

## *Resilient Creatives: Experiences of Filmmakers During Covid-19*

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### **Abstract**

The Covid-19 pandemic has in various ways affected many industries across the globe, including filmmaking. The global film community, struck by the severity of the pandemic, had to face production postponements, financial losses, and the uncertainty of when production could resume. While many governmental organizations have instituted specific Covid-19 film production guidelines, from mandatory physical distancing to recommended best practices, other strategies were also developed within the film communities themselves. This paper employs the methodology of ethnographic fieldwork, which includes material collected from in-depth interviews with individual filmmakers from the United States, Japan, Nigeria, South Africa, and Mexico, and reports their individual Covid-19 experiences. To date, existing research detailing the impact of Covid-19 on the film community has mainly covered the entertainment economy and the emerging streaming sector. Activity from the film community and their evolving changes have not been explored and reported to any great extent. Based on interviews with individual filmmakers across continents, this paper demonstrates changing ideas and best practices, the resilience of filmmakers, and viable trends for future productions. These findings have a two-fold implication: potential contributions to the sub-field of film studies and the sociological impact of Covid-19.

Keywords: Covid-19, Global Filmmaker, Independent Film, Covid Film Production

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## Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has in various ways affected many industries across the globe, including filmmaking. At the early stage of the pandemic, almost all film productions were halted by government shutdowns and industry-imposed regulations. The global film community, struck by the severity of the pandemic had to face production postponements, financial losses, and the uncertainty of when production could resume. While many governmental organizations have instituted specific Covid-19 film production guidelines, from mandatory physical distancing to recommended best practices, other strategies were also developed within the film communities themselves. Filmmakers across many continents have demonstrated even greater resilience and an innovative spirit to continue working within this "new normal."

Numerous news reports, articles, and media interviews with filmmakers have described the severe impact Covid-19 has had on the global film community. According to a 2020 report released by the Motion Picture Association (MPA) in the United States, the entire global theatrical and home & mobile entertainment market totaled \$80.8 billion. This is a decline of 18% from 2019 and represents the lowest since 2016. The most significant decline was in theatrical revenue, which dropped from \$42.3 billion in 2019 to \$12 billion in 2020. Theatrical entertainment accounted for only 15% of total global entertainment revenue. In comparison, this number was 43% in 2019.

It is unassailable the severe impact Covid-19 has had on the film community. While there have been several industry reports on the pandemic's impact, this research sets out to extend these observations and discussions beyond industry statistics. What is it really like to shoot a film during the pandemic? How can a financially stretched production company manage? How practical are current film production safety protocols? How different is the production experience of an American filmmaker versus an Asian filmmaker? These are among some of the most important questions this research attempts to answer.

## Literature Review

Only a limited amount of research addressing the pandemic's impact on the film community has been published globally. Researchers Sarah Moon and Murat Akser looked at the film entertainment industry in a more generalized manner, summarizing the precautions that major industry leaders took during the early stage of the pandemic. Their studies included discussions of the long-term impact on filmmaking and film education. A research paper entitled, *American Film Industry Challenges in China: Before and During Covid-19 Outbreak*, analyzed how the pandemic is affecting the Hollywood film industry in the Chinese market. Two more studies, performed by Lothar Mikos, and Joel Frykholm illustrated the pandemic's ramifications on the German and Scandinavian film industries respectively.

Similarly, a significant portion of the existing research discussed specific countries and the necessary changes taking place within film festivals and the film distribution sectors. A study by Jan Hanzlík evaluated several East European film festivals who utilized streaming services that brought the festival experience to their audiences, while a research paper from Wang Changsong, Lucyann Kerry, and Rustono Farady Marta discussed various film distribution options currently available through video streaming platforms in Southeast Asia. In addition, several interdisciplinary topics have been explored, including the possible

correlation between television streaming sites and post-Covid “film tourism” by Jennifer Stewart. Other researchers, including Luke Creely, Robert Letizi, Whitney Monaghan, Grace Russell, and Simon Troon, addressed key challenges in film education and efforts to transform the curriculum and content into material for online teaching.

In addition, a few research projects have examined the pandemic’s impact on film content creation. Lucio Reis Filho reported how the crisis evokes many tropes of horror cinema, reinforcing the role a pandemic takes in the notion of apocalyptic imagination. A group of Malaysian scholars used the methodology of framing analysis and gender perspective as a means to look at the underlying ideology(s) of a popular TV program in Indonesia.

## **Methodology**

This research aims to employ the methodology of in-depth interviews as well as content analysis. To do this, interviews were conducted with five professionals from the following countries - the United States, Japan, Nigeria, South Africa, and Mexico. All have reported their unique Covid-19 production experiences. Filmmakers who participated in this study are established and award-winning, and currently very active in their respective film communities.

| <i><b>Participating Filmmakers</b></i> | <i><b>Position</b></i>           | <i><b>Country</b></i> |
|--|----------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Dan Mirvish                            | director, screenwriter, producer | United States         |
| Ohyama Koichiro                        | director                         | Japan                 |
| Imoh Umoren                            | independent filmmaker            | Nigeria               |
| Aurelie Stratton                       | actress, scriptwriter, director  | South Africa          |
| Juan González                          | producer                         | Mexico                |

Table 1: Participating Filmmakers

This research is also advanced by utilizing several secondary sources such as interviews, written comments, and news reports from media outlets.

## **Credibility and Trustworthiness**

To ensure the data’s trustworthiness, all interviews were conducted by both the author and co-author with standard questions for all interviewees and additional customized questions based on individual backgrounds and experiences. Specifically, participants were invited to add, change, or otherwise comment on relevant questions raised in the interviews. Spanish and Japanese Interpreters were present to ensure the non-English speaking interviewees accurately described their experiences in their native languages. Lastly, in a few cases, written transcripts were provided for the filmmakers’ review so they could be confirmed for accuracy and clarity following the interviews.

## **Limitations**

Several limitations to this study should be noted. First, the in-depth interviews were conducted with a modest group of filmmakers. To compensate for this limitation, this research managed to select interviewees with a variety of backgrounds and roles on set. Second, due to international travel restrictions during the pandemic, the researchers were not able to perform sufficient fieldwork on the actual film set. Finally, interviews may not be the

most accurate method to collect reliable information for more sensitive matters such as financial management of production companies, and other topics the participants may perceive as personally sensitive.

## Findings

This paper focuses on the critical areas among filmmakers’ most significant interests. To do this, six topics out of three major phases in filmmaking activities were summarized and examined. The first phase, on set production, includes the participants' description of their production activities during the pandemic. The second phase, pre-production, explores measures that were taken prior to filming to prepare for this unique pandemic environment. The third phase, distribution, discusses the participants’ experiences with online film festivals, and the changes in their distribution plans as a result of the global health crisis.

| <i>Phase</i>           | <i>Topic</i>                           |
|------------------------|--|
| On Set Production      | Covid-19’s Direct Impact               |
|                        | On Set Filming                         |
|                        | Covid Protocols                        |
| Off Set Pre-production | Financial Impact Due to Covid          |
|                        | Covid Inspired Stories                 |
| Film Distribution      | Online Film Festivals & Emerging Media |

Table 2: Research Topics

### (1) Covid-19’s Direct Impact

When Covid took hold in March 2020, governments worldwide shut down non-essential activities. All interviewees in this research stated that their film productions had to be suspended indefinitely. In the U.S., a significant portion of the production postponements was initially motivated by industry leaders or unions, and non-profit organizations, when many states had not yet released any specific guidelines for productions to follow. For example, American independent filmmaker Dan Mirvish, who had completed approximately 80% of his new narrative film, “18½”, said his production had no choice but to take a “pandemic pause” on the suggestion of a representative from the Directors Guild of America (DGA). It was six months later, that he and his crew could resume production and finish the four remaining days of shooting.

*A couple of days before we shut down, we had a visit from our DGA representative – the Directors Guild of America. She said: “You are pretty much the last production shooting in North America. Maybe there is one other shooting on an island of Puerto Rico, and you.” That’s really when it hit home that we were like the last remaining shooting. (Dan Mirvish)*

On March 16, 2020, the DGA released a statement to its members, in which they reinforced their support and encouragement to film productions regarding the shutdown. The statement however, served only as a guidance rather than an order of enforcement.

*We are, and will continue to be, in touch with the Studios, Networks and other employers about their plans and their obligations to you. As you’ve seen, most but not all productions have temporarily hit the pause button, which we fully support. (The Directors Guild of America)*

Contrary to Dan Mirvish's situation, in some countries, production shutdowns were a direct result of their governments' Covid restrictions. This also extended to the later stages of the pandemic, after film professionals were gradually allowed to return to production activity with Covid protocols required. For example, South African filmmaker Aurelie Stratton described in her interview that South African filmmakers were stymied by local regulations even at the point when productions were allowed to resume.

*The original curfew was that you had to be home by 9:00 p.m. So, the struggle for film sets in August, when that was put out, was trying to get a letter because if you got pulled over by the police, and you didn't have a letter saying you were an essential worker and you were allowed to be out, you were in trouble. So that became a big problem. (Aurelie Stratton)*

## **(2) On Set Filming**

As the virus went to a full pandemic, filmmakers were rapidly reassessing and altering their production plans under unprecedented circumstances. It was clear even at the beginning of the pandemic the potentially serious risk that could grow exponentially with more crew members on set. During the interviews, filmmakers described their constant awareness to limit and configure the size of the casting crews that would be on set for safety and liability reasons. For example, Nigerian filmmaker Imoh Umoren, who regularly worked with a sizable crew, continued to scale back his team considerably since the early stage of the pandemic. His situation highlights the fact that film jobs were being lost or postponed indefinitely throughout the film industry, leaving many talented film professionals out of work.

*At every point on set, when you have 50 or 60 people on set, obviously that's a huge risk. Because the more people that come to the space, the greater the risk of the virus spreading. With the kind of show we are shooting, I wasn't willing to risk to a suicide. So, on the film now, I scaled it back considerably. I mean, even half the number. (Imoh Umoren)*

Since love stories are the most popular film theme in the Nollywood film industry, the combination of a pandemic and the necessity of kissing scenes pose another set of challenges. Imoh Umoren stated that it is very difficult to completely avoid shooting intimate scenes. Often times cast and crew are making their best effort to create alternate strategies to get the intended shot.

Similarly, it became necessary for filmmakers to develop aesthetic backup plans in the event any crew members would become infected, which would inevitably result in their absence and quarantines. American filmmaker Dan Mirvish decided if any of his lead actors would come back with a positive PCR test and they would have to be quarantined, he would shoot their scenes as a point of view shot and add voiceover remotely. In the case of a supporting actor testing positive, their lines would be given to a different character or recast using crew members already on set. Fortunately, his crew did not have to use the above backup plan before successfully finishing production.

*These changes would have affected the aesthetic a lot, but the film still would have worked. (Dan Mirvish)*

In Mexico, film producer Juan González adopted a similar strategy for crew members who worked on a recent production in Columbia.

*There were some people who tested positive. And so our protocols required if any crew member, be it an assistant director, or anyone, who could not show up to the set, then the second assistant would move up. (Juan González)*

The use of face masks, face shields, and the requirement for social distancing can make communication challenging in an on-set production environment. They make the speaker's voice softer and more muffled, conceal vocal tone, and reduce facial expressions that limit essential non-verbal signals that both acting partner and director need. While there has been no specific academic research regarding how negatively these precautions effect on-set productivity, several studies have discussed their detrimental effect on older, frail, and cognitively impaired populations. In this research, several filmmakers described the effect of face protections and social distancing on their productions, as having vitiated their efforts toward achieving production goals.

*The communication was tough because everyone's wearing masks plus face shields. Plus, in my case I've got about three pairs of glasses. On a normal set, you want as a director you wind up whispering to actors, you take them aside, you put your hands, or you take them aside. You say OK, in this next take, do this and you go on. You have to do it very quietly. (Dan Mirvish)*

### **(3) Covid Protocols**

As countries and economies began to reopen, many governments and organizations put forth production protocols and Covid safety guidelines. In the interviews all filmmakers expressed a supportive attitude toward the implementation of safety protocols, and believed such policies were necessary for the current pandemic environment. Some filmmakers even took a step further to better promote these protocols, and demonstrated innovative methods with their financial and technical resources. For example, Mexican film producer Juan González and his company Saywhisky, created an animated film to introduce all the rules required for film productions. The creative work has helped his team to quickly adapt to the transition.

Several filmmakers expressed their concerns over the implementation of these protocols among anti-vaccination coworkers. While conspiracy theories surrounding Covid-19 can be found on the internet and in various communities, film producers have not been immune to the personal beliefs of individual members of their production team. South African filmmaker Aurelie Stratton described her frustration with crew members who lean toward the anti-vaccination ideology.

*It's all that conspiracy stuff that has gone around that the vaccine is going to kill you in two years, that it's the rich trying to kill you, it's these people and those people who have all gotten together and have had this plan to get rid of people. It's insane. (Aurelie Stratton)*

On several occasions during the interview process, interviewees also expressed a dissatisfaction regarding contradictory actions between the implementation/enforcement of the Covid protocols for productions versus the looser requirements observed during political gatherings. For example, Imoh Moren made his point about this “double standard” of the Nigerian government’s enforcement of Covid rules during the pandemic.

*The ironic thing is that the government flounders on guidelines because they have lots of big political gatherings during the pandemic. And so for us as filmmakers, there was a big*

*hypocrisy, like, OK so you're going to sanction filmmaking, but you are having political gatherings. It's ridiculous. (Imoh Umoren)*

Producers and directors very often found themselves beholden to impractical production protocols. Japanese director Ohyama Koichiro said it is extremely challenging to follow all the rules that are currently being practiced on set. He also stated that the policymakers should have had more conversations with crew members who are charged with implementing these rules.

*Since the Covid guidelines were made by people who are not familiar with the film industry, and limit the number of crew members, this became too challenging for our production. Naturally we got frustrated and tended to ignore some of the guidelines. (Ohyama Koichiro)*

#### **(4) Financial Impact Due to Covid**

Every filmmaker has impressed upon the researchers how the pandemic has caused an increase in their production budget. Filmmakers have been saddled with extra costs which include regular testing and additional lodging and transportation arrangements, in order to maintain a safe environment. In addition, a Covid-19 compliance officer is now required on set in many countries.

The PCR (*Polymerase Chain Reaction*) test, which is often regarded as “the gold standard” for Covid-19, was not conveniently available to the general public at the early stage of the pandemic. Therefore, having to test all crew members would not only increase the production budget, but also take up a significant amount of the locales testing capacity. This has left film production companies to deal with the requirement for rapid testing and the inaccessibility to medical labs on their own. To fulfill the protocol requirements, some film production companies have partnered with testing labs in order to get the results for their crew members in a timely manner.

*Part of the problem was figuring out where to get tested. And by just Googling, we were able to find Mount Sinai Hospital that worked with us and for our New York City testing. And then we found a local hospital in Greenport that worked with us. What do you do when you have a group of people and a bunch of actors and a bunch of crew members coming in, and whose insurance gets billed and whose doesn't get billed. And, you know the logistics of that were really challenging. (Dan Mirvish)*

In countries where Covid tests are not offered free of charge, this puts more financial stress on many production companies and independent filmmakers. Mexican producer Juan González pointed out that production companies in Mexico have to shoulder approximately \$80 for a regular PCR test, \$15 for an antigen test, and two or three tests are required per crew member per week. Out of necessity, González has been able to comply with the guidelines in this way: for commercial jobs, the cost of testing is covered by the client, and when it is a self-funded independent shoot, the cost is absorbed by the independent production.

*For example, when it's our own films where obviously it's our own budget and costs, it does affect us and the costs can be up to 7% or 8% of our budget. (Juan González)*

Transportation is often needed between different film locations. In the U.S., most state-mandated Covid protocols recommend the use of a higher-capacity passenger vehicle which allows for six feet of physical distancing. Under the guidelines, producers must arrange and provide more vehicle trips with fewer passengers per trip to maintain minimal contact. In addition, film production companies are required to designate the maximum number of passengers per vehicle and post it on the vehicle.

*If two people are in the same car and then one of them, their test result comes back positive, they're sick or whatever, then that means you have to quarantine. So we had to evenly distribute the crew and make sure that two people from the same department weren't in the same car together. (Dan Mirvish)*

Several filmmakers stated that these added demands from Covid protocols not only affect production, but influence all budget and personal considerations, even from the first moments of pre-production. As Aurelie Stratton prepares her new documentary film which will record the lives of artists and their struggles during the pandemic, she is experiencing difficulties planning her production budget.

*We're talking to funders about that at the moment, and we literary realized the other day, oh, Covid protocols, we haven't put that in the budget yet. (Aurelie Stratton)*

## **(5) Covid Inspired Stories**

The researchers identified a reoccurring theme that Covid-19 was influencing filmmakers to tell a variety of pandemic related stories. In fact, during the first wave of the pandemic in early 2020, an International Public Health Film Competition organized by the British Public Health Film Society was launched to showcase the work of amateur and professional filmmakers around the world. The festival indicated that the pandemic has had some influence on the types of stories filmmakers wanted to tell. Nigerian filmmaker Imoh Umoren created a collective called "The Lockdown Writers," who have been working on a series based on the pandemic, and the seemingly indefinite lockdowns occurring there. This effort created employment opportunities for Nigerian scriptwriters who produced original scripts related to Covid. One of these scripts is currently ready for film production.

*Not only were we able to create our own script, but also it became a resource for us. And so lots of people got jobs from just being in the group, because right after Covid there will be increased activity in terms of production and everything. (Imoh Umoren)*

Despite imposing new challenges on the production aspect of filmmaking, the pandemic brought to light difficult stories about social issues that have prompted many filmmakers to start new projects. A recent short film titled "I Will Call You Later" by Aurelie Stratton highlights the increase in domestic violence during the pandemic. Her award-winning work sheds light on this difficult subject in South Africa.

*In a country where we have an incredibly high rate of violence towards women, it's something that really just kept sticking in my mind. I literally just opened Final Draft and started writing. And that's how it actually happened. (Aurelie Stratton)*



Meanwhile, some filmmakers stated without any doubt they would not have interest in developing Covid-related projects. Conversely, festival programmers and film producers have been witnessing a dramatic increase in pandemic related stories.

*There's obviously a great temptation for filmmakers to start projects during the pandemic. And there were and there are a lot of those. And unfortunately, there are going to be way too many of those. (Dan Mirvish)*

## **(6) Online Film Festivals & Emerging Media**

The pandemic has brought tremendous upheaval to the distribution phase of nearly every production, forcing global filmmakers to rethink and change their plans. Instead of packing for international travel, many filmmakers had to interact through zooms and apps with festival juries and audiences, while others postponed the release of their new works completely. Although online film festivals have been around for over a decade, many independent filmmakers still view them with skepticism, and many would argue there is no comparison to face-to-face meetings. In this research, every filmmaker expressed disappointment over Covid's negative impact on film festivals. For example, Japanese director Ohyama Koichiro said without any doubt that he values much more a typical film festival than an online event because "in-person interaction is crucial for him to exchange ideas with other filmmakers and to give and receive critiques."

Making a film can take years of planning and failing, investments of time and money, unexpected wins, as well as stretches of real momentum. This study shows most filmmakers agree that nothing compares to a packed, in-person festival screening for the audience and the filmmaker. Whether huge or intimate, every festival audience gives the filmmaker something back that they carry with respect into their next project: a broader vision, future opportunities, and partnerships. Nonetheless, festival programmers, producers and distributors had to quickly improvise and recalibrate during this pandemic. Many members in the film community put force their best effort to minimize the losses, stay relevant and continue the festival tradition.

Conversely, South African filmmaker Aurelie Stratton made her point that online film festivals during the pandemic had brought her several fortuitous opportunities. In her case, she was able to virtually attend overseas film events which she would not have been able to afford otherwise.

*The good thing about it is, a very interesting thing about it, is that there were festivals that I could maybe not attend because it was expensive, but I ended up going to [them] because they were all online. (Aurelie Stratton)*

With the covid pandemic continuing, some filmmakers believe a great opportunity can come out of this crisis. At the very early stage of the pandemic, Nigerian director Imoh Umoren predicted a substantial increase of live streaming services in Africa and therefore quickly adjusted his production plans. At the moment, he is wrapping up his most recent series, which will be distributed online exclusively. He has also confirmed that instead of waiting for Covid to end, that he would submit his new work to online festivals.

*All of this are part of the filmmaking process. If festivals don't work, you still have a chance of people watching your film through streaming sites and all that, you know, commending or*

*panning it depending on how they feel. So it's still a part of the business they can still enjoy, thankfully. (Imoh Umoren)*

## **Conclusion**

This research aims to investigate the extent to which filmmaking activities has been impacted and reshaped by the pandemic. Some of the toughest challenges faced by the film community include navigating the complex and sometimes impractical Covid protocols, managing budgets in the face of heightened production costs, and scrambling for new distribution strategies. Confronted by an unprecedented global health crisis, filmmakers who participated in this study indicated they had to scale back crew size and develop alternate aesthetics to ensure a production process that could be as smooth as possible under the circumstances.

Six central topics emerged as a result of this study. First, all interviewees stated that their film productions had to be suspended when governments worldwide shut down non-essential activities in March 2020. While some production shutdowns were a direct result of Covid restrictions, others were primarily called for by industry leaders or unions, and non-profit organizations.

Second, filmmakers described how they had to be constantly aware of limitations and challenges when it came to configuring the size of the casting crew that could be on set. With Covid spreading widely and surging in multiple waves, it became necessary for everyone in the film community to develop alternate aesthetics to minimize production disruption and keep the original crew intact.

Third, while many governmental organizations have instituted specific Covid-19 film production guidelines, from mandatory physical distancing to recommended best practices, producers and directors very often found themselves beholden to impractical production protocols. Filmmakers in this study expressed several concerns regarding the design and implementation of current Covid protocols.

Fourth, every filmmaker had impressed upon the researchers how the pandemic has caused an increase in their production costs. With a Covid-19 compliance officer required to be on set, production companies are also saddled with incremental costs which include regular testing and additional lodging and transportation arrangements.

Fifth, the pandemic has had some influence on the types of stories filmmakers want to tell. Those motivated by the topic of Covid have chosen to salvage the raw stories, so they are not lost to time. However, other filmmakers stated without reservation they would avoid the topic completely.

Lastly, most filmmakers expressed disappointment over how the pandemic has negatively impacted film festivals, coupled with their skepticism of online events. However, some filmmakers believe this crisis has brought about unexpected film distribution opportunities, with better access to online screenings and increased revenue from emerging media platforms.

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