whether there was any traction for collaborating on a film. Shannon reflects on the experience in our production notes (S. Owen, personal communication 22 June 2019):

I remember the goose bumps I got when the participants shared their writing. The feeling of anxiety when another declared she had no idea what had come onto the page during the freewriting session. The way the energy in the room shifted once the boxing drills began, and the sense of release by the end of the session. It was incredible to witness. As a filmmaker I am drawn to stories with a social justice lens they often come with highly charged personal and political stakes, and as a practitioner researcher I am interested in relational ethics that come into play when telling these types of stories. The challenge was set - how to translate the space Donna had created with these incredible women into a film using

both our knowledge of the documentary sector and our positions as researchers at the University of Melbourne.

Later that year, the authors saw an opportunity for genuine interdisciplinary research via a University Creativity and Wellbeing Research Initiative, offering seed grants for cross-disciplinary research. A project team was formed comprising a psychologist, gender expert and Lyon and Owen as filmmakers and creative practice researchers. The team sought to measure the wellbeing outcomes of the participants across the 8-week program and test the viability of bringing an observational camera into this space to create a longer form documentary. In film industry terms, this early-stage development sought to prove access to the story – a fundamental aspect of any documentary marketplace pitch – while also generating evidence-based findings to support the project's aspirations in the social impact documentary space. Financing early-stage documentary development like this via film industry funding mechanisms is extremely rare. Within the academic context, outcome measures needed to secure research funding allowed for a more exploratory approach to project development than is normally required by industry. This enabled the team to work within a trauma-informed framework that prioritised participant agency and empowerment over marketplace requirements.

Institutional seed funding formalised the initial research frame of the project and required the authors to submit the project proposal for approval from university human ethics committees. Here the tensions between more traditional research disciplines and the non-traditional practice-led approach taken within creative practice research were highlighted. University human research ethics processes seek to ensure that any potential harm to research participants through their participation in university research projects is minimised. It requires researchers to articulate and action steps to mitigate risk of harm to research participants. This includes ensuring participants are supported across the research life span and are made aware of ongoing support services available to them outside of the research. Participants must also be allowed to remove themselves from the research project at any point and clearly informed about their risks and consent options.

Lyon had developed a trauma-informed framework (Sweeney et al. 2018) foregrounding participant agency and empowerment that guided the delivery of the writing and boxing workshop model. This approach aligned with Owen's own approach to an ethically engaged documentary practice grounded in relational ethics (Jackson 2021; Pollard 2015) and informed by the work of other practitioner researchers (Colusso 2017; Thomas 2017). For both authors, ethical considerations are a deeply embedded part of their practice. Despite this, the ethics approval process proved difficult with the team having to submit the project to the institutional ethics committee three times. Feedback from the ethics committee indicated ongoing reservations about engaging a method of filming as part of the research, despite this being a central component of the mixed methods approach taken by research team. It was only after meeting with the Chair of the Ethics committee to discuss the ethical underpinnings embedded in the team's creative research practice approach that the project received institutional ethics approval. This highlighted an outdated and paternalistic attitude within institutional ethics processes toward creative practice research that utilises documentary filmmaking methods. The assumption within some institutional ethics processes that engaging documentary filmmaking methods in a research project is fundamentally

detrimental to participants remains an ongoing challenge for certain creative practice researchers and projects.

From a creative practice standpoint, in *Left Write Hook*, the documentary camera offered a powerful opportunity to bear witness to the experiences of the project participants, most of whom had never disclosed in a group context let alone in front of a camera. Unfortunately, the team only had the opportunity to film the first two weeks of the workshop before the Covid-pandemic thrust them into lockdown. The footage captured during this time served as an important test bed for validating the team's hypothesis that the camera could record without intrusion and laid the foundations for ongoing documentary development.

Working within the constraints of the first round of pandemic lockdowns, Lyon shifted the workshop delivery online. This allowed for the rest of the project team to continue data collection and complete the analysis of this initial stage research. The findings of this research have been published elsewhere (see Lyon et al. 2020) focusing on the links between creativity and wellbeing. The data analysis revealed that the program reduced PTSD symptoms, stress and depression, and increased personal agency along with a sense of belonging and community. The creative practice research component, although compromised to some degree by pandemic lockdowns, contributed evidence to support these findings.

### **Development**

Citizens of the state of Victoria, Australia, spent most of 2020 in lockdown. This saw Lyon run the 8-week program three times across the year with the same research participant group. By the end of this, the group had amassed a considerable body of writing. Lyon presented the idea of publishing curated selections of the group's writing in a book. This helped frame the research and project within a wider conversation around adding survivor voices to public discourse (Lyon, Gaskin, and Everall 2022).

Lyon found a publisher for the book and worked with the participants to co-curate selections of their writings that resulted in a collection of prose poetry along with testimonials and a contextual analysis of the project (Lyon and Gaskin 2021). With the book publication the documentary narrative expanded, not only was this a story of female survivors coming together to reclaim a sense of self and discover community, but they had also forged a collective strength to go public and position themselves and their experiences within a broader political conversation.

The strength of the writing pushed the filmmaking in new directions. A methodology of co-creation, implicit in the workshops' design around sharing lived experience, began to consolidate as a more formal methodology in the approach to documentary filmmaking. Instead of projects being made for or about a community, co-creative projects emerge from within communities (Cizek and Uricchio 2022). Engaging the iterative reflexive affordances of creative practice research, Owen began to consider more participatory and performative processes that shifted filmmaking beyond the observational mode (Nichols 2010, 2016) and into more of a hybrid documentary space. With this the possibilities for researching documentary ethics and re-storying expanded and enabled the creative team to articulate through practice an ethically robust production methodology that foregrounded the agency of the participants.

The writing itself also offered a unique way of exploring the participants' personal journeys. Creatively the idea of 'stepping into the ring' was strengthened. The ring had become a literal and metaphoric space of trauma and transformation and provided the aesthetic frame for the film.

In pragmatic terms, the authors, working with Victorian College of the Arts documentary graduate Ella Sowinska as cinematographer, continued to shoot opportunistically in and around lockdowns. Using a 'fly on the wall' observational filming style they had effectively documented the dynamic space of the initial two workshops and the significant emotional stakes for each of the participants that emerged early on. With the participant group firmly committed to participating in a long form documentary, the creative team returned to the gym in late 2020 to film a third workshop and experimented with the affordances of slow-motion footage to develop stylised boxing sequences. In the same weekend, they filmed interviews with both Lyon as onscreen participant and workshop facilitator and the eight remaining workshop participants. Alongside these interviews Owen invited the participants to read an extract of the writing they had produced during the workshops. This introduced participants to the shift toward a more performative filmmaking mode (Nichols 2010) and provided material to support the next stage development.<sup>1</sup>

Using the early observational material, along with interviews and more exploratory aesthetic material shot in late 2020, the authors edited the first of three video teasers. The teaser demonstrated story development and participant access and was used to raise next phase development funding. The authors knew they needed to develop further proof of concept materials to sell the idea of the performative aesthetic and have a chance to access the production funding required to pull off this expanded vision for the film. With initial seed funding exhausted, they sought formal development funding from Vic Screen, the Victorian state-based government funding agency. The first teaser became a key component of the application for development funding which requested funds to undertake additional filming focused on developing the performance possibilities of the documentary.

The project had so far been developed through an iterative reflexive frame of creative practice research. This had enabled a rigorous and responsive approach to both the films' narrative and aesthetic dimensions as well as the production processes the creative team and the participants were engaging with. Within the shift toward screen agency industry process and funding mechanisms it was integral to the project's success to maintain an ongoing flexibility and agility to effectively respond to the creative and ethical dimensions of the project.

The authors sought ways to support the participants as the filmmaking shifted into a more performative mode. Formal development funding enabled the team to bring in dramaturg Rinske Ginsberg to work with the group to explore possibilities for an embodied delivery of their writing. It also allowed for an expanded film crew to deliver on the aesthetic requirements of this shift in filmmaking modes. Playing with the ring as a metaphor, the filmmaking team lit a block box theatre space with a square spotlight and across a weekend worked with the participants to film selected extracts of their writing to camera as spoken word performances. This built confidence amongst the participants and enlivened the material in new ways. With this material in hand, the research team took the project to the Melbourne based production company Sweetshop & Green and with their support developed a new pitch deck and second trailer to take to market.

## Marketplace and financing

In 2022, the film team pitched the project at the Australian International Documentary Conference (AIDC). Shannon Owen offers a reflection of this in her production notes

Talking to local public broadcasters (SBS & ABC) was interesting for me to note a previously unheard-of concern for the participants wellbeing. Commissioning editors asked for evidence that we were somehow qualified to be making this work. While my sense is that their concern is as much about ensuring their networks and their jobs are protected as it is about genuine concern for the participants, this definitely signals a change in the sector and an increased awareness of the filmmakers' responsibilities toward documentary participants from certain buyers. Here, collaboration with research psychologists and the associated journal publication along with the ongoing University of Melbourne endorsement seemed to satisfy their questions around our ethical integrity. This demonstrates the merits of institutional backing in a marketplace context (S. Owen, personal communication, 17 March 2022).

Conversations with these broadcasters continued beyond AIDC but failed to result in any marketplace investment in the film from either the traditional broadcasters or newer players in the streaming arena.

The film's finance plan was built from the ground up to raise the financing the production needed. The production company sought traditional funding via screen agencies – Screen Australia through a production investment (via a grant), producer's offset (as government rebate), Vic Screen (which included an attachment placement fund), MIFF Premiere Fund, a postproduction company reinvestment and production company reinvestment, a small distribution guarantee and some private investment and philanthropy.

Key to this multitiered financing model was seeking money from the University of Melbourne, the institutional home of the creative practice researchers and the early research. The authors sought to maximise the opportunities that existed at the University – firstly, to amplify the genesis of the research that had informed the filmmaking phase of the project, and secondly, to celebrate the innovation of the research inherent in this project.

As the financing conversations progressed, the team was pleased to receive feedback from Screen Australia (the national screen funding and research agency) that indicated strong interest in the production methodology, grounded in a participatory and trauma-informed methodology. This favourable view of our chosen production methodology strengthened applications for production finance, and alongside a robust creative treatment and strong team, contributed to successful screen agency production funding, from Screen Australia and VicScreen, despite limited marketplace attachment.

Concurrent to the development of the documentary film and the creative practice research embedded within it, Lyon had taken the workshop model of Left Write Hook (as a writing and boxing program for adult survivors of child sexual abuse and trauma) into the research innovation and commercialisation space (RIC) and worked with University of Melbourne RIC's team to explore possibilities for the expansion of the workshop program model. The documentary, while existing as creative practice research, here provided a compelling medium to communicate research findings that focused on expanding and commercialising the workshop model.

Visual storytelling can often convey the nuances of a program's impact more effectively than traditional academic outputs, making the research accessible to a broader audience. In this instance the strength of the filmic storytelling was deeply embedded

in the iterative reflexive approach to practice adopted by the filmmaking research team. Ironically, the team continued to find it challenging to get the broader University to recognise the making of the film as research. This was largely driven by a tension around funding pathways. Film industry funding meant that the production investment raised was managed by the production company to comply with industry processes and chain of title protocols. As this funding did not flow through the university's systems it could not be accounted for as research income. The inability to ascribe formal research income to the project diminished the perceived value of the creative practice research. Instead, the issues-based nature of the *Left Write Hook* film warranted institutional merit based on engagement and impact measures, not practice-led research in and of itself. This signals an ongoing challenge for creative practice researchers working with film and television industry processes.

The authors found that the ways in which their university validated and administered research funding were at odds with industry requirements. In the film industry, it is standard practice for projects to be administered through professional production companies rather than higher education institutions. There are legal, financial, and industry precedents for this, particularly due to the production company's imperative to allocate funds in line with tax incentives, such as the producer's offset.

Securing financial support from the institution presented significant challenges, underscoring a dissonance between the university's aspirations to channel funds into research grants and the film industry's financing processes. The authors navigated this dichotomy through relentless perseverance, successfully acquiring the necessary funds via a combination of strategic innovation and support from the institution.

While the university's financial contribution was commensurate with industry investment, and the institution received due acknowledgment in the film's credits, both front and back end, there was little institutional recognition of the intrinsic value of this positioning. This was largely because the *Left Write Hook* film project did not conform to traditional categories of research income that might bolster the university's financial reporting.

Despite the benefits of associating the film with research and impact beyond fiscal measures, the challenge of bridging the gap between film funding and university research administration remains largely unresolved. Some Australian universities have made progress with public-facing platforms in highlighting external funding efforts, such as creative practice researchers at Griffith University. However, for many institutions, this remains an ongoing dilemma. The authors' experience reflects the broader, systemic issue of integrating screen industry funding within the confines of academic research, which demands further structural adjustments for true synergy.<sup>2</sup>

## From methodology to marketplace and production

Production is often where the rubber meets the road, and for *Left Write Hook*, the academic setting was both a canvas and a catalyst. In this section, we analyse the unique opportunities afforded by the academic environment for creative expression. Pertinent to this stage was exploring how the ethical and intellectual framework adopted in the development stage contributed to the film's storytelling approach. The authors also reflect on what production practices were adopted to align with ethical and academic standards while embracing the fluidity of documentary filmmaking.

Successful engagement with industry financing models meant that the production was positioned to realise the creative ambitions of a more hybrid filmmaking form. Owen, working as both director and part of the producing team, sought to bring together the unfiltered rawness of the observational material with more structured, performed vignettes that worked to represent each participant's individual journey. The vignettes required a scaling up of production resources and collaboration with additional key creatives – production designer Leon Salom, director of photography David Rusanow and editor Luca Capelli – as well as an increased on-set crew.

Given the possibility of vicarious trauma arising as a result of filming material related to childhood sexual assault, all crew were given access to counselling and psychological services, available anonymously and at no cost to them, across the course of production and post-production. These costs were borne by the production where this level of duty of care was supported across the board. In acknowledgement of the ongoing financial burden borne by the participants as survivors, as well as their need for increased support across production, the production also allocated funds to cover two sessions with the participant's chosen therapist.

The production expertise and networks contributed by the production company were essential to the successful management of the project as the documentary moved into formal production. They were responsible for ensuring budget allocations were appropriate to realise the narrative and deliver the finished film. There had been an ongoing conversation amongst the broader producing team about the finished film's ability to effectively realise all seven of the participants stories in the screen time available, and as budgeting realities firmed up, the authors were asked to justify the costs of ongoing filming with all participants with the knowledge that all the performance vignettes may not make the final cut. Here the trauma-informed framework and co-creative methodology developed as part of the creative practice research underpinnings of the project provided a clear position. The project had evolved as a group endeavour, where all participants were invited to engage with emergent production processes. Foregrounding participant agency and empowerment meant that the participants could choose to opt out of any or all of these processes; however, it was integral to the methodological approach that the opportunity to participate was open to the entire group.

Process transparency and knowledge sharing was a further tenet of our trauma-informed approach. In terms of film production, this meant regularly engaging with participants, providing updates, giving them the opportunity to watch project teasers and respond to cuts of the film at rough-cut and fine-cut edit milestones. The participants were made aware before moving into production that everything shot may not end up in the finished film, and that some of them may feature more heavily than others. Allowing the time to engage in these conversations was integral to working with a co-creation methodology and a trauma-informed framework. Across postproduction and the editing of the film, the task was to manage the expectations of a range of stakeholders. In this phase, the challenge was to reconcile the expectations of a diverse range of stakeholders, from participants to production partners, ensuring that the film's integrity remained intact while adhering to the pragmatic realities of documentary filmmaking. This process was managed through a transparent production and editorial approach, allowing stakeholders to understand and accept the practical and ethical constraints that shaped the final narrative structure.

Within the academic milieu, *Left Write Hook* balanced ethical considerations with creative aspirations, establishing a prototype for documentary production that was both scholarly and cinematically compelling. The project's progression through postproduction remained steadfast to its commitment of ethical engagement, to ensure a final product that resonated with authenticity and addressed the multiplicity of stakeholder interests. However, this intent did privilege an ethically-driven research framework that established participants as part of decision-making.

## Distribution strategy and social impact

As *Left Write Hook* approached its 2024 release, the distribution campaign was designed to target victim-survivors and healthcare professionals, aligning with a strategic sector engagement. Part of the early outreach campaign extended to screening the film privately to those working within family violence and child abuse sectors. The feedback from these sessions proved influential in helping the filmmaking and research team understand how the film could be used as an educational tool in healthcare settings and to effect policy change in the area of child sexual abuse and trauma. The audiences identified by the sector to target included areas such as clinics and hospitals, and for professionals such as doctors, maternal health nurses, and psychologists. The development of the film's social impact campaign and strategy drew upon these extensive sector consultations and private sector screenings where observations and feedback were systematically gathered and analysed. At the time of writing, this feedback has since formed the backbone of a narrative that interlinks the film's content with healthcare professionals' needs. The team's aim is to develop crucial discussion points and training to help further an understanding of trauma and promoting of trauma-informed care.

The distribution strategy aims to catalyse a progressive social impact campaign, reflecting a growing alliance within those already working in the sector. The social impact campaign will serve to not only inform and educate but also foster a profound understanding of the survivors' journeys, facilitating a deeper empathy and more effective care practices within the healthcare and wider community. This strategy underscores the potential of film and indeed creative practice research, to be more than just a narrative or a suite of traditional/ non-traditional outputs. Rather, documentary film can be evidenced as a tangible tool for real-world impact, aiming to enhance the therapeutic practices and enrich dialogues around trauma recovery.

Further research is underway to evaluate the effectiveness of this impact strategy, with a view to sharing the findings that could refine and enhance the distribution approaches for similar future projects. This ongoing commitment to creative practice research and dialogue ensures that *Left Write Hook* continues to contribute to the discourse on trauma and recovery, extending its reach beyond immediate film audiences to effect change in community and healthcare practices.

## Discussion

Our findings offer a candid examination of the entire process, from the nascent stages within the academy to the film's life in the wider marketplace. These pivotal lessons

have been learned through the lens of the producers and researchers who navigated this unique production pathway.

*Left Write Hook* bridges the divide between academic and non-academic audiences. The film translated complex research and theoretical concepts into compelling visual narratives that were accessible and engaging to a wider public. The documentary distilled the essence of academic findings on trauma and recovery – trauma is stored in the body (Herman 1992; Fisher 2017; Panhofer 2017; Van der Kolk 2014), healing is best done in relationship to others, and body-based and creative practices can help victim-survivors regulate their nervous system (Naparstek 2005) into stories and visuals that resonate on an emotional level, making the science relatable and understandable. It is this affective register that is a specific and unique aspect of much creative practice research. It also brought forward the voices of lived experience to share their experiences of the impact of childhood sexual abuse from memory fragmentation to dissociation, to self-harm, eating disorders, shame and psychosis. The practice-led research through which the documentary emerged is an important contribution to a growing body of research around documentary ethics (Aufderheide 2012; Colusso 2017; Maccarone 2010; Nash 2009; Sanders 2010; Thomas 2012, 2017) participatory and co-creative methodologies (Aguayo 2019; Cizek and Uricchio 2022; Miller, Little, and High 2017) and social impact filmmaking (see Borum Chattoo 2020; Borum Chattoo and Jenkins 2019; Nash and Corner 2016).

Additionally, the film employed a language that was inclusive and visual, serving to reduce barriers to wider understanding of a complex social issue. Moreover, the documentary's thematic focus on a universal human experience – overcoming trauma – ensured that its appeal transcended the academic sphere, touching on a core aspect of the human condition that is widely relatable. This universal theme, combined with the storytelling approach, has allowed *Left Write Hook* to serve as a bridge between the academic research it was based on and a broad audience spectrum. *Left Write Hook* served as a catalyst for partnerships and expansive research dialogues by actively engaging with various academic and professional communities, thus facilitating a cross-sectoral investigation into trauma and healing. The production also facilitated outreach and engagement through the sharing of the work at each of its stages. Marketplace teasers and other visual material taken from the film were introduced in diverse forums to discuss the research and its underpinnings. These included departmental presentations, research seminars and conferences, community and sector screenings, as well as Q&A sessions with both researchers and participants. This direct engagement allowed for a dynamic exchange of ideas between the academic team and the audience, leading to expanded opportunities for research and social impact across the production life cycle.

Further, Lyon's presentations at research innovation and commercialisation events emphasised the documentary's role in establishing the charity. This highlighted the project's potential as a social enterprise and its capacity to effect change beyond the academic sphere. The discussions generated at these events contributed to the recognition of the documentary as a model for social impact and as an agent for therapeutic justice.

More recently, Lyon has secured proof-of-concept funding for a train-the-trainer program (connected to the *Left Write Hook* charity). This signifies the practical extension of the project's reach, demonstrating the project's scalability and applicability. The

development of this program, in collaboration with international partners, exemplifies the project's success in fostering international dialogues and creating a framework for global partnership.

As of the time of writing this paper, the authors, in collaboration with the expanded production team, are currently devising a distribution and social impact campaign tailored to the nuanced needs of victim-survivors and healthcare providers. This strategy has been meticulously shaped through comprehensive engagement with professionals in the family violence and child abuse sectors, ensuring the film can act as a transformative educational tool. The impact strategy will roll out following a more traditional national film festival and targeted cinema release in the second half of 2024.

Through these various channels, *Left Write Hook* has not only contributed to the discourse on trauma and recovery but has also exemplified how creative practice can interlace with research to extend its impact into the realms of policy, community engagement, and international collaboration.

Navigating the realm of creative practice research presents a unique set of challenges, particularly as this discipline is not universally recognised beyond the confines of fine arts and music faculties, and its nuances are sometimes even misconstrued within these specialised areas. The production of *Left Write Hook* underscored these challenges, with financial management processes revealing that traditional institutional frameworks were not yet equipped to support the needs of a mutually beneficial production partnership.

Furthermore, while the establishment of a related charity has been acknowledged by the University of Melbourne as an innovation akin to a startup venture, the institution has yet to fully embrace the concept of film as research medium capable of commercialisation. This is despite the film's potential for significant impact, given its wide-reaching international and national exposure. This dichotomy between the recognition of charitable endeavours and the commercial viability of research-based film underscores a broader struggle within academia to fully value and understand the potential of creative practice as both a research method and a commercial entity.

Nevertheless, despite the challenges and tensions expressed above, overall *Left Write Hook* has encountered a wealth of opportunities through its intersection with the academic realm, enhancing its credibility and depth. The endorsement from a university not only bolstered the film's appeal to broadcasters and screen agencies but also infused the production process with a rigorous ethical accountability that deeply enriched its methodology. Additionally, research funding provided essential early development capital, enabling preliminary story access exploration, and helped to foster interdisciplinary collaborations that might otherwise have been challenging to initiate.

The film's premiere at the Melbourne International Film Festival (MIFF) and its subsequent theatrical release serves as pivotal platforms for research translation, presenting the findings and themes of the documentary to a broader public and academic audience. This exposure extends the reach of the project's research components, bridging the gap between scholarly work and public engagement. The involvement of a university as a partner in tackling the complex social issue of childhood sexual abuse through the *Left Write Hook* project significantly enhanced its credibility and reputation. The association with a respected academic institution conferred a level of authority and trustworthiness that is essential when dealing with such sensitive subject matter. It signified rigorous

ethical oversight and academic scrutiny, ensuring that the narratives and research were handled with the utmost care and professionalism. This partnership not only elevated the project's standing in the eyes of participants, stakeholders, and the broader community but also provided a solid foundation for the dissemination of the research findings, lending an academic weight to the project's contributions to social discourse and policy.

Moreover, the in-kind support from the academic institution, including production equipment and studio space, afforded not only significant cost savings but also a level of flexibility often unavailable in standard production environments. This support has been integral to the project's success, allowing for a more dynamic and responsive production process that aligns with the creative and investigative nature of the documentary. These opportunities collectively showcase the potential of integrating creative practice research within an academic framework to achieve a project that is both financially viable and methodologically robust.

### Ongoing research findings

Our participant cohort remains actively engaged and eager to participate further, which presents an opportunity to extend the co-creative methodology into the film's distribution phase. In collaboration with scholars from creative arts therapies and criminology fields, we are cultivating a subsequent research endeavour that delves into the dichotomy of visibility versus vulnerability around the social impact campaign and ways to engage audiences through expansive cinema and research dialogues.

This study will explore the potential risks faced by on-screen participants following the film's release and help the filmmaking and research team strategise to mitigate these risks. We are currently exploring research funding avenues to support this initiative.

Further to this, as part of the researcher's commitment to ethical engagement and the ongoing relationship with the participants, the team is currently conducting research on the participants' experiences with the documentary, specifically during its distribution phase. This mixed-method study combines both quantitative and qualitative approaches, allowing the research team to gather insights into the emotional, psychological, and social impacts the film and its broader dissemination have had on the participants. These findings will provide a comprehensive understanding of the project's longer-term effects and include the voices of lived/ living experience to be addressed in a future study and dissemination of its findings.

Concurrently, Lyon is dedicated to expanding the reach of the Left Write Hook program. She is refining the charity's business model and overseeing the development of train-the-trainer programs. The objective is to have a robust system in place, ready to be implemented by other survivors, coinciding with the film's release. This strategic scaling ensures that the program's resources and methodologies are readily accessible, further broadening the film's impact and its contribution to survivor support and knowledge systems.

### Conclusion

*Left Write Hook* as a multi-faceted creative practice research endeavour is part of the larger narrative of contemporary documentary production within and across the borders of the

academy and marketplace. This paper presents a case study of reflective findings on the project's lifecycle, with the aim of offering valuable insights to filmmakers and researchers embarking on similar ventures. It addresses the significant lessons learned, the documentary's thematic universality, and the strategic advice from the producers' vantage point. It seeks to contribute to the ongoing discourse on creative practice research, social impact documentary providing a lens through which we can evaluate and appreciate the intersection of knowledge, creativity and impact that a project such as *Left Write Hook* represents.

The film, *Left Write Hook* stands as a testament to the dynamic interplay between academic pursuit and creative documentary filmmaking. This article traces the contours of the film's creation through the case study of the documentary *Left Write Hook*, touching on its multi-faceted nature. It also offers a reflective commentary on the evolving relationship between the marketplace and the academy.

This project's successful realisation owes much to the collaboration between the University and the external funding agencies. While tensions arose from the differing expectations and priorities of these entities, it is important to acknowledge that the documentary would not have come to fruition without their mutual support. The University's commitment to fostering creative research, paired with the agencies' willingness to engage with academic processes, created a space where the project could thrive. This partnership, despite the tensions, ultimately proved essential in bridging the gap between creative practice, academic research and the screen industry, highlighting the potential for future collaborations in this space.

The film's journey was analysed as a case study through the various phases of production from the lens of two of the producers. In doing so, the researchers have provided a comprehensive study that underscores the potential for trauma informed and ethically produced documentaries to be both intellectually robust and culturally compelling. The story of *Left Write Hook* acts as a narrative about the ever-changing landscape of knowledge production and dissemination in the modern era. This article has served to further offer pragmatic advice to fellow filmmakers contemplating a similar journey. The insights gleaned from producing *Left Write Hook* may serve as guidepost for other creative practice researchers navigating the complex yet potentially rewarding interface of academic filmmaking and positioning screen work within the marketplace of the screen industry.

Readers can find out more about the *Left Write Hook* film at [www.leftwritehook.film](http://www.leftwritehook.film) which includes a link to the film's trailer.

## Notes

1. One participant withdrew from the project following the filming in late 2020.
2. It is worth mentioning that for the authors, there is no mechanism for acknowledging the production finance secured as part of their research profiles, thus further problematising the value of industry-engaged filmmaking research for academics working at this nexus.

## Disclosure statement

The authors of this article were directly involved in the production of the *Left Write Hook* documentary film and served as researchers on the associated project. This dual role as filmmakers and researchers provided unique insights into the subject matter but also necessitates acknowledgment

of their vested interest in the project. Efforts have been made to maintain objectivity in the analysis and discussion presented in this paper.

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## Notes on contributors

**Donna Lyon**, PhD, is an Associate Professor and creative practice researcher at the University of Melbourne, specialising in Film Producing. She is the founder and CEO of Left Write Hook, a charity merging writing and trauma-informed boxing to help survivors of child sexual abuse reclaim their narratives and bodies. With a rich background in arts and filmmaking, including the independent feature film 'Disclosure' (available on Stan), Donna has also published extensively on film archives and the therapeutic impacts of writing and boxing. Her personal journey as a survivor has profoundly shaped her professional path, leading her to co-edit 'Left/Write/Hook: Survivor Stories from a Creative Arts Boxing and Writing Project' and produce the documentary *Left Write Hook*, which premiered at the 2024 Melbourne International Film Festival and took out joint audience award winner for best film.

**Shannon Owen**, PhD, is a documentary filmmaker and practitioner researcher at the University of Melbourne. Her work has been broadcast nationally and internationally, screened at festivals in Asia, Europe and North America and exhibited in Australia's National Portrait Gallery. Her recent documentary credits include *Left Write Hook* (2024), *Guy Bourdin Image Maker* (2021), and *Thomas Banks Quest for Love* (2019). An alumni of the VCA Film & Television, Shannon returned to VCA to teach documentary and currently co-ordinates the Masters Filmmaking Program. Her research interests centre around relational ethics, social impact filmmaking and the intersections between documentary making and futures discourse.

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