

“The Impact of COVID-19: Implications for Creatives and Resilience”

Presented to Michelle Murray, KMP Entertainment

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Abstract

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 virus a global pandemic. The existence of this disease, prevalent across the globe, forced life as "normal" to change. Rituals were upended, routines suspended, and expectations were twisted as stay-at-home mandates, quarantines, and mask-wearing was regulated. Social distancing – the necessity of remaining six feet apart, became a new normal and the current more for interacting with others. Individuals who are in quarantine together did not intermingle with people outside of their safety zones, or “bubble.”

Mental health awareness and plans to support people living alone were given widespread attention. For some families, being home together in quarantine opened up a new world of family commitments, home school responsibilities, and learning how to balance work-life while being at home. No one expected or could have predicted how the COVID-19 pandemic would change the economy, the job market, family structures, or the entertainment industry.

Introduction

According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC), the COVID-19 virus is a disease that is spread “. . . when an infected person breathes out droplets and very small particles that contain the virus. These droplets and particles can be breathed in by other people or land on their eyes, noses, or mouth. In some circumstances, they may contaminate surfaces they touch. People who are closer than 6 feet from the infected person are most likely to get infected (www.CDC.gov).” Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, over 937,000 individuals have lost their lives worldwide. Millions of people continue to live with the post effects of contracting COVID-19. Some with astronomical medical bills continued breathing problems, blood clots, and lifestyle changes. The COVID-19 virus has created a strain on families, employers, and stretched the healthcare system to a breaking point.

The film and television industry, service-based industries (i.e., retail workers, food service workers, and transportation) are still feeling the effects of a worldwide pandemic. To add more stress, Black and Brown communities were hit hard by COVID-19. Due to medical disparities and underlying health issues with diabetes, hypertension, and other illnesses, the losses in those communities were crippling. While many people at home turned to their televisions to help them cope, splinters within the film and television industry were exposed. Forced shutdowns due to COVID outbreaks, higher insurance premiums draining budgets, and overworked employees, screaming for support – the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic exposed a system that needed to change.

Implications – Effects on Film Financing and Distribution

Film crews, craft services, editing, photographers – almost every job within the film and television industry requires people to work closely together in closed spaces. For movie theaters that were once filled with excited moviegoers, many have had to shutter their doors or only open and half capacity. Studios have had to make difficult choices about how to release anticipated high-ticket

projects. Some production companies have released films to streaming platforms only, while others have chosen to do a hybrid release –limited play in theaters and major play on streaming platforms. For streaming services such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, Hulu, subscription services have become a preferred viewing option.

To some actors, streaming services have become a source of conflict with production companies. At the onset of the pandemic, when major companies were launching new platforms, Disney created Disney+, an exclusive paid platform to lure new customers. A-list actress Scarlett Johansson filed a fifty-million dollar lawsuit against Disney in 2021 claiming that she lost income when her film, “Black Widow” was released to the Disney+ streaming platform and in the studios at the same time. Instead of choosing a hybrid solution, Disney released everything at one time. Although Black Widow was a box office hit, sales dropped on the second day. Walsh in his Forbes Magazine Article (2021) described Disney’s decision in this way:

The coronavirus pandemic forced movie theaters to close or operate at limited capacity, causing movie studios to choose between delaying films or sending them directly to streaming services. This shift coincided with entertainment companies’ longer-term pivot toward paid streaming platforms. Disney offered Black Widow and the movie Cruella to Disney+ users and movie theaters on the same day, and it released the Pixar film Luca exclusively on Disney+ instead of showing it in theaters. (Walsh, 2021).

In August of that 2021, Johansson withdrew her lawsuit and therefore, no “precedent” was created. “The matter will now be left for talent, their representatives, and the studios to resolve—behind closed doors, if they can (Breznican, 2021).

For film and television specifically, mandates and safety protocols were put in place to ensure that crew members were kept safe from COVID on set. During the pandemic, writer’s rooms had to

move to virtual platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams Google Meet. Another example of a safety protocol within the film industry is the implementation of specific zones for filming as outlined in “The Safe Way Forward: A Joint Report of the DGA, SAG-AFTRA, IATSE and Teamsters’ Committees for COVID-19 Safety Guidelines (2020):

- Zone A is any perimeter within which activity occurs without physical distancing or the use of PPE.
- Zone B is everywhere the production has a footprint that is not Zone A. Use of PPE and stringent physical distancing practices are observed and enforced within Zone B
- Zone C is the outside world: homes, hotels, wherever people employed in the production go when they’re not working

Although safety zones create a more controlled environment to protect talent and crew there have been cases where sets have had to cease production due to an outbreak. Mission Impossible 7, Game of Thrones: House of Dragon, Black Panther: Wakanda Forever, are some examples of sets that have had to stop filming due to COVID. These circumstances have raised discussions about mandatory vaccinations for cast and crew.

Trends that Shape the Film and Television Industry Post-COVID

The COVID virus exposed hidden concerns within employee structural systems. For workers in service industries, workers grew tired of being disrespected by employers and customers. Mass walkouts from service industry positions including “. . . retail, professional services, transportation, warehousing, and utilities” (Cassidy, 2021). Cassidy continued, “COVID-19 simply gave dissatisfied workers a moment to reflect on their situations.” Some employees left their jobs to work remotely, start businesses or go back to school.

The top three reasons that employees were leaving to pursue different employment opportunities ranged from lack of workplace communication, relationships with superiors, and

toxicity in the workplace. Cassidy in his explanation of a "toxic work environment" shed light on what this looks like: What is a toxic workplace exactly? It's a company that puts money or success over the needs of its employees. Profits are important in business, but nothing is sustainable if employees aren't in a healthy mind frame." According to Cassidy's definition, recognizing toxicity in the workplace is one way that entertainment staff has taken a stand at their jobs.

In every facet of the film and television industry, before the pandemic and during, people were affected by low pay, long hours, and lack of medical care. The big-name talent in front of, and behind the camera bear most of the financial glory for the end product. During the pandemic, the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) threatened to strike from working on set due to the work hours and lack of pay. After several days of negotiations, the strike was averted in 2021, but the union, thirteen thousand members strong, were ready to walk off set in protest of inappropriate treatment and work standards.

All of the popular products in the entertainment industry are not possible without people working to make it happen behind the scenes. Several articles and news outlets reported in 2021 about how film and television crew are required to sacrifice family time, sleep, vacations, and medical care. Those with specialized jobs are unable to take off work because there is no one with the unique skillset to replace them. COVID not only affected the film and television industry solely for the filmmakers and creatives, but the extended ripples of COVID hit other types of businesses hard as well. Caterers, florists, transportation, fashion designers, photographers, hairstylists, coaches, and other specialty service providers were put out of work.

In addition to other changes during COVID, the film and television industry has to grapple with insurance regulations, new budget items to cover the cost of personal protection equipment, and COVID testing. "Production costs have already soared because of coronavirus safety measures, and longer rest periods and higher pay endanger profitability even more. Costs associated with

Covid-19 safety protocols can expand a project's budget by as much as 20 percent, producers say (Barnes, 2021).” Filming and distribution pipelines have also become a concern for producers.

According to an article written in the New Mexico Newsport, tax incentives offered by New Mexico are being used to support local "workers, goods and services." The problem is if the state is not careful and the workers are overrun, or the tax breaks go away, everything has the potential to fold like a house of cards. After the tragic shooting of Halyna Hutchins on the set of "Rust", New Mexico was pushed to the forefront of the news for some of its careless practices. The article states that "New Mexico wants a large and successful film industry, but, as the Rust story points out, it has work to do to produce a workforce that can fully meet industry needs and assure everyone is properly trained and protected." Workers' complaints about long days, long drives in the dark, and unsafe working conditions fell on deaf ears.

The state of New Mexico has beautiful landscapes, gorgeous weather, and strong Native American history. It is known for its hot springs and mountains, but it has not been top billing, or a hub for film and television production, until recently. In the wake of the pandemic, new restrictions enforcing a strict mask and COVID regulations, California's approach to controlling the Coronavirus is turning filmmakers and creatives away - forcing them to find new locations other than Georgia and California. Filmmakers and production companies such as Netflix and NBC Universal are moving productions to New Mexico. Tamalewood is now number two in production sites according to an article written by Teya Vitu.

Locations, tax incentives, budgets, transportation, or any of the other necessary items go making a film. Filmmakers must learn how to pivot and be ready to reposition quickly. No one knew that the pandemic was coming, and it shut down production for months causing job loss and drastic changes to what happens on set. Although the film and television industry is now beginning to thrive in New Mexico, the pool of workers is not as experienced, or may not have the same

technical skills as professionals in states with more history. But the great thing is that there are colleges right across the street.

With training and schooling, crews must ensure that New Mexico can handle the influx of projects. A concern that was raised after Hutchins' untimely passing was how there are how far stretched the production crews have become. "Local crews are working more than twice as many hours as a few years ago, leaving the state's relatively small pool of skilled labor stretched thin and intensifying the debate about whether more can be done to protect workers from physical injury on the job." Before films can get financed they need to have insurance with completion coverage, completion bonds, schedules, specific plans, and COVID-19 protocols in place. Eight to ten percent of all film budgets need to include COVID-19 protocols and contingencies.

Social Awareness in Film and Television

Several writers have deemed the year 2020 as the year from hell. (Gopnik, 2020; Salo 2020; Whitehead, 2020) In his New Yorker article entitled, "The Year In Hell." Gopnik wrote, "Throughout the year, nothing was normal, and everything seemed normalized." Not only was there a pandemic, but Kobe Bryant, his daughter, and several other people were also killed in a helicopter crash on their way to basketball practice. In 2020 the president was impeached, Prince Harry and Meghan Markle left the royal family, and there was a stock market crash. On top of that, several major social justice events occurred in 2020 including nationwide Black Lives Matter Protests after the deaths of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor. In August of 2020, Chadwick Boseman, best known for his work in Black Panther, 42 and Get on Up, died of cancer and no one was aware of his diagnosis.

The year 2020 was difficult on many levels for all of these reasons. Whitehead mused: in her article, "2020: The Year from Hell":

“Every country seems to be leaning in to help their citizens except us. We have received one stimulus check as an eviction crisis is happening, as small businesses are closing, as our children are being educated from our kitchen tables, as our positive case numbers are rising, and as incomes are falling. Our politicians are playing politics as millions of us struggle to pay our bills. I have never been so disgusted and frankly embarrassed to be an American. (2020)

The impact of the social uprisings was reflected in entertainment as people used their phones to record and share injustices they experienced in real-time. With so many clashes of morals, values, ideals, and motivations, where was culture supposed to go and how was it supposed to respond to the shift in the standard? It had to find a way to make its imprint and it showed up on film. In an article listing the top fifteen social impact films of 2020, the writers penned this statement”

The year 2020 was one of the loud and urgent calls for societal change, as the country's racial and economic divides were starkly exposed by both the COVID-19 pandemic and the most unconventional presidential campaign of our lives. The best social impact films and television shows of 2020 put the issues that traumatize, divide, unite and inspire us squarely at the heart of their narratives” (USC School of Cinematic Arts Staff, 2020).

Some of the films listed in the USC School of Cinematic Arts Staff article that highlighted social justice issues included a documentary about John Lewis “Good Trouble,” a documentary about transgender representation “Disclosure,” and Chadwick Boseman’s last film, “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom.” The latter was written and published by August Wilson, a Pittsburgh-born and bred writer.

Book Publication Post-COVID

Book Logix, a printing company in Cumming, Georgia sent an email to their customers on October 21, 2021, to inform them that the price of paper is increasing. “As you may have heard, the

pandemic has caused a variety of supply chain issues that are impacting the book industry, specifically causing a current paper shortage. All varieties of paper have gone down in supply and up in cost due to a big increase in the cost of wood pulp, the overall amount of paper being manufactured, and transport issues. It is also taking longer to get paper orders from suppliers” (James, 2021, personal email). Not only did the paper shortage impact the paper supply, but it also affected the colors of paper that are available to print. "All varieties of paper have gone down in supply and up in cost due to a big increase in the cost of wood pulp, the overall amount of paper being manufactured, and transport issues. It is also taking longer to get paper orders from suppliers.”

With the increase in paper costs came an increase in glue, among other costs associated with printing. Sharing a news report from the Today Show to validate their claim, the email shared a link to a Today Show report. Further explaining the shortage, the Today Show report states, "Costs for those who make paper have increased, too. Wood pulp, the raw material used in paper, has gone up 50.2% over the past year, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The price of paper rose 14.2% in the same time." Book Logix encouraged their customers to order more books before another price increase due to the paper shortage.

Before COVID-19, many authors depended on in-person events to sell their books and interact with readers. Book fairs, bookstores, vending events, and conferences were major activities used by authors to promote and sell their books. Unfortunately, COVID-19 caused a full stop to these activities. No one was able to visit Public Libraries which are designed to bring communities and authors together because they were also closed. Authors had to turn to different ways to share their messages and encourage people to buy books. To stay relevant with the change in times, many authors have penned stories to include COVID-life, begun to investigate self-publishing options, and expanded their outreach to e-books.

Pivoting to Thrive – Industry Leader Spotlight

Writers, actors, filmmakers, and other entertainers that depend on large gatherings to generate and sustain their lifestyles were quickly sidelined due to COVID-19. Some entertainment workers have not been able to recover from the financial, medical, or emotional setbacks caused by the virus. Others, quick on their feet and desperate to stay afloat, found ways to pivot their creative expression to stay active in their creative state of mind.

Just as authors needed to pivot as a result of COVID-1, creatives in other facets of the entertainment industry pivoted into new directions. One popular social media personality, comedian, and content creator who pivoted during the pandemic was Kevin “KevOn Stage” Fredricks. Kevin started his career in high school and college by writing and performing plays. He and his brother would film themselves doing comedic skits and post them on YouTube. With his witty humor, thoughtful content, and knack for interviewing skills, Kevin has built a fan base of 2.3 million followers in all walks of life on Facebook and over 500 thousand on YouTube. Among other social media platforms of Twitter and Instagram, Kevin boasts on his website that he reaches 18 million people a week (kevonstage.com, 2018).

Growing his fanbase organically through his comical videos, Mr. Fredricks has gone viral several times. Similar to how his friend Issa Rae, of the popular show “Insecure”, organically grew her audience using YouTube, Kevin is a successful podcast host, writer, and producer. He also teaches an e-course called “The Blueprint,” which shares some of his personal tools and tricks to creatives for making money online as he has done.

Kevin, along with his wife, Melissa co-hosted “The Love Hour,” a podcast that was geared toward offering advice, support, and tools for married couples. The podcast, available on YouTube and other platforms aired 198 episodes from December 3, 2018, before it was ended on December 16, 2021. On the January 28, 2021, episode, Melissa in a tearful statement said, “I am seriously

considering this being the last season of The Love Hour. I feel like I have squeezed all the juice. There ain't nothing else to squeeze. There ain't nothing else to come up out of this." Melissa, feeling the strain of the pandemic, was looking for something different to do creatively.

In February 2020, Kevin and his team were evicted from an office they rented to record their content due to a conflict with their landlord. In March the Pandemic sent them home from tour. Kevin's main source of income before the pandemic was traveling for comedy shows at venues, churches, and comedy houses. He self-funded his tours three times over. When all of his comedy shows were canceled due to the pandemic, Kevin created a virtual comedy experience called "Keep Your Distance." This comedy event raised money through low-cost ticket sales on the Eventbrite platform. Utilizing his "Stage Krew," the moniker he has named his fans, Kevin promoted the event to his Patreon audience first and they were given a steep discount. He gave a different progressive discount to his email list and the general public. Fredericks' vision for the shows was to allow Black, Brown, and female comics to perform for audiences that may not otherwise see them.

For the Keep your Distance shows, comedians selected by Kevin performed for a live, socially distanced audience at an outside locale in Los Angeles. Virtual attendees were able to stream the show via the Zoom platform. Shows were held every Friday. In an interview with The Laugh Button, Fredericks explained how he would have toured 80 cities but had to pivot, "And quickly we figured out how to do Zoom and then we came up with Keep Your Distance comedy. So you kind of always have to be evolving and pivoting, or else you're going to be left behind."

In all of his podcast shows, Kevin shares his authentic truth and talks often about he is consistently hard on himself. On several episodes of "The Love Hour", he has discussed his low-self-confidence issues and the progress he has made in therapy. The pandemic allowed him to investigate new ways to define and implement his success. Kevin shared openly about his therapy and other tools

that he has used to help him reach his goals. One of those tools was reading a book that his therapist recommended entitled “The Big Leap.”

In an interview with the author of the book, Gay Hendricks, Kevin and Melissa discussed their "upper limit problems," fears, and barriers to success. Gay coached them live on the show and described that when he studied the upper limit problem he asked a question, “Are you willing to feel good for longer and longer periods of each day?” Hendricks further explained, “Finding out what you are afraid of is a key to the upper limit problem.” Kevin in his response to Hendricks explained that he and his wife come from poverty and experienced it for the majority of their lives. "This successful period has only been within the last three to five years. What we are always afraid of. . .fear that broke is around the corner." He asked Hendricks how to quiet that fear, he desired to purchase a Maserati which is his dream car.

To help Kevin and Melissa address some of their fears, Hendricks guided them through a vision exercise. He had them close their eyes and confront what is holding them back. Kevin said, "I flashed back to El Paso when we had nine people living in a three-bedroom house and it was the lack of enough. However, we never felt a lack of love. We lacked extravagance but we never lacked love." Melissa shared how she remembered seeing her father stress over his checkbook. These images then prompted Mr. Hendricks to discuss with Kevin and Melissa what is underneath their fears. Kevin shared that he was afraid, “there is not enough. There is not enough space. Not enough food. Not enough for everybody.” This is what drives Kevin to work so hard and why he found ways to pivot his business during the pandemic (The Love Hour, 2020).

A family man, Kevin is loyal and dedicated to the people in his circle. He has a close-knit group of friends that he has remained loyal to throughout his journey toward success. His brother and best friend were his first production partners, and he has expanded that group to include his wife, his two sons, comedians Tony Baker, Tahir Moore, and his long-time friend and photographer Josh

Gonz. During the pandemic, when Kevin was contemplating his plan of action, he kept his friends in mind. He started a new podcast, “Here’s the Thing,” and hired a female co-host, “That Chick Angel” Angel Laketa Moore-Tanksley. Through their work together, the two have built a friendship that has developed into brand expansion for their spouses.

The four of them, That Chick Angel, Marcus Tanksley, and Melissa have a podcast called, #TheBaldandtheBeautiful. All of this was made possible because of Kevin who works hard to ensure that the people around him are afforded opportunities. When he made the pivot during the pandemic, he remained connected to others who were finding ways to thrive. Musician and philanthropist Tobe Nwigwe, and social media influencer Tabitha Brown are two of Kevin’s friends in the entertainment industry. Tobe had a successful MonuMINTal music tour and Tabitha Brown retired her husband from his police job, opened a restaurant, and had a New York Times best-selling book.

In his interview with The Laugh Button, Kevin described what pivoting to thrive has done for him:

The most important thing that I have learned is that the worst has happened, and I've made it. My biggest fear was like "What if I get canceled and I can't tour?" I didn't get canceled but outside got canceled. I figured it out. I would never have thought that I could still sustain with my number one income going literally to zero. But you figure it out. I figured out a way to make things work. And that, to me, has been an amazing feat to realize that in the face of great adversity, we've figured it out. For the most part, we've figured out what we can do to make things work (Buss, A. 2020)

Kevin has pivoted his business and family business into several directions including a mobile app called KevOn Stage Studios. He has created fake conflicts or "beef" with other entertainers (i.e., Spice Adams and Jonathan McReynolds) to help them get followers and share about their projects. The mobile app costs less than \$50 a year and is available for multiple devices. The material on the

app includes comedy shows, documentaries, improvisation shows, matchmaking, sketch comedy, and other content produced by Kevin and his network of friends. Recently Kevin has released a food show called, “What’s Good?” For this show, Kevin follows in the example of Food Network star Guy Fieri, and he eats at recommended Black-owned restaurants in communities where he travels for comedy shows.

Kevin has not only created a lane for himself, but he has also opened up several opportunities for others to make money and stay afloat during the pandemic when they could not otherwise get work to provide for their families. Kevin shared a tweet that expressed a sentiment about why he works so hard to support others, “One time @IssaRae said networking ain't about getting connected to people above you. It's about connecting with people on your level and rising together. That STUCK with me” (Fredricks, 2021).

Jo-Issa Rae Diop

Jo-Issa Rae Diop is the child of Delayna Diop, an educator, and Abdoulaye Diop, a Senegalese pediatric doctor. One of five children, she was born in California and lived briefly in Maryland and Senegal before relocating back to Los Angeles. As a result of her cultural experiences, Issa Rae speaks fluent French. Issa Rae comes from a religious background and her mother initially had difficulty watching *Insecure* because of explicit scenes. She later binge-watched every episode.

Issa Rae graduated from Stanford University with a degree in African American studies in 2007. She supplemented her education with a filmmaking course through the New York Film Academy and is listed on their website as notable alumni. Issa Rae is not only an actress and writer, but she is also a philanthropist and executive producer. After the death of Alton Sterling, she raised scholarship money for his children and gave the Black Lives Matter movement permission to use one of her viral phrases, "I'm rooting for everybody Black" to raise money for the cause.

From the beginning of *Insecure*, Issa Rae and her team had a plan to end the show after five seasons. During the fifth and final season, “Season Bye-ve,” the cast and crew had the unexpected challenge of dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. Prentice Penny and several other directors on a *Variety Magazine* panel shared how the COVID 19

A few days after the series finale of “*Insecure*,” Arlan Hamilton, host of the podcast, “Your First Million¹,” used her platform to reflect deeply on how *Insecure* touched her as a fan of the show. She spoke to Issa Rae, who was not present on the recording, in an unscripted rumination on her podcast. Hamilton mused, “It was everything I needed as a human,” and she offered words of gratitude to the co-creator of the HBO series, “The world will never be the same . . . the world will never be the same after this show. She built something so, so intensely purposeful, and important.” Hamilton’s musing is one example of how Jo-Issa Rae Diop has impacted people of color, influenced music, and supported creatives within marginalized populations (LGBTQI+, women, and others). Even through adversity and a pandemic, Issa Rae thrived within her creativity and inspired others to do the same.

Author

Issa Rae is a best-selling author of the book entitled, “*The Misadventures of an Awkward Black Girl*” which is a book of essays. Reviews are often written by readers who self-identify as awkward, geeky, or nerdy and concur with Issa Rae’s lived experiences. One such reviewer, Michelle Cavalier (2015) described herself as a white woman and gave this thought:

ABG is also about Issa Rae's racial awareness, which is something that never occurred to me as a white kid growing up in the suburbs. Reflecting on the representation of race in pop culture in the 90s was surprising and saddening. How is it possible that in the age of

¹ Your First Million “How ‘Insecure’ helped me become a better investor & founder. Google Podcasts: https://podcasts.google.com/feed/aHR0cHM6Ly9hbmlNob3IuZm0vcy9iZjE2NDMwL3BvZGh3QvcnNz?sa=X&ved=0CAcQrrcFahcKEwiok_Pjv1AhUAAAAAHQAAAAQLA

technological expansion we have regressed so far in the representation of minorities?

Primetime television when I was a kid was full of racially diverse characters – where are they now? Why does it seem that everyone is forced to play to a stereotype? Or worse yet, to not be present at all.

Insecure

The internet helped to shape and launch Issa's career. "Insecure" is a scripted series following the lives, friendship, and relationships of two Black, millennial women, premiered on HBO on October 9, 2016. It premiered during a significant time for black people, during the height of the 2016 Presidential election that left many people in the country feeling apprehension about what the new leadership would bring. A month later a new president was elected and there was in some sense, a splintering of the country. Insecure provided a reprieve for Black people during that time and addressed topics such as interracial relationships, stereotypes, and racial profiling.

Based in Los Angeles and featuring the city as a character, the show played for five seasons on HBO. It garnered Issa Rae accolades from Peabody Awards to a listing in the 2018 Time Magazine's list of 100 most influential people in the world. This accomplishment made Issa Rae the first black woman to "create and star in a premium cable show" Bethonie Butler, November 29, 2021, Washington Post article entitled, "Insecure" and the Defiant Come-up of Issa Rae)." The series was modeled after Issa Rae's award-winning web series, "The Misadventures of an Awkward Black Girl and Friends" (2011-2013), her book was published later. When asked about why she chose to write about these topics, Issa told Huffington Post interviewer Emma Gray, "I felt like my voice was missing, and the voices of other people that I really respect and admire and wanna see in the mainstream are missing."

Leah Asmelash in her 2021 CNN Entertainment article stated, "At its core, "Insecure" is about a group of Black millennials trying to figure life out -- their love lives, their friendships, their

careers, things to which any young adult can relate. The beauty of the show is, in part, its mundanity. "These are regular people, dealing with regular things." Although the show featured a millennial woman and her friends, the characters extended beyond that generation and touched on topics related to Generation X, Generation Z, and Baby Boomers.

Every season was based on an overall theme. For the final season, the theme was, "Are we going to be okay?" In Episode 5, "Surviving, Okay?" Molly's (played by Yvonne Oriji) mother (played L. Scott Caldwell) had a stroke. This episode investigated how this major illness impacted Molly's father, his other children, and extended family including Issa. Often, the themes, jokes, and plot of the show were relatable to a wide age range. Asmelash further stated, "For Black people on Twitter, or just online in general, "Insecure" became an event that was impossible to miss. Regardless of whether someone watched the show or not, many engaged with it . . ." The crew and actors watched the show and tweeted in real-time.

On her blog, professor Jonita Davis shared her deeply personal experience of "growing up smart, gifted, and black." She experienced beatings when she was not in line with her parents' expectations, attended church – which did not help, and often received beatings to make her compliant. Davis said, "By the time I was in my 20s I had learned that keeping my mouth closed, my expectations low, and my presence small as I coasted through harmful spaces virtually undetected and unscathed." In her article entitled, "How 'Insecure' and Issa Rae Became Part of My Healing Journey," Davis shared how therapy supported her healing journey from those experiences. She described her childhood trauma and the process she took to heal with relating to the protagonist in the show as a bit part of that journey. Speaking of the show Davis wrote, "It's not enough to just see ourselves. We must have authentic stories out here that help us reconcile and heal. . . . finally seeing "me" in a show and its creator helped me to make it across some serious hurdles in my

healing journey. Hurdles that I think would have tripped me up if I didn't have this shining example." This reflects the writing, acting, and production of *Insecure*.

The cast and crew of *Insecure* were anticipating writing the final season together and COVID changed the plans of how they were required to finish the season. In an interview with *The Cut*, Issa shared her perspective about filming in COVID:

It was terrible. You don't get to socialize in the same way with people. We're pretty much a tight-knit crew. Some people I didn't even recognize. I was like, "Girl, that's you? What?" Because their masks will be on. And then, of course, you're shooting in a dangerous pandemic, so everybody's anxiety is high. We made the most of it all, but it was really dreadful to be shooting during that time. I have all the respect for the cast and crew who made it happen. (Reese, 2021)

Music

With intention, Issa Rae used *Insecure* to open doors for marginalized actors and creatives, design peer mentorship opportunities, and write scripts to normalize the lives of people of color in mainstream media. This show has catapulted musicians, artists, crew members, and writers to new levels. As a music curator for the show, Issa Rae "emphasis on under-the-radar, Black, independent, and Los Angeles-based artists. This has crafted the opportunity at possible mainstream breakout successes for numerous emerging music creators Turner-Williams, J. March 8, 2021).

Issa Rae's Influence on the Culture

Issa Rae raised over \$50,000 through KickStarter to film season one of "The Misadventures of an Awkward Black Girl" and as a creator on Patreon has 2,637 patrons supporting her production company Hoorae. Influencing people in the age of social media, the internet, and mobile phones is currently the simple act of tapping a finger. Tik Tok, Instagram, YouTube, and other such platforms

are examples of how a creator with an idea or an opinion can have their message heard reach the masses.

To give voice to and showcase upcoming writers, Issa Rae, among other things, has created a YouTube channel, "Issa Rae Presents." Through her media company Hoorae, Issa Rae and her team have given exposure to writers and filmmakers who would otherwise not have had an opportunity to get their work produced. This YouTube channel, dedicated to featuring upcoming filmmakers has given a platform to filmmakers like Chinwe Okorie who had her film, "LOVEBITES" featured on Issa Rae's YouTube platform.

Hallease, an aspiring filmmaker and creative, interviewed Chinwe on her YouTube show called "Tryna Be Somebody." Chinwe and Hallease discussed the lack of Black Women in film and Chinwe talked about indie filmmaking. LOVEBITES is a short film written by Chinwe and during the pandemic, she had to put her viewing at South X Southwest (SXSW) on hold. Making a bold move to get exposure for her film, Chinwe sought out a generic email for Issa Rae to invite her to watch her film. Three days later someone from Issa Rae's team responded with a favorable response from Issa Rae she was invited to participate in "Short Film Sunday," a program Issa Rae hosted at the time that had been on pause. Seeing LOVEBITES, Issa Rae opened up Short Film Sunday and put Chinwe's film on her site.

With this exposure, Chinwe was able to form her production company. In a recorded interview with Hallease, Chinwe stated, "Because of Issa I was able to get Elephant off the ground." When Issa Rae put her name on Chinwe's project, everything changed for her. "When SXSW was canceled, Austin filmmaker Chinwe Okorie was left in limbo with her new short, "Lovebites." Now it's been given the Issa Rae seal of approval, and after only a week she's already seeing her career elevated (Whittaker, 2020)

Issa Rae is intentional about the connections she makes to support others. When interviewed by James Colbert on his late show before the premiere, Issa Rae and James discussed how people are emotionally invested in this show. James joked that millions of people reach out to her with suggestions and ideas about the storyline. They told her not to “game of thrones the finale.” Issa was so concerned about how the characters' stories would end that she rewrote the script two days before filming. She gave an analogy that one of the writers offered, “We keep trying to land this plane, but the characters are going to live on after the show.”

Through the social uprisings during the midst of the pandemic, and the stress of the COVID-19, *Insecure* became a platform for Black people to escape from the pangs of daily life. For some groups, having discussions about the characters and situations played on the show gave them an outlet. One writer mused, “While COVID-19 may rob us of physical quality time with those we love, virtual and interactive community groups may help mitigate the impact of isolation and improve your well-being (Ware, and Meshesha, 2020).”

A popular quote by Issa says, “As long as the people who are in charge aren’t us, things will never change.” If she were a writer fifty years ago, the content, themes, and subject matter she writes about would still be relevant. People of color have often fought for a place, time, and season to be who they are without microaggressions or being minimized. For years, Prentice Penny, the showrunner was the only person of color in many of the writing rooms where he worked while building his career. He like Kevin, Issa Rae, Tabitha Brown, and Tobe Nwigwe, blazed a trail and left the door open for people who came after them. This is the power of peer mentorship.

While Arlan Hamilton thanked Issa Rae and her team for *Insecure* which aired its last show on December 26, 2021, Issa Rae was negotiating a contract with WarnerMedia to the tune of 40 million dollars to create new content and shows. Arlan Hamilton is a bridge builder in her own right, she owns a venture capitalist firm that "invests in "the very best founders who identify as women,

People of Color, or LGBTQ. I personally identify as all three.² From LGBTQI women like Arlan Hamilton to generation X college professors with ADHD, and white women, Issa Rae is leaving her imprint on pop culture influence. Her body of work, just like *Kev on Stage*, has not only opened doors for Issa Rae, but she has been intentional about creating a platform to help others, encourage peer mentorship, and display the humanness of Black people in their private, safe spaces.

Insecure created for some viewers a distraction from the heartbreak of COVID-19, the stress of social uprisings, and the pain of the death count. When it was first discovered, COVID-19 had a major effect on two major populations: people over the age of sixty and black and brown communities. *Insecure* and shows like it, provided an outlet for people to laugh, cry and talk about hard subjects with friends and family for a few minutes once a week. Lin Manuel's *Hamilton* was able to be experienced outside of the silver screen and Broadway stages as a result of changes that happened during the pandemic.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic ripped through the world furiously. With multiple variants, it has caused millions of civilian deaths worldwide, caused a mass exodus of employees from service-based jobs, and knocked the Black and Brown communities to their knees. The implications of the Pandemic have reshaped how the film and television industry operates, distributes films, and interacts with its consumers. The negative aftereffects of the COVID-19 pandemic continue to shake families, rattle communities, and force changes in the lives of people striving to make an honest living.

Although the cons are heavy and seem to outweigh the pros of the implications of COVID-19, if one is intentional, they can find the positive on the other side of the coin. Families were drawn closer together due to quarantines, entrepreneurship rose 20% (Brennen, 2021), and awareness of

² www.Backstagecapital.com

mental health support became a priority due to seniors and millennials experiencing depression and anxiety during the pandemic. Virtual therapy services such as Better Help Online, Talk Space, and Therapy for Black Girls became prominent and more accessible.

When the pandemic shifted the economy, creatives such as Kevin Fredricks and Issa Rae Diop were at the forefront of creative content that provided a distraction from the perils of life during the pandemic. Looking at the example of these creatives and their network of friends, they found a way to thrive during a difficult time that shifted entertainment, film, and television. This is the power of resilience married with creativity.

During the pandemic, creatives were forced to shift their thinking. Tobe Nwigwe filmed and produced a virtual concert during the pandemic called “The Pandemic Experience.” Lin Manuel Miranda made his popular Broadway play “Hamilton” available to a streaming audience.

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