Covid-19 and the Experience of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Creative Entrepreneurs
Foreword

Before the Covid-19 pandemic, many BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) creative entrepreneurs existed in an invisible space between the public and private sectors. Both sectors had consistently undervalued what they do. In this space, innovation, creativity and optimism forge a resilience that is necessary for their ability to survive; and in a few cases, thrive. This resilience is partly born of necessity and partly of humanity; the natural drive for security, identity, status and creative expression. Covid-19, like other major crises before, has tested this resilience. For the first time, our report intends to give voice to this group, and capture, in all its complexity, their various experiences.

As a second round of money is being distributed to support the arts and creative industries through the government’s £1.57 billion Culture Recovery Fund, we need to ask ourselves: what is it that is being recovered? The murder of George Floyd, and the global fight for racial justice which followed, produced arguably the biggest response to racial diversity the sector has ever seen. For some, this has outweighed the impact of Covid-19 on BAME creative entrepreneurs. Many of the people we spoke to have had their best year ever, either in terms of business growth, personal recognition or job satisfaction. Their fear is that the heightened interest in diversity will slowly evaporate, and that ‘recovery’ will mean giving up any gains made – a return to business as usual in the invisible gap between the public and private sectors.

Even with the positive impact of the Black Lives Matter movement, inevitably, some of the entrepreneurs have businesses that could not be insulated from Covid-19 and the lockdown measures. However, even amongst this group there is strong acknowledgement of a positive shift in recognition and perception of BAME entrepreneurs within their industries. They had found a voice, and colleagues, as well as some of those in power, were opening their doors to listen.

Our paper – covering 20 case studies – is not claiming to be statistically significant or representative of an entire sector. It does provide different stories of life during Covid-19. Collectively their experiences point to enduring themes, supported by the reality on the ground and by wider evidence that’s emerging from ongoing research. The fact that, on aggregate, the entrepreneurs we interviewed performed better during the pandemic than before means we have made progress, of a sort, and that we should aim to build on any gains made. To do this we should invest in regeneration (i.e. creating new systems, new structures and new leaders), not just recovery of the sector as it was pre-Covid-19. This is not a time for self-preservation by the gatekeepers of our current system; a system which allowed underinvestment in BAME artists and entrepreneurs over the last 100 years, * and broadcasters. It is a time for them to cultivate something new. Entrepreneurial creativity is required, the very qualities our case studies have in such abundance.

This is the start of a conversation. Many of the themes raised need further exploration. The experience over the pandemic, and in the last year, is mixed. But if I were asked to draw a single conclusion, it is that consciousness has been raised, aspirations have been elevated and nobody wants to simply go back to life and business as we knew it pre Covid-19 and pre-George Floyd.
None of the people we interviewed want to believe that moving beyond lockdown will mean moving back to being less visible and having less of a voice (a return to their invisible space). Their collective hope is that these various crises will be the catalyst for the regeneration of our sector, to one that is more equitable and as a result more resilient. It is a hope they are willing to fight for.

Thank you to Sue Barnard and the Arts Council for their timely support of this research. Thank you to James Doeser, not only for his work on this but for his guidance. Thanks to those on the MeWe team who helped in pulling this together. But mostly I want to thank the 20 people for the time they took to share their inspirational stories which formed the source material of this report.

Kevin Osborne  
CEO, MeWe360

*We have used the abbreviation BAME in the foreword and throughout the report. We recognise the diversity of individual identities and lived experiences and understand that BAME is an imperfect term that does not fully capture the racial, cultural and ethnic identities of people that experience structural and systematic inequality.
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About the project

MeWe360 is a Black-led not for profit that champions Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) entrepreneurs in the arts and creative industries. It supports a network of members through its Incubator Programme which is designed to develop the mindset and tools that underlie success and to provide the support needed for budding entrepreneurs.

This rapid research project provides rich new qualitative data that reveals how a sample of the MeWe360 Incubator members (past and present) are experiencing the pandemic and lockdown. We conducted a total of 20 interviews designed to reveal what life was like before the outbreak of Covid-19 and the lockdowns imposed to control its spread. Specifically, we crafted our approach in order to understand how the pandemic and the events of 2020 were affecting:

- their ability to produce work
- the ways they reach customers and audiences
- income and expenditure
- use of government support
- their plans for the future

It also helped us map the various unexpected impacts of the virus and government policy. Our rich qualitative data is complementary to the many larger surveys and statistical analyses that are being undertaken in an effort to chart the impact of Covid-19 on the sector. This is the first study of its kind to tell the lived experience of BAME creative entrepreneurs in 2020. We present our findings in a way that helps funders, policymakers, sector-support organisations and other creative practitioners understand what has happened this year while highlighting what can be done to help people in a similar situation.

The interviews were conducted in November 2020, during which England was in a month-long period of national restrictions. The report was completed in the first week of December. The results of our study are contextualised by other relevant research that was completed and published in the months leading up to December 2020.

This study was undertaken at rapid speed (from start to finish in the 30 days of November 2020). The experiences that it describes are one subset of wider national, regional, sector experiences. We readily acknowledge that the sample of interviewees is not representative (or even reflective) of the wider cultural or creative sector. Nonetheless, our interviewees comprise voices which do not normally feature in policy or funding discussions within the sector: younger, BAME, commercially-minded or independent entrepreneurs working from small or micro-businesses.

Whatever the limitations of the sample’s composition, we present a set of stories which enrich and complicate the usual narratives of the cultural sector here in the UK. We have conducted this research with as much rigour and transparency as time, resources, and our experience permits. A fuller description of the methodology is available in the Appendix 1.
It is notoriously difficult to get high quality data about the demographic characteristics and financial circumstances of people (especially freelancers) working in the creative industries and how they are differently impacted by Covid. In reviewing all the published Covid-related surveys of cultural and creative workers, Roberta Comunian & Lauren England\(^1\) found “a clear lack of attention towards demographic information”. They say that by not measuring disability, gender and ethnicity “the groups which are acknowledged in the literature as being more marginalized might end-up being the ones paying the higher price” and that the “uneven impact of Covid-19 is very likely to result in the exacerbation of existing inequalities”. This isn’t just an academic concern since “funding and support provisions based on these survey findings may fail to reach those most in need” and “will make the sector less diverse and less inclusive in the long-term”. Our findings are punctuated by other relevant published research from the field but are really designed to help provide detailed knowledge and to encourage others to dig deeper into these stories.

**Findings**

The headline findings of this report are:

- The pandemic and shutdown has been an unprecedented shock to lives and livelihoods
- Black Lives Matter movement, the killing of George Floyd and the reinvigorated commitment to racial justice has been a more powerful and profound force for change than Covid-19
- Structural racism and mutating forms of gatekeeping continue to put Black-owned enterprises at a disadvantage
- The chaos of the first wave of the pandemic opened opportunities for some Black-owned businesses
- There is enduring optimism and resourcefulness among a majority of our interviewees

**The pandemic and shutdown has been an unprecedented shock to lives and livelihoods**

At the time of writing, there were anywhere between an estimated 60,000-70,000 deaths from Covid-19 in the UK. The latest data in November from the Office for National Statistics\(^2\) shows that the economic situation in the UK is bleak. The unemployment rate is rising sharply and the employment rate is falling. The UK economy has gently recovered from its lowest performing month in April 2020, but GDP is still some 8.2% below the February 2020 level, with growth having lost momentum in recent months.

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\(^2\)https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/conditionsanddiseases/article s/coronaviruscovid19roundup/2020-03-26
The most recent Federation of Small Business Voice of Small Business Index³ (Q2 2020) showed a substantial recovery in confidence after a record fall at the start of the year. Three quarters of small businesses report falling confidence looking ahead as a direct result of the coronavirus outbreak, with the arts, entertainment and recreation sector recording by far the lowest confidence score. Small businesses are cutting employment levels at the fastest rate ever. More than half expect gross profits to fall over the next three months. One fifth of small businesses expect to downsize in the next year.

Many of the attempts to measure the impact of Covid-19 and government policies designed to suppress and mitigate its spread are collated on the website of the Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre⁴. They all tell a punishing story of cancelled work and diminished prospects, not to mention an ambient level of anxiety and ongoing uncertainty.

“One of the odd things about this pandemic is that a sensible plan doesn’t last longer than a week, before you having to reassess it and recalibrate its value.”

The pandemic and the lockdown have meant that many BAME entrepreneurs in the creative industries either lost money in 2020 or are projected to make less money than expected. About half of our interviewees said that their main business income was down on last year (with some reporting catastrophic declines and predicted big losses). For the rest, the picture was similar to last year, or actually much improved in 2020. However, most of our interviewees are working harder than ever before just to stay in business and to traverse new restrictions and seek out new marketplaces.

“One bigger opportunities that I was going for all kind of dried up, and, and all my staff have relocated, and I’ve streamlined down the business just to myself.”

“I’ve got two revenue sources, which obviously, both got literally severed.”

A report from Creative Access⁵ on the impact of coronavirus on underrepresented communities within the creative industries based on a survey of 252 respondents (of which 89% were BAME individuals) had some sobering results:

- 40% of all respondents said they have run out of money already or are about to do so
- 67% said their mental health is suffering due to coronavirus
- 40% had been furloughed, made redundant or had work cancelled or postponed
- 18% of those in work said they had work cancelled or postponed because of coronavirus
- 18% of those in work said they had been furloughed
- 44% said their primary source of income has changed since coronavirus
- 80% said their priority is to find a new job or freelance work
- 81% wanted support via mentoring and access to training

The report concluded that “it is evident that young people from under-represented communities are disproportionately impacted by recent events; more likely to be furloughed, have work cancelled or postponed; more likely to be affected by the Covid virus itself and more likely to be impacted by the longstanding structural inequality within the creative industries”.

While the revenue of many firms has decreased, so have costs – especially for those in the live events business. The calendar of the film, music and TV sector is usually filled with events, festivals, screenings, awards ceremonies, etc. Because none of these were happening in 2020, it has led to people spending less money producing and attending them.

“[This year has] been really interesting, because it's like, ‘oh, actually, a lot of this stuff can be done, you know, quicker, simpler, cheaper, without me even having left my house’.”

The most turbulent time for everyone was the period from March to July 2020, when there were restrictions on movement and meetings, there was a lot of confusion, and people were not spending. Some of our interviewees found themselves picking up work as restrictions eased and confidence began to return later in the summer. Those working in the screen industries were always in demand from clients needing material for broadcast and looking for people to tell new stories and make fresh content.

“It's been a huge time of change for me, actually, because two things were happening just before everything hit: I was in the middle of doing a fundraiser for my company and I was also gearing up to shoot the next movie.”

In an attempt to measure the damage and disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic for small business owners The British Business Bank & Oliver Wyman found that the sectors most hit were those requiring “face-to-face activities (e.g. food services, arts, health and social work)”. They also say that “Black male business owners report being particularly badly affected and having to take drastic action to save their businesses in response”.

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Beyond the financial shock, the biggest change to affect their business and creative practice is having to work remotely and manage teams and projects over the internet. The move to interfacing over Zoom and Skype has demanded that people learn new skills and pay greater attention to staff welfare and workload.

“We've delivered six hours [of content] and I've not met, physically, any of the people who've worked on any of those shows. We've lost a bit the texture of the company, I think it has suffered. And I think the creativity suffered a bit as well.”

“I enjoy the company of my clients and getting to really understand their processes and desires and goals. And I feel like when I'm in that space, we can do the best work. With the pandemic and the way things have turned out, we obviously don't do that in-person face to face thing anymore.”

Many of the businesses we examined operate a flexible model that responds to growth and shrinkage of workload. They do this through the use of freelance and contract staff. The majority of businesses that have reduced their work during the pandemic have lessened their use of freelance talent in order to cut costs and respond to lower demand.

“Now we get people to film content for us from their mobile phones, and edit at home, then we will send the cut to the company, whereas before we will actually be out outside the house filming somewhere.”

This means the hit on freelance communities inside the networks of the interviewees for this project is likely to be very large. For some of the business owners we spoke to this weighed on their minds, recognising that these were precarious people with limited resources to draw upon. It also meant that many owners/founders/managers
are working much harder, taking on the tasks that would have usually been delegated to more junior colleagues.

The pandemic has precipitated huge changes for some – especially those with big projects underway, or in the immediate pipeline. The change has been most severe for businesses who provide in-person services, like high-end fashion or live events. Either work has shut down altogether, or it has involved increased costs and risk. This has meant that premises have been forced to close and extra equipment and staff procured to make things ‘Covid secure’.

“We always worked on a very high working capital number, just to allow us to research and prepare for projects. So that artistically means we can’t do the kind of research we want to do for the next project.”

Businesses that are built around digital sales in digital marketplaces have fared much better than ‘bricks and mortar’ companies and those whose viability depends on dealing directly with people face-to-face. For those companies built to operate remotely and digitally, the lockdown and pandemic have been easier to manage. The most frequently cited concern was managing teams remotely, which impacted the creative process.

“Because the shop was situated in a gallery, it was one of the first places to close when lockdown was announced. I just had to stop everything and recalibrate, to work out how to change how my business is run completely. And so that’s what’s changed. Everything. Literally everything.”

**The Black Lives Matter movement, the killing of George Floyd and the reinvigorated commitment to racial justice has been a more powerful and profound force for change than Covid-19**

“I feel like our conversations have changed more significantly, because of the diversity conversation rather than the Covid conversation, kind of creatively, and from a business point of view. I would argue that that’s having more of an impact in how we’re perceived as a business and the customers we’re attracting and who wants to work with us, than necessarily the Covid situation.”

“The way I would frame it is that Covid affected our day-to-day more, but Black Lives Matter has had a positive impact on the nature, and even perceived needs, of our business.”

Although this research began as an investigation into the effects of the Covid pandemic, it quickly became clear that there was as much change (if not more) underway in the creative sector as a result of the reinvigorated debate about racial justice prompted by Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and events such as the murder of George Floyd in the United States. This movement has increased visibility for our interviewees, increased demand from clients and commissioners, and unearthed new allies. For some in our study the BLM movement has been a direct contributor to their best financial year in decades.
“The attitude around my colleagues has been reversed because of George Floyd, not because of Covid. I’d prefer to be in corporate right now because of George Floyd, because all my corporate mates, like, their Black History Month was the best they’d ever had!”

“We have turned over more since July than we have done in 10 years.”

“I think because of everything that happened in the summer with Black Lives Matter, we actually got investors more interested in our project, like, private investors.”

The political and cultural force of BLM has resulted in perceptible change in the stated attitudes of institutions in the creative sectors here in the UK. It also had a powerful impact on the personal and professional outlooks of our interviewees and the relationships they have with others.

“We're in a place now where you don't have to muffle your voice, you don't have to muffle your feelings or your lived experience. And you can actually document and vocalise the things that before you might have brushed under the carpet.”

“This year, I’ve recognised that a lot of the relationships I've had with people have been quite conditional, right. And I realised that because of the Black Lives Matter movement, George Floyd's execution, Breonna Taylor, and, you know, all of those things have brought things to the fore for me, which when I've tried to broach it with close friends, they're completely shut down. They're not interested. And just not just the opposite reaction to what I would have expected, having known them for 20 years or something.”

There is a cautious enthusiasm for the many institutional commitments to address racial inequity in the creative industries. There is also a strong thread of scepticism and cynicism about the sincerity of the diversity rhetoric that is circulating in the sector, the extent to which powerful parts of the sector are prepared to give way, and whether change will turn out to be temporary and tokenistic.

“It’s been the best summer ever! I was worried this time last year. It's to the point where I need to expand. I want to use this moment to get serious investment so that it's not just a passing moment.”

“[Talking about a scheme for Black producers...] the wording in this document was very clear that “now is the time for Black people”. Like, yeah, but that's our argument. The last 10 years haven't been our time and they should have been, and the next 10 years should be our time. But that's our argument. Stop doing this tokenised thing!”

A recent report from Bridge Group/Inc Arts focusing on diversity and arts management showed in candid detail that many people “are worried about their

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futures in relation to the crisis, reflecting on the fact that there will be fewer opportunities going forward”. Among the many fears expressed by the voices in that report is that when budgets are constrained (as many expect they will be) “the first thing that goes is the diversity goes. In terms of socio-economic diversity even before the pandemic there was more of a divide, it’s only going to get worse and when you think of young people there’s less opportunity for work”.

Interviewees also discuss the BLM movement within the context of the pandemic. Some in that report are hopeful for meaningful change but express similar concerns to what we heard in our own study: “I want to see responses beyond sending a Tweet in support of BLM. I want to know what will be the steps to be taken when it comes to hiring, programming, representation, how does that work”.

There is widespread concern about people being what participants to the APPG Roundtable called the ‘diversity hire’ in which an employer would “shine a spotlight on one protected characteristic, and then expected people to ‘make the use of the opportunities given’ during a set period of time. This sort of time-limited opportunity puts pressure on people to achieve within a certain period and therefore sets them up to fail”.

**Structural racism and mutating forms of gatekeeping continue to put Black-owned enterprises at a disadvantage**

A renewed focus on increasing diverse representation and diverse stories is not the same thing as rebalancing power and equity in the sector. Many of our interviewees wanted to see a real shift in power as much as sentiment in the creative industries.

“*The calls I got in those couple of weeks, it was intense. People crying on the phone, people like pouring out their guilt that they’ve had. You know, can you be on this panel? Can you do this thing? No, fund my film. Give me money. I don’t want to have a conversation with you about how you feel bad that you’re racist. I know you are, and I don’t give a shit. Like, move over, or write me a cheque. That’s all I’m interested in right now.*”

There was a mix of impressions about what kinds of organisations that would be able to ride out the pandemic. Some thought that the larger more established companies had the resources and political power to survive, whereas others saw a future in which the smaller, more agile and nimble would be the ones to emerge as a new cohort. Many acknowledged a racial dimension to the future vibrancy and sustainability of small companies in the creative industries.

“*There’s probably a lot of Black businesses that don’t have generational wealth. Yeah. So, as a result, when something hits hard in this scenario, they haven’t got the backup to kind of see them through the hard times.*”

https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5c18e090b40b9d6b43b093d8/t/5fb6967ab3db4d4323bf1f77/1605801598364/Hold+on+Inc+Arts+V19+FINAL+FULL+REPORT.pdf

7 The impact of COVID-19 on diversity in the creative industries. Insights from Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre and the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Creative Diversity

A recent report by the British Business Bank and Oliver Wyman\(^8\) showed that “Black business owners have median turnover of just £25,000, compared to £35,000 for White business owners. The median productivity of their businesses is less than two thirds of White entrepreneurs’. Only half of Black entrepreneurs meet their non-financial aims, compared to nearly 70% of White entrepreneurs. Those from Asian and Other Ethnic Minority backgrounds have better outcomes than Black entrepreneurs. However, they have a substantially lower success rate for starting a business and see less success overall compared to White entrepreneurs”. In explaining this state of affairs, they suggest that “access to finance, deprivation, education, and under-representation in senior workforce positions partially explain these disparities. However, systemic disadvantage also appears to play a role”.

“I think that there were fundamental issues with business ownership in the first place and access to funding or access to mentorship and all of that kind of stuff. BAME businesses won’t thrive, mostly, in a time like this. And they will have the struggles because those, those issues have always existed. So I think that is beyond the conversation of how to support businesses during Covid is about how to support these businesses full stop.”

Some of our interviewees took advantage of all support available, while others were reluctant to seek help or take on debt. Awareness of the available support and the routes into accessing it depended upon the networks of the entrepreneurs, or whether they were getting advice from accountants. A few of the interviewees had no interest in seeking financial support for their business, and some were keen for help and alarmed to discover they were ineligible for one reason or another.

Easily accessible loans backed by the government and a record-low Bank of England base rate have vastly increased the availability and reduced the cost of loans for businesses and individuals. Attitudes to loan finance differed hugely – from people keen to bolster their cash reserves at advantageous rates, to people being wary of owing others money. The companies with no income that did not seek loan finance minimised their outgoings and dipped into their reserves.

“Most Black people I know are quite cautious when it comes to borrowing money. People don’t want to owe people money. People don’t want to ask for money, because you think you’re gonna get told no.”

“At the start of the pandemic I was working really hard to clear all loans, and my personal loans, because I’m not a huge fan of debt, basically. And so I just about got there. So I had no interest at all in taking a loan. My plan was the alternative, which was just reduce everything as much as possible.”

Take-up of government schemes was patchy. Those businesses with rateable premises or who were VAT registered sought to take advantage of those payment holidays. Those with staff on payroll took advantage of the flexible furlough scheme at times of low demand or shutdown. Nobody had applied for a Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan (with a few citing its complexity) but just under half of the

interviewees had taken out a Bounce Back Loan. Less than a quarter of interviewees had benefitted from either the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme, or Universal Credit, or emergency grants from funding bodies. Some of the companies which began the year with decent balance sheets were advised against applying for emergency funding from the likes of Arts Council England because they were not facing the direct threat of imminent collapse.

“Someone told me about a grant. I didn’t even know about the grant. And then last week, someone said “get the Bounce Back Loan, it’s cheap money”. I’m only finding out about this stuff by word of mouth.”

A report by Extend Ventures & YsYs\(^9\) based on a survey of 84 businesses (14.5% Asian, 74.7% Black, 8.4% Mixed, 2.4% Other), was able to show the ways in which Covid was affecting the performance of firms and the support that was being taken up by BAME entrepreneurs. They concluded that “there is an emerging and exciting cohort of young small businesses led by Black and ethnic minority founders that needs to be nurtured. The companies have been built in a prudent and resilient fashion, non-expectant of state aid. As we emerge from this crisis, we cannot afford to take our eye off these businesses or allow them to be penalised for prioritising sustainable survival over debt-laden risk”.

\(^{9}\) Extend Ventures & YsYs (2020) Impact of Covid-19 on Black and Ethnic Minority-led businesses
https://www.extend.vc/reports
“A trait that is often associated with the Black community is one of having to be resilient and resourceful when it seems like there is, like, no hope or no future. And yet, we are stereotypically seen as more resilient and more resourceful, but that characteristic isn’t told about us when we are assessed as entrepreneurs, it should make us way more investable.”

Similar observations are borne out by Diana Chrouch’s report for the APPG for BAME Business Owners,¹⁰ which documents the many challenges facing Black-owned SMEs, particularly when it comes to accessing finance and other government support.

Many interviewees shared their impressions as BAME individuals of being closer to the front line of this pandemic than their White counterparts.

“All of the Black and Brown talent that I’m working with have had deaths in their family or extended family. It’s something that a lot of my colleagues who are sitting in their nice houses in Hampstead with a big fat garden have just not experienced. This has been a nice holiday for a lot of White people, you know, it’s been a really nice holiday, the kids are at home, we’ve got a nice garden, we’re drinking Prosecco. We’re baking our fucking bread. I’ve known people who this disease has gotten very real for and that it’s been a time of great mourning and reflection, and that does affect your work.”

One person told us of the need to shield as a result of Sickle Cell Disease, a condition that is more prevalent in the Black community in the UK. A few others were also cautious about their own risk profiles.

“I take my personal safety very seriously. So I'm not doing unnecessarily anything at all. And, yeah, and also my co-founder, both of us are taking it very, very seriously.”

Others were greatly concerned about the statistics and stories being shared during the first wave, which demonstrated that BAME individuals were more at risk of contracting and also dying from Covid.

“Those early days, when we were being told, if you're Black you're gonna catch it quicker, you're probably gonna die from it. That's quite a severe thing. A sort of steady level of anxiety. It's weird. It's like, I think as a Black person, you feel a bit under siege. I do feel under siege from it.”

“We're all very much aware of this fact that, you know, you're far more likely to die of Covid. And I feel like it's made myself and my household and my parents’ household more cautious than maybe other members of the general public because for us, there is a greater risk.”

The chaos of the first wave of the pandemic opened opportunities for some Black-owned businesses

The ‘forced downtime’ of the early and severe lockdown provided a chance for rethinking and refreshing business plans. Some have reevaluated their work-life balance and overall goals and priorities. The fact that clients and audiences have been locked down and sat at home in front of their screens has also been an opportunity to capitalise upon.

“What it has allowed us to do is really focus on our creative development cycle, and double down on the projects that we had. And, you know, and really spend some time building relationships with executives around the world who are all sitting at home, you know, doing calls and trying to carry on working.

Especially over the last, like, four months. It's been quite heavy on the new business lead generation. Probably more so than we've ever done. Which is, I guess, a positive thing. I think has been driven by the fact that we needed to.”

The enforced ‘refresh’ that the pandemic has inflicted led some to develop new creative ventures, not merely in development but to full delivery. Others have been able to adapt their products and services to respond to the pandemic (such as manufacturing face coverings or methods for remote ‘zero contact’ capture).

“I would never have considered something like children's television before. And I thought, you know, why not? Let's see, let's try and put something together and see if it's successful. And so yeah, I have diversified it was a good thing to do.”
“The digital festival that we delivered in October just gone…which was basically one of the one of the best festivals I’ve been part of…and I’ve seen come to life and its level of quality, and its professionalism was up there. [It] reached a global audience of thousands.”

There is enduring optimism and resourcefulness among a majority of our interviewees

Although almost all of our interviewees had a positive outlook on the future, this was tempered by a large amount of concern with the long-lasting costs of the pandemic and the policies designed to keep it under control. Despite the turbulence of 2020, almost all the interviewees expected to be trading in April next year, and most of them had plans to expand. Some were on the verge of investment, others gearing up to expand production, others preparing for wider audiences via digital platforms.

“I feel incredibly positive. And often don't let myself feel too positive. It's okay, let me be positive. We have more clients, more different types of work, and I'm working with different people more often. So, and this has been in the most difficult circumstances to do so. And I'm paying other people's rent. Other people are depending on us to pay their rent. And that's, that feels like, wow.”

This is somewhat tempered by people’s fear about the wider and longer term social and economic consequences of the pandemic, and the policies devised to suppress it.

“I definitely do worry about the long lasting effects of what's happened over the last year. From the job market to people's, like, health in general, to the debt that we've taken on as a country and other kinds of stuff, I think is something to have a bit of caution towards.”

A form of acquired resilience borne of continued disadvantage is something that some of our interviewees cited as a cause for optimism.

“There have been times when I didn't win any commissions so I've been like “fuck, I need to know what my company looks like moving forward, for the next three months”, and there’s been times that I've been super busy, and I think that we've been trained to be a little bit more resilient in these times, than other industries have, and I think that that's been a really good thing.”
Conclusions

In reflecting on what we learned from the interviews and reading adjacent research that was undertaken this year, we think there are at least five broad conclusions to draw:

- Every pandemic experience has been unique, but there are particular disadvantages felt by BAME entrepreneurs
- The creative industries are undergoing a confluence of long-term cultural change, medium-term technological change, and rapid Covid-induced behavioural and economic change
- For the time being, power is still held by a minority of predominantly White elite
- BAME entrepreneurs want and need help that boosts their capital and capacities
- The future is precarious but full of radical potential

Every pandemic experience has been unique, but there are particular disadvantages felt by BAME entrepreneurs

Our findings are generally reflective of the wider UK experience of the pandemic and its social fallout. There are a number of important and distinct stories, though. BAME individuals are known to be more at risk of catching and dying from Covid. Small businesses in the cultural and creative sectors are known to be among the worst hit in the economic turbulence precipitated by the pandemic. BAME entrepreneurs are known to face structural disadvantages relating to capitalisation, access to finance and discrimination. These disadvantages play out in the real lived experience of entrepreneurs who can feel excluded or misunderstood by the market, funders, peers, even family and friends.

“The support and the positivity…it’s been limited, you know, to be honest, it’s been really limited…it’s come mainly from home and family, and myself.”

There are as many experiences of 2020 as there are people in our sample. So much has depended on the situation and temperament of the business owners. Some are precarious and just starting out, others have plenty of experience and deeper financial reserves. Some are cautious in the face of risk, others are prepared to rapidly pivot to new ventures. It has been quite chaotic for people throughout the course of the pandemic – with fallow periods and moments of extreme activity. While many expressed an excitement at the changes they saw coming to the sector, it has been a very tough time for a majority of the group.

“I really fell into some black holes personally, where you lose your sense of purpose, and your sense of hope. But mainly your sense of purpose, you know, because we’ve been doing so well, for so long.”

The life circumstances of people matter just as much as the shape and size of their creative businesses. A few of our interviewees had become new parents during 2020, and whether it was babies or older children, there was a serious impact from the closure of schools and childcare facilities.
Just about everybody cited their family as a source of strength during this time. Some also described their inner fortitude and renewed values as something that kept them going.

“Knowing what we stand for, knowing what matters to us, our values. And I think every single project we’ve done online as actually being reinforcement of our values and not losing touch with not losing sight and staying connected to them. And that has stopped us panicking.”

The creative industries are undergoing a confluence of long-term cultural change, medium-term technological change, and rapid Covid-induced behavioural and economic change

The sector is undergoing a highly destabilising period of change – some of which is forcing an acceleration of pre-2020 trends like digital production and consumption, and a consolidation away from legacy brands and institutions towards new platforms and new voices.

“It’s been a needed thing, something that’s been long, long time coming. And so yeah, I’m definitely positive around that. I just, I hope that, you know, the conversations manifest itself in actual tangible change, that it’s not just a flash in the pan, like, thing that people will forget, when something else happens next year.”

The demographics of the UK are getting more diverse every year. The cultural tastes and engagement patterns are increasingly moving away from traditional passive experience of a canonical elite culture towards a more immersive and experiential participation in all kinds of genres and artforms. The flavour of the ‘cultural life of the nation’ is different as a result. It is increasingly informed by BAME producers and more attentive to BAME audiences.

Producing content and reaching audiences is cheaper and easier than ever before. It’s easy to watch a music video on YouTube and share it with your friends while on your way to work. It doesn’t require buying a ticket or making a special excursion. This kind of cultural engagement doesn’t require joining a club or behaving in a particular way. It’s casual, it’s easy, it’s fun, it’s collective, it’s cheap. It presents none of the barriers that traditionally exclude BAME audiences. It’s also the form of cultural and creative activity that proved most immune to disruption by the pandemic. This has meant that some of our interviewees have built from that growing position of strength and acquired a higher profile and command greater attention from commissioners.

“We’ve been able to use this moment to kind of address some of those kind of very contentious and very controversial issues about race and the uncomfortable ones as well. I don’t think we’re suffering from it. We’re using our voice in a way that that we’ve not been able to use it before.”
For the time being, power is still held by a minority of predominantly White elite

If industries, sectors, broadcasters and commissioners are looking to diversify their talent, their customer base, their audiences, then they cannot do so while retaining their role as gatekeepers and hoarding the power. This came through when people talked about schemes designed to increase diversity – schemes devised and overseen by White people embedded in White corporate structures.

“I have been very vocal about the fact that kind of pitting ethnic minorities against each other, is the most colonial thing that you could possibly do. And I kind of feel quite strongly about it. There's a sense that you have to prove how Black or Brown you are, before you kind of win the opportunity to kind of go into a select room. And I find that quite distasteful. I think people don't really understand the optics of kind of going, “if you’re Black and Brown go through this door. And if you're not an ethnic minority, you can go through the front door”. I wouldn't equate that to racism, I would equate that to foolishness.”

The crisis has created space for people to become more attentive to inequalities and injustice. While everybody was pleased to see greater efforts at diversity and representation, there was an understanding that equity was crucial. Early signs are that good faith commitments will fail unless power in the decision-making process is ceded to the people they are seeking to attract and advantage.

“I think all these large institutions like the Arts Council, and the ones who have the power, so to speak, I think they first have to recognise and apologise that they're getting it wrong. There can be some wins, I think, in terms of making special funds and grants to BAME organisations, but that will not be enough. It needs to be a recalibration of the whole process.”

There needs to be an acknowledgement that BAME entrepreneurs want and need power and capital. They need to occupy the power hierarchies and take control of the decisions that affect their businesses, rather than be granted concessions by others who retain their elite status.

“I think the bigger thing to be looked into is, okay, there are more diverse projects being made. But they’re not necessarily being made by diverse companies. And to me, that is the crux of the problem. Black or diverse businesses are not being supported.”

BAME entrepreneurs want and need help that boosts their capital and capacities

There were three kinds of support that people wanted: finance in the form of grants that don’t require jumping through the hoops of White gatekeepers, training and expertise for business growth and development and, finally, a sense of community and connection. Many of the people we spoke to felt alone and disconnected from

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Inc Arts has a proposal for a National Diversity Action Plan for Culture
https://incarts.uk/resources#68bb95c-d006-4350-8c14-0537a7339ce
the world they had chosen to build their lives around, especially those in the live entertainment sector.

“Any platforms that connect people with people that are still doing stuff, or actively having creative thoughts or doing stuff. Something like that would help me. Me personally, like, not in business, just personally, mentally, from a mental health perspective. Having interactions with others is a really healthy thing.”

The kind of support that people need isn’t necessarily sector specific. It includes things like guidance and protocols on how best to run an organisation remotely – how to manage people and projects without physical proximity. A number of people were also grappling with the sudden growth of their businesses as a result of new commissions and platforms. A lot of people talked about social media marketing, recognising that the pandemic restrictions have accelerated an ongoing trend that is leaving some business owners behind. This finding in our study matches other surveys of freelancers and microbusinesses assembled by the Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre.

News of available support for creative entrepreneurs needs to be visible and viral within their networks and not merely channelled through government websites, arm’s-length bodies, and other agencies. Agencies like BFI have detailed and up-to-date guidance on their website, but our interviewees weren’t in the habit of checking these kinds of sites.

The future is precarious but full of radical potential

“If all of this does is make people not have preconceptions about what Black people do, what they can make, what they can write, what our dreams are… not saying it will have been worth it, but if out of this madness something positive can come.”

This research has uncovered an important and neglected set of experiences in relation to the pandemic and the wider events of 2020. It tries to present a collective testimony of energetic adaptation and ongoing struggle. These are likely to be enduring forces for BAME entrepreneurs in the creative industries.

In a sobering review of likely impacts of Covid on the diversity of the cultural economy workforce, Doris Ruth Eikhof found that employers are likely to increase their use of casual labour and unpaid volunteers, as well as other work practices that are known to “act as barriers for workforce participation and advancement for individuals from under-represented groups”. This is on top of the fact that “financial inability to sustain a cultural economy career [is] likely to be more widespread amongst workers from working class and ethnic minority backgrounds, workers with caring commitments and disabled workers”.

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[https://doi.org/10.1080/09548963.2020.1802202](https://doi.org/10.1080/09548963.2020.1802202)
The role for government and its agencies is clear: “Without policy intervention, it is thus likely that disproportionately more workers from already under-represented groups, and especially those who belong to more than one under-represented group, will drop out of the cultural economy workforce”. This would diminish not just the outcomes of the individuals concerned but the collective relevance and vibrancy of the entire sector.

“Yes, people are kind of very worried right now. But we can’t forget the fact that we’re meant to be cooler than my brothers that are lawyers or accountants or whatever. And we have to kind of keep that spirit alive.”

The attitudes and skills that our interviewees displayed seem to be exactly the sorts of competencies that will make them best equipped to rise again after the pandemic has gone and the economy revives. The agile pivoting of some younger companies in recent months has revealed a preparedness and adeptness at managing changing circumstances and a fortitude that suggests the future is theirs. A reinvigorated debate about racial equity has brought forth overdue conversations during a time of unprecedented crisis for the creative industries. The physical, economic and social scars of this pandemic will heal eventually, and it will be the test of our sector and its power brokers as to whether good faith commitments to equity will be honoured.
Appendix 1: Methods

Sample

We recruited a panel of 20 respondents drawn from the membership of MeWe360 that were varied across business size and maturity, creative art form, location, etc. Given the rapid turnaround times for the project we opted for Convenience Sampling, using the pre-existing contact book of MeWe360 and securing time in people’s diaries where possible. Our sample group were of various ages and career stages, based in many parts of the UK with a focus on London. They work in a range of industries including arts and crafts, events, branding, TV and film, digital content, fashion, dance and music.

The sample was devised in order to contain a range of perspectives from within this subset of BAME entrepreneurs. We readily acknowledge it is not representative or reflective of the wider sector or the British BAME experience. Therefore, without complementary data, generalisations should be made with caution. The sample is heavily skewed towards men. There are no East Asian voices. The sectors most represented in our study are film and television production.

Data collection

The data for this study were gathered through retrospective interviewing using a Topic Guide that was designed to gather comparative information from every respondent and be sufficiently open-ended to capture novel or unexpected information.

The interviews lasted between 45-60min, they were conducted over Zoom, frequently (although not always) using the video function. The audio of the interviews was recorded and was later auto-transcribed using Otter.ai.

10 interviews were conducted by James Doeser, a trained researcher (who is of White British ethnicity), and the other 10 by Kevin Osborne, from MeWe360 (who is Black) after some instruction in the tools and techniques of qualitative fieldwork interviewing.

Analysis

The interview recordings and transcripts were analysed to identify common experiences of the pandemic and to understand the type and scale of disruption to business and creative practice. The emergent themes were discussed within the project team where they were refined and reinforced to arrive at the main findings set out in this report.

Funding

The project was part-funded by Arts Council England.
A note about language

We use the term BAME throughout the report as a commonplace shorthand for non-White, recognising the diversity of experiences that this term disguises.
Appendix 2: Topic Guide

Topic Guide for MeWe360 Covid Tracker

Preamble

Thank you for participating in this research. I want to use the time we have to learn about your experience of Covid and the lockdown measures as they relate to your business and your creative practice. The transcript of our conversation will be analysed to identify how BAME entrepreneurs have been affected by the events of 2020 and what can be done to improve your situation.

The results of this research will be turned into a report which will be freely available online. The report may include quotes from our conversation, but they will not be attributed or identifiable as coming from you individually.

[Reminder about recording/transcription]

First of all, I’d like to hear about how your day-to-day life has changed since the end of March.

Your daily life

1. What’s been the biggest change to affect your business and creative practice?

Change in ways of working

2. Are you working more, fewer, or about the same number of hours per week as before the lockdown in your main role?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of FTE staff</th>
<th>X</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of FTE staff with reduced hours</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. In what ways have you had to adapt your way of doing business?

4. Have you sought out new audiences or clients? For example, have you turned to online marketplaces or clients or audiences outside your usual network?

Change to creative practice and output

5. Have you been able to stay creative and productive since the start of lockdown?
   a. What has been the difference between good days and bad days?

6. Has your creative output changed much during lockdown – have you been making work which reflects your experiences of the pandemic?
I’d now like to move on to the subject of finances and financial support...

Income and expenditure

7. Has your revenue increased or decreased because of the pandemic, or has it broadly stayed about the same? [ask for numbers, proportions, and context]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall revenue in 2020 compared to first three quarters of 2019</th>
<th>% difference</th>
<th>£ amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall profits (or profit forecast) in 2020 compared to first three quarters of 2019</td>
<td>% difference</td>
<td>£ amount</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall value of sales in 2020 compared to first three quarters of 2019</td>
<td>% difference</td>
<td>£ amount</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

8. And what about your overall costs, have those changed as a result of the pandemic? [ask for numbers, proportions, and context]

| Overall operating costs in 2020 compared to first three quarters of 2019 | % difference | £ amount |

Government support

9. Have you been able to take advantage of government support such as furloughing staff, loans (such as the Business Interruption or Bounce Back Loans) relief from taxes or grants (like the Self-Employed Income Support Scheme)? [ask for numbers]
   a. How did you find the process of applying for the support?

| Total £ in government grants | £ amount |
| Total £ in government-backed loans | £ amount |

The number of full-time equivalent (FTE) staff placed on furlough (Job Retention Scheme) | X |

The number of staff laid off | X |

10. Have you applied for other support such as funding from the Arts Council or other sector agencies and funders? [ask for numbers]
   b. Were you successful? Tell us more about your experience of those opportunities.

| Total £ from other Covid grants | £ amount |
| Total £ unplanned taken from reserves since start of 2020 | £ amount |
MeWe360 champions Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic entrepreneurs in the arts and creative industries and so we’d like to ask a few questions about race and the pandemic experience in the UK...

The role of race in Covid and the creative sectors

11. Have you experienced any greater degree of prejudice or racism since the start of this current crisis?

12. Are there any ways in which you feel your ethnicity has shaped your experience of the pandemic, of the lockdown measures, and of the support available to our sectors?

Moving ahead

13. What have been the most important sources of strength and support in this pandemic?

14. Are there things that sector support organisations like MeWe, agencies like the Arts Council or wider government could do to help you right now and over the longer term?

15. In general, do you feel positive, negative or neutral regarding the future?

16. How likely is it that you will be operating your business and creative practice after March 2021? Do you expect to be downsizing, expanding, or staying the same?

Closing remarks

Thank you for being part of this research. We will be in touch again when we have a copy of the report and if you would like to contact us again before that time then please do not hesitate. Is there anything more you’d like to tell me before we finish?