



TAFF The
Asian American
Foundation

RED LIGHT, GREEN LIGHT:

Overcoming Roadblocks
to Asian American Creative
Executive Success
in the Entertainment Industry

OCTOBER 2023



Executive Summary ——— 03

A Call to Action ——— 05

Introduction ——— 06

Methodology ——— 07

Identity ——— 10

Challenges ——— 15

Recommendations ——— 22

Ideas for
Further Research ——— 24

About CAPE and TAAF ——— 28



This study, led by CAPE, in collaboration with TAAF, investigates the workplace experience for Asian American creative executives in the entertainment industry.

Note on terminology:

While the report predominantly focuses on Asian American experiences, it includes Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander perspectives where possible and intentionally does not use the AANHPI acronym when it might not fully represent NHPI perspectives.

BACKGROUND

According to a study conducted by the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, 95.1% of Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islanders (AANHPIs) working in the entertainment industry surveyed in the study agreed that AANHPI representation behind-the-scenes is inadequate. A majority of the respondents described experiencing micro-aggressions, blatant racism, and tokenization.¹ Moreover, 93.3% agree that representation on screen is similarly lacking. There is a need to better understand how Asian American professionals experience the workplace in the entertainment industry, specifically barriers to entry and promotions, day-to-day challenges, and factors that contribute to attrition and industry pivots.

WHO IS THE STUDY ABOUT?

This first-of-its-kind study focuses on one of the most critical, but often overlooked, components of the narrative change ecosystem: creative executives. The purview of creative executives includes, among other duties, finding and acquiring intellectual property and other source material, hiring talent including writers and directors, casting, and ultimately wielding the power to greenlight projects and shepherd them to screen.

HOW WAS THE STUDY CONDUCTED?

To understand better how Asian American professionals experience the workplace in the entertainment industry, individuals in CAPE’s network were surveyed—a curated list of creative-executive-track professionals working in film and TV at every level (from assistants and coordinators to mid-level executives and the C-suite). CAPE and TAAF then conducted focus-group discussions with entry-, mid-, and senior-level executives on their experiences and brainstormed recommendations on how to make the industry a better environment for AANHPIs to thrive in.





The study brings to light the issues faced by Asian American creative executives.

WHAT DID THE STUDY FIND?

- The Asian American identity brought with it complexities - creative executives of Asian descent brought in diversity and unique perspectives into the workplace; however they also felt tokenized at times. Asian American creative executives grappled with the expectations of fitting into Western norms or meeting high standards of Asian cultural knowledge.
- The intersection of gender and ethnicity highlighted challenges faced by Asian American women, including sexism, age-related biases, compensation disparities, and difficulties in career advancement, particularly for mothers.
- Asian American creative executives also reported experiencing high stress levels, unmanageable workloads, insufficient mentorship, slow-paced advancement, and unsustainable pay. The all-consuming life of being in entertainment, along with the additional challenges that come with working in the industry, and resulting mental health considerations led some executives to leave the industry or pivot.

WHAT ARE SOME KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE STUDY?

- For senior-level executives: intentionally recruit diverse people of color; establish paid internships to attract more AANHPI talent; organize company-wide trainings on topics such as intersectionality, class, race, microaggressions, and racism.
- For entry- and mid-level executives: leverage networking opportunities to connect with higher-level executives; proactively seek mentoring or advice even through cold calls; develop a personal voice rooted in their experiences and identity; actively work on increasing visibility to supervisors.

A Call to Action

Since 1991, **CAPE (Coalition of Asian Pacifics in Entertainment)** has championed Asian and Pacific Islander representation through their highly-acclaimed systems change work, through pathway programs, cultural script consultancy to the major studios and streamers, talent referrals from the largest database of AANHPI talent, and marketing and exposure to ensure the success and acclaim of AANHPI-led work.

CAPE has fostered the next generation of senior creative executives since 2017 through the CAPE Leaders Fellowship, the only talent development program of its kind that builds leadership skills and creates networking opportunities for AANHPI creative executives in Hollywood. Following CAPE's "lift as we climb" philosophy, this year two CAPE Leaders Fellowship graduates co-founded the CAPE Emerging Executives Committee (CEEC), a first-of-its-kind initiative to fast track AANHPI employees at the assistant and coordinator levels, which is often the gateway to the entertainment industry.

CAPE is proud to collaborate with **The Asian American Foundation (TAAF)**, a champion for narrative change in the AANHPI community, for this important research on the experiences of Asian American creative executives in the entertainment industry.

TAAF was founded in 2021 in response to the historic rise in anti-AAPI hate. While the immediacy of the work calls on supporting survivors and communities impacted by hate incidents, TAAF's long-term objective to fight hate is to create belonging. This can only be achieved by ensuring AANHPI representation in classrooms, boardrooms, newsrooms and casting rooms. TAAF's narrative change work focuses on supporting and growing AANHPI decision makers and allies in media, entertainment and journalism and increasing diversity in front of and behind the camera.

TAAF's pipeline programs such as the "Sundance Institute | The Asian American Foundation Fellowship and Collab Scholarship" provide AAAP artists working in film and television with professional development opportunities to ensure they are equipped to capture the full humanity of the AANHPI community in their storytelling.

But none of this matters if AANHPIs are not represented at the decision-making level.

To change what and how AANHPIs are portrayed, it is imperative to have AANHPI creative executives with greenlight authority represented across all major studios and streamers. These executives who understand, champion, and shepherd AANHPI stories to the screen are the greatest hope for more inclusive storytelling. Among other things, this landmark study investigates the challenges and opportunities to increase their ranks and support them at all costs.

Every research study leads to additional unanswered questions. This study is no different. One such conversation is that of the term "Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander (AANHPI)." CAPE and TAAF set out to survey AANHPI creative executives in the entertainment industry. However, due to the low number of responses that were received from respondents who identified as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (NHPI), and the fact that all of the NHPI respondents also identified as mixed Asian and Pacific Islander, the study largely focused on Asian American perspectives. The study team recognizes that the issues faced by Asian Americans are different from issues faced by NHPIs and did not want this study to inaccurately represent that it spoke for NHPI perspectives that may have been underrepresented in the respondent pool.

This study ultimately serves as a clarion call for senior leadership in the entertainment industry to enact necessary changes that address the workplace challenges and barriers to advancement that rising creative executives experience. CAPE and TAAF are proud to add "Red Light, Green Light: Overcoming Roadblocks to Asian American Creative Executive Success in the Entertainment Industry" to our continued work in changing the stories of tomorrow.





INTRODUCTION

What are creative executives and why do they matter? The average person may never think about creative executives or even know they exist, but they are the invisible hand behind every scripted studio project.

In 2023, when *Everything Everywhere All at Once* won a groundbreaking seven Academy Awards, including Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actress, Best Supporting Actor and Best Original Screenplay, there was prestigious industry recognition for what Asian Americans had believed all along – that our stories matter, that our stories are American, and that our stories have universal appeal.

The film stood on a century-long legacy of Asian American filmmaking that arguably began with Sessue Hayakawa's Golden Age silent films in the early 1900s and later, the Asian American independent media movement that emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Asian American filmmaking has always been fueled by unbounded creativity and steadfast perseverance by Asian Americans working in a variety of roles – as writers imagining stories, executives greenlighting them, directors and producers helping vision into fruition, actors bringing them to life onscreen, and the countless creatives including cinematographers, composers, designers, editors and others working behind the camera to make magic.

Yet in spite of glimmers of success, it is unlikely that a critical mass of Asian American stories are seen on screen unless more creative executives of Asian descent enter, feel safe and supported, are fairly compensated, advance, and thrive in the entertainment industry.

A variety of studies have examined Asian American representation on-screen in the entertainment industry, but few focus on Asian American experiences **behind the camera**; more specifically, the challenges that leaders of Asian descent face in entry-, mid-, and senior-level roles.

This study, led by CAPE in collaboration with TAAF, investigates the workplace experience for Asian American creative executives in the entertainment industry. Insights from a survey of 86 respondents recruited by CAPE are presented under three themes: Identity, Challenges, and Recommendations.

First, the report discusses findings related to the Asian American identity and its role in positioning, progress, and upward mobility within the industry. Then, workplace challenges, including those that lead to creative executives of Asian descent leaving the industry is examined. Next, challenges related to advancement, and the role of mentorship is explored. Finally the report concludes with recommendations to improve Asian Americans' experiences working in the entertainment industry.

A mixed-methodology approach was used to explore identity, challenges, and recommendations.

SURVEY

A 10-minute online survey was designed and administered using SurveyMonkey and shared with 345 people in CAPE's network – a curated list of contacts working in the film and TV industry on the creative executive pathway. This ranged from assistants and coordinators, through mid-level executives (managers, directors) up to vice president+ (Vice Presidents, Senior Vice Presidents, Executive Vice Presidents, and C-Suite Executives). It also includes alumni of the CAPE Leaders Fellowship as well as mentors and speakers for the program.

Participation in the survey was voluntary, and only those who identified as AANHPI (or multi-racial including AANHPI) were eligible to participate. The survey included sociodemographic questions as well as questions on how they found their current role, barriers to entry, day-to-day challenges faced, and difficulties in advancing within the industry, as well as reflections on how these challenges were related to their race/ethnicity. Additionally, respondents were also asked about their preferences related to mentorship and sponsorship. Lastly, respondents were asked if they were interested in opting into a focus group discussion to further elaborate on their experiences.

86 respondents completed the survey. The survey was intended to also gather feedback from a fourth group, i.e., those who have pivoted or left the industry; however, only 3 responses were received from this group. Hence, they were included in the general analyses, but not included in analyses disaggregated by level (entry/mid/senior).

FOCUS GROUPS

Focus group discussions (FGDs) were held with each of the three groups (entry-, mid-, and senior-level executives), facilitated by an experienced research consultant with a separate consultant tasked with note-taking. FGDs explored questions related to how respondents found their role, how their identity may have influenced their progress within the industry, what their training and mentorship needs were, and how senior-level executives could help with their advancement (especially for entry- and mid-level executives).

INTERVIEWS

CAPE staff also conducted individual in-depth interviews with 4 respondents who pivoted in their career path or left the industry. Interviews focused on reasons for leaving or pivoting and how they were related to the respondent's identity and recommendations/advice for others who may be facing similar challenges.

RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

| | | |
|--------------------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------|
| RACE (check all that apply) n=86 | Asian/Asian American | 86 (100%) |
| | Native Hawaiian | 1 (1%) |
| | Pacific Islander/Pasifika | 4 (5%) |
| | Multiracial including AANHPI | 11 (13%) |

| | | |
|-------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------|
| ETHNICITY (check all that apply) n=86 | East Asian | 60 (70%) |
| | South Asian | 14 (16%) |
| | Southeast Asian | 12 (14%) |
| | Filipino | 9 (10%) |
| | Pacific Islander/Native Hawaiian | 3 (3%) |

| | | |
|----------------------------------------------|------------|-----------------|
| GENDER (check all that apply) n=85 | Female | 57 (67%) |
| | Male | 25 (29%) |
| | Non-binary | 4 (5%) |

| | | |
|----------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|
| SEXUAL ORIENTATION (check all that apply) n=84 | Heterosexual/straight | 69 (82%) |
| | Other (asexual, bisexual, gay, lesbian, pansexual, queer) | 17 (20%) |

| | | |
|----------------------|-------|-----------------|
| AGE (n=86) | 18-24 | 8 (9%) |
| | 25-34 | 44 (51%) |
| | 35-44 | 24 (28%) |
| | 45-54 | 8 (9%) |
| | 55-64 | 2 (2%) |

| | | |
|---------------------------------------------|------------------|-----------------|
| ANNUAL INCOME BEFORE TAXES (n=86) | Less than \$50K | 8 (10%) |
| | \$50K - \$100K | 29 (36%) |
| | \$100K - \$150K | 11 (14%) |
| | More than \$150K | 32 (40%) |

| | | |
|-------------------------------|--------|-----------------|
| CAREER LEVEL (n=80) | Entry | 24 (30%) |
| | Middle | 19 (24%) |
| | Senior | 34 (43%) |

% may add up to more than 100 when multiple selections were allowed

The majority of our survey respondents identified as Asian American, specifically East Asian (70%), with 4 people identifying as Pacific Islander. 72% of the sample identified as female or non-binary, and 60% were aged 18-34 years. Most respondents lived in California (95%), were citizens (92%), and not adopted (98%), and a quarter (26%) of them were born in a country other than the United States. At least 20% of respondents across all levels had an advanced degree in a related field (entry-level: 29%, mid-level: 21%, senior-level 29%).

What challenges did respondents face entering the entertainment industry?

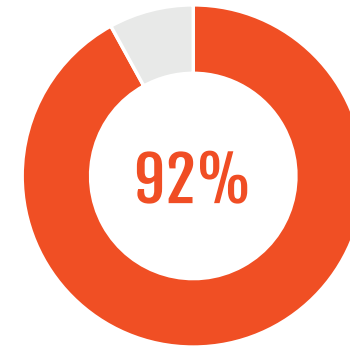
Childhood interest in stories, interest in the creative/entertainment industry, and desire for increased Asian representation were some of the reasons that drew the focus group respondents to the industry. However, entering the industry was a challenge acutely felt by many. A majority of respondents across levels felt that they experienced differential treatment because of their racial/cultural background and/or how they looked, with all senior-level respondents expressing that they faced discrimination. Additionally, across all levels, lack of connections in the industry, lack of mentorship, and compensation that did not match cost of living were key factors that posed a challenge.

Personal and professional networks were key for career entry and advancement for several participants across all career levels. Only 3% of senior level respondents found their current role using a “cold” application. 65% of senior-level respondents found their current role using their professional network compared to 33% of entry-level respondents and 53% of mid-level respondents. Several respondents from the focus groups, especially those at the entry-level, had found opportunities through the people they have worked with. Most participants did not express particular challenges with tapping into their networks; some mentioned that it came up organically and felt good to talk to people they knew. Only one respondent mentioned that they felt uncomfortable asking for jobs by tapping into their personal network.

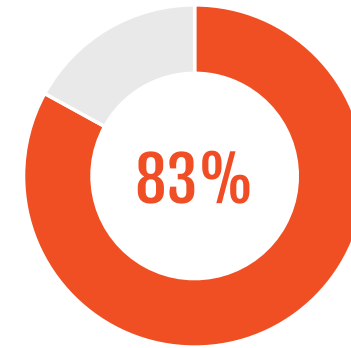


TOP 3 BARRIERS TO ENTERING THE ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY

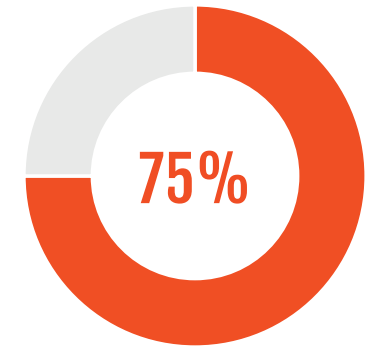
ENTRY-LEVEL



No **connections** in the industry

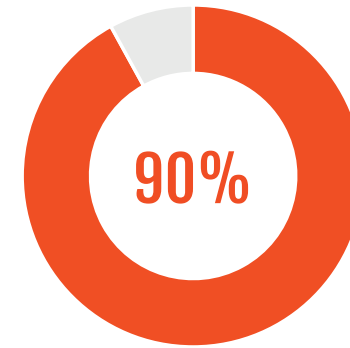


Lack of **mentorship** available

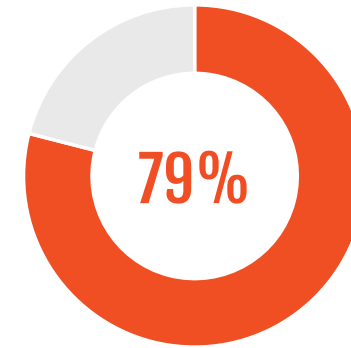


Pay offered was not sustainable or did not match **cost of living**

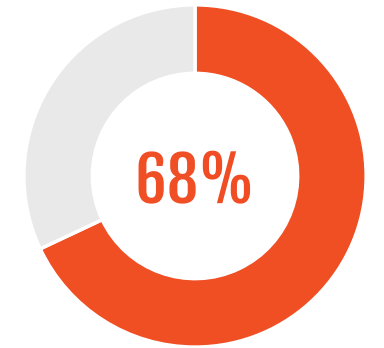
MID-LEVEL



No **connections** in the industry

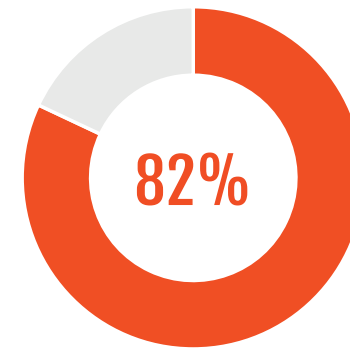


Pay offered was not sustainable or did not match **cost of living**

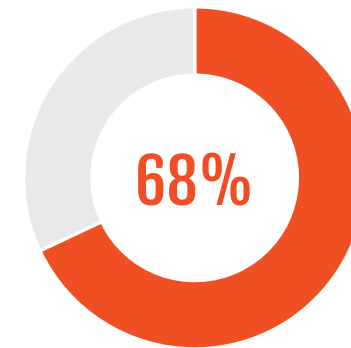


Lack of **mentorship** available

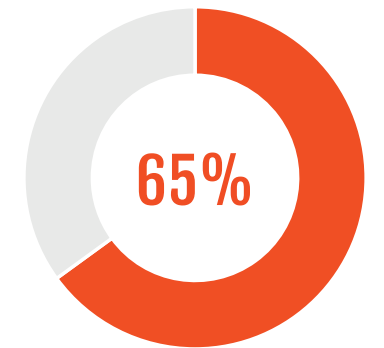
SENIOR-LEVEL



No **connections** in the industry



Lack of **mentorship** available



Different treatment due to **racial/cultural background**

IDENTITY



Identity played a key role in the experience of executives in the entertainment industry. Fitting in is a racialized process.

Identity was seen as a double-edged sword. The majority of respondents felt they had a last name perceived to be AANHPI, and most of them did not consider themselves as passing for another racial or ethnic background. Many respondents said being Asian American could be seen as an asset because they brought diversity to their company, their insight was regarded as unique, and their identity could influence decisions related to content.

“For me, it was a positive. Timing-wise, I came in when the industry was pivoting to focusing on representation and I leaned into that from day one at [a talent agency] - started API programs and got a lot of facetime with...agents. It was a positive, but I also grew up pretty whitewashed, to be honest. I knew how to play both sides of it, so that’s one of the reasons it was successful.”

- Mid-level male former executive

However, some respondents felt that they were reduced to being seen as a diversity hire. As usual, they were the “only” person or amongst the very few people of color.

“There’s a limit, they don’t want to be too diverse, you need to fit in. They only want diversity at a skin deep level, not all the other parts.”

- Mid-level male executive

There was a tension between being “too Asian” and “not Asian enough.” Some respondents shared that by merely being Asian American, they were expected to know an Asian language, know Asian/Asian American talent, or enjoy Asian-language movies. Others shared that they were automatically assigned to Asian content because of their identity.

“I grew up in China but I went to an international school and I lived in Canada and the US, so I feel like I’m always trying to convince native Chinese execs that I’m Chinese enough, and convince American execs I have enough American in me.” - **Entry-level female executive**

“The founder asked, ‘What is your favorite film?’ I said *Pride and Prejudice*. And he asked me, ‘You don’t have a favorite film in your own language or your own country?’ Later, on reflection, I thought about it and I grew up watching films from all over the world, and yeah, my favorite film is not a Chinese language film.” - **Entry-level female executive**





Asian Americans in the entertainment industry navigate being diversity hires, too Asian, not Asian enough, and being reduced to stereotypes.

Respondents described being reduced to stereotypes and subjected to microaggressions.

“Maybe being Asian and definitely being male, I was very much let into the club in a more casual way. It was very helpful - I was never necessarily ‘the other’ but maybe in some parts harmless enough - it was like ‘[He’s a] hard worker, we can trust him, we can have real conversations.’” - **Senior-level male executive**

“My last boss was not Asian and liked to send me Asian Tik Tok videos. I thought it was a little odd but figured they wanted to connect with me?” - **Entry-level female executive**

“I have...[an experience] when I first did my interview for [a show]. [My] two interviewers were white...I could hear them whispering in the hallway as I was leaving the office, and they were saying, ‘Let’s just hire everyone with ethnic last names’...it was a bad feeling. And two weeks later, I got the call that they wanted me to be an intern. It was a thing because all of the interns were diverse women...[and] the head of every department at this show was white - every head except one. It was an interesting dynamic because partly why I got this job is because I am diverse, but you feel kinda discounted.” - **Entry-level female executive**

Others described having to adopt “Western manners” to fit in, which led them to feel conflicted.

“East Asian people grow up in situations where you are not told to speak up for yourself or be outspoken. Once I stopped doing that I got better at my job, but I was conflicted in modeling a Western culture; going against my culture.”

- **Mid-level male executive**

Asian American women have an even more nuanced experience in the workplace.



Several women spoke about experiencing sexism and misogyny, especially when they were younger or in entry-level roles. They noted they were paid less than their counterparts, especially white colleagues, who had less experience than them. One respondent shared that because she had a child, she was passed over for a leadership position. A senior vice president shared that most of the executives at her level were male and she was automatically assigned “girl projects,” and not given a shot at any action or sci-fi films unless they had a female lead or director.

“Being younger and being a woman, every time I’m in any meeting with an older man, it’s their body language. It happens all the time. They see who I am and they’re instantly like ‘I don’t give a s**t about you and you have nothing important to say’ and there’s a leanback. And I start talking and they’re like, ‘Oh, you’re actually smart and have value and are saying something real.’ It’s consistent and it happens.”

- Senior-level female executive

“I came into the industry through production and post which [were] very male-centric at that time. Having someone come in that looks young and female, they weren’t expecting me to understand the more intricate technical terminology - that was something I had to contend with for a while, not so much any more.” - Senior-level female executive

“For me, as an Asian woman, a lot of it is [a lack of] respect whether I’m on set as a producer with a grip who’s an ex-marine in disbelief that I’m his boss or on a Zoom asking myself, ‘Am I on mute?’ when no one’s listening. It’s the same microaggressions a lot of communities face.” - Senior-level female former executive

Internalized and overt sexism pits women in the industry against each other and creates roadblocks for their leadership. Still, women supporting women makes a difference.

Some female respondents reported worse experiences working with female co-workers or mentors. Respondents also addressed industry pressures and stresses which may require female colleagues to prove themselves (more than their male counterparts may need to) and/or exhibit more “masculine” traits to show they are “tough” or “competent.”

“Older female mentors tend to be more cutthroat with their female assistants. I’ve gone through the same thing, forcing you to be tougher, or maybe it’s an inherent lack of boundaries of women to women forcing you to be tougher.” - **Entry-level female executive**

Internalized sexism may condition some older women to be tougher on younger women, and cutthroat behavior may be a mechanism of survival when operating with a scarcity mindset.

However, there are also examples of successful ways women have been able to support each other in the workplace and build community.

“[A] lot [is] changing. There’s this amazing group... started by an executive and it’s a group for moms in Hollywood, and you have women talking about everything from ‘what kind of nipple cream should I be using’ to ‘hey, my studio fired me while I was on maternity leave, does anyone have a good lawyer?’ It runs the gamut. [A] few years before that kind of communication was verboten. Besides having a strong mentor, having a good support system - those people will become your allies.” - **Senior-level female former executive**

Several women commented on being perceived as young and friendly, stating that it impacted them adversely when it came to being hired or promoted.

“For instance, if we’re negotiating and I push back, people say, ‘You’re aggressive.’ But for a man...’He’s sure of himself, he’s confident.’ As an Asian woman, there are benefits - when people meet you, because you’re Asian and a woman, you’re less threatening.”

But the downside is, whenever you act different to their expectations, that’s when they’re calling you a bitch or giving you a bunch of nicknames, saying you’re not a team player... it’s definitely a double edged sword.” - **Senior-level female former executive**

“You start off as a pet and somebody they want to elevate and bring into these meetings and as soon as you start to form your own identity, try to push your way into something and become a little more substantial as an executive, sometimes it can go sideways.” - **Senior-level female executive**



CHALLENGES



CHALLENGES

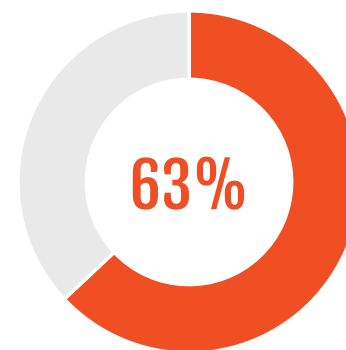
In their day-to-day work, 58% of respondents reported high stress or an unmanageable workload, among other challenges.

A majority (52%) of respondents across all ranks reported lack of mentorship as a challenge. 54% of entry-level respondents and 71% of senior-level respondents also cited differential treatment because of one's racial or cultural background or appearance as a challenge. The majority of entry-level respondents earned \$50K-\$100K, mid-level respondents earned \$50K-\$150K, and senior-level respondents earned more than \$150K. In focus groups, entry-level respondents discussed how low pay and part-time work required them to work overtime or find additional jobs that would cover necessities such as health insurance. Even as individuals advanced to mid-level positions, unsustainable pay continued to pose a challenge.

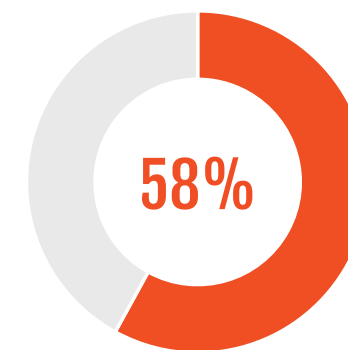


TOP 3 CHALLENGES IN DAY-TO-DAY WORK

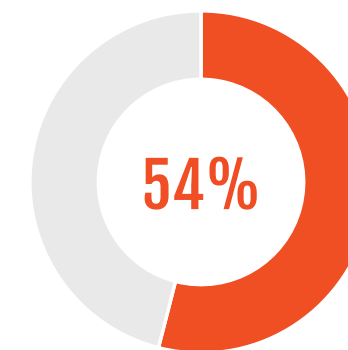
ENTRY - LEVEL



High stress or unmanageable workload

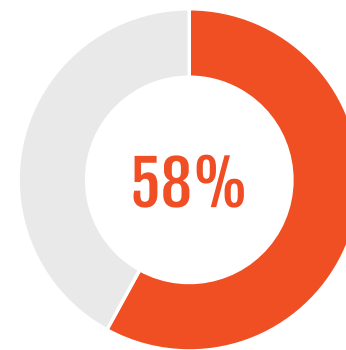


Lack of mentorship available

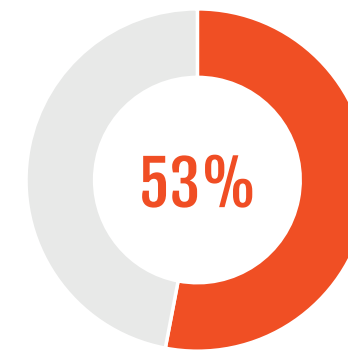


Different treatment due to racial/cultural background

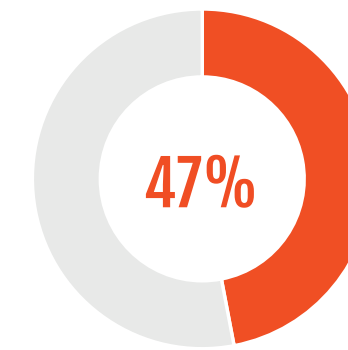
MID - LEVEL



High stress or unmanageable workload

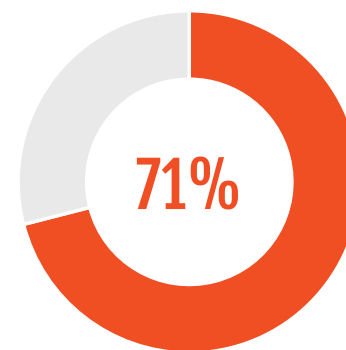


Pay offered was not sustainable or did not match cost of living

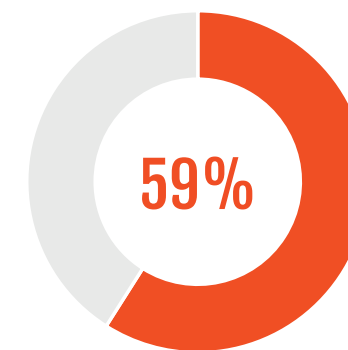


Lack of mentorship available

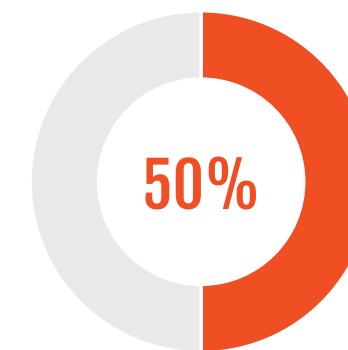
SENIOR - LEVEL



Different treatment due to racial/cultural background



High stress or unmanageable workload



Lack of mentorship available

WHY DO PEOPLE LEAVE THE ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY?

The all-consuming life and stressors of being in entertainment, poor pay, slow growth, and resulting mental health considerations are some reasons that drive executives to leave the industry or pivot.

Almost 1 out of 5 respondents across the different levels expressed that they were looking to pivot to a different capacity within the entertainment industry (18%, 19%, and 20% at entry-, mid-, and senior-levels). Respondents shared that they had contemplated leaving or were forced to make a choice in order to have more work-life balance.

“I’ve definitely considered leaving. Through COVID, I realized I do like my work life balance and I don’t know if it’s completely worth it [even] to work in a career I’m passionate about. I don’t know if it’s the company I work for or the nature of a development executive, but I’ve started to wonder if this is something I see myself doing for the rest of my life.”

- **Entry-level female executive**



“I remember starting in the business and hearing people say, ‘Yeah I wanted to have a family so I decided to go into [Current TV] because the hours are more normal and no one expects me to be there at 1 AM.’ It was a given you’d have to make a choice.”

- **Senior-level female former executive**

Working in a different capacity in the entertainment industry can vary, from shifting from a career in development to departments such as marketing or diversity and inclusion, or leaving studios to work as an independent producer, allowing for more control over one’s own schedule and work-life balance.

Respondents also shared that sometimes, creative executives were pushed out of the industry because of their identity. People of color are usually at greater risk of unemployment, and studies show that workers of color are often the first to be fired during economic downturns and often the last to be rehired during recoveries.²

“There’s a ton of execs at studios right now and you’d hear people say ‘It must be great to be a woman of color; you must be getting all the jobs.’ [But when] you look at when all these firings are happening, it’s usually ‘last in, first out,’ and it’s all those people being laid off.”

- **Senior-level female former executive**

DEIA (DIVERSITY, EQUITY, INCLUSION, AND ACCESSIBILITY)

Although some of the respondents reported having DEIA trainings and programs at their organization, many felt trainings were “surface-level” or “not helpful.” They were usually implemented during onboarding, conducted online, and paired with sexual harassment training. Trainings were sometimes offered only to select people, if at all, and minimal in content. One entry level respondent said that although her organization has employee resource groups for women and Asian Americans, the company does not ensure that staff have the capacity to attend these meetings. Being the only person of color or amongst the few people of color, also puts employees in a difficult position with respect to advocating for DEIA initiatives.

When creative executives, especially entry-level staff, leave the industry, it drains the pipeline of those AANHPI creatives who could potentially ascend to mid- and senior-level positions. This in turn means that there are fewer AANHPIs in decision-making positions to greenlight specific creators and content.

Asian American executives carry responsibility for advocating for AANHPI talent and content, sometimes with limited power and amidst industry-wide scarcity mindsets.

Some respondents talked about their experience advocating for more diversity and bringing in AANHPI content. One respondent always included Asian talent when bringing in filmmakers to pitch. Another respondent tried to ensure AANHPI content was given to someone who could personally relate to it. However, they cited mixed success in championing AANHPI-centered content because of challenges related to catering to what audiences want and what kind of content would be profitable.

One senior respondent attributed his successes advocating for AANHPI creators to being at a company where his bosses trust him and enable him to take risks.

“There needs to be more spaces where people like us can feel empowered to be fearless and that is one of the things I do actually really value about my position here - I feel like I’m given the freedom to be fearless.”

- Senior-level male executive

Another senior-level respondent felt that it can be hard to find the right people for a project as there are a limited number of AANHPI casting directors to choose from.

“We were having trouble finding a meaningful BIPOC (Asian name) to fill one of our roles. And they asked ‘Well what Asian American casting directors are out there?’ and you can’t because there aren’t too many people out there, and it goes back to who is in your circle. ...For me, the goal is to make sure we’re seeing the broadest range of people, and being truly inclusive on the staffing, on the casting, on everything, and then you cast the best people. So the more we can promote and push and make sure at every level we’re being inclusive, [the more] it’ll benefit the whole process.” - Senior-level female executive



CHALLENGES

Respondents also shared that while they receive quite a few pitches from Asian American creators, they receive none or only a handful of pitches from NHPI creators.

One senior-level female executive explained at an [industry] panel, “It was really informative to hear the perspectives of the NHPI community. I think they’re not as included in the AANHPI community so I’m looking for something.”



On the flip side, a senior-level male executive spoke of the extra diligence it takes to champion NHPI content and the importance of seeking people from specific communities to attach to projects with those perspectives.

“I try to approach...AANHPI-driven content [by] speaking to creatives with someone from their own community. And I think when it comes down to it... they know they’re in the hands of someone who cares on a really personal level.”

One respondent remarked that a scarcity mindset continues to permeate decision-making today. There are only so many Asian roles and opportunities, and this leads to a lot of competition within the industry.

“When one [type of Asian project] comes out... it eliminates it for everyone else. It’s scary as a developer for Asian [content] because you’re racing - once something... is out, it’s done. And writers know that too. There might be fewer in the future.”
- Senior-level male executive

One senior level respondent expressed hopes that their cohort of executives will be able to greenlight more diverse projects when some of them are at the presidential level in 10 years.

“We can only do so much at our level. We aren’t greenlighting things that are 50 million dollars yet. So much of the power in the industry right now is still in super traditional hands who have had it all along. But I do feel like it’s changing and I’m really hopeful.”
- Senior-level male executive

Challenges in Advancement: Mentorship

62%

of respondents felt that lack of available mentorship was a challenge they faced when trying to advance within the industry.

The need for mentorship was an acute one felt by executives across all levels, but especially by entry-level staff - 71% of entry-level respondents identified lack of available mentorship as a challenge (compared to 58% of mid-level and 56% of senior-level respondents) when trying to advance within the industry. Entry-level respondents were least likely to have mentors, and the majority of respondents (88%) expressed desire to have mentors from their racial/ethnic background.

Senior-level executives were least likely to have mentors of the same race - only 10% had a mentor from their racial/ethnic background, as compared to 46% of entry-level respondents. Interestingly, entry-level respondents were more likely to want and have a sponsor of similar background (41% of entry level staff preferred a sponsor from their racial/ethnic background, and 40% of them had a sponsor of a similar background).

Respondents said mentors have encouraged them to be more vocal, especially about pay, and to advocate for what they deserve. An entry level female respondent shared that she wanted her mentor to be a person of color who could empathize with her, but felt some female mentors tend to be more cutthroat.

One respondent also shared that sometimes mentors could have perverse incentives to keep mentees from being promoted.

“I’ve had some past mentorship experiences where you’re doing a lot of work and it clicks that they don’t want you to leave, they want you to stay so they’re not going to ever promote you.”

- Entry-level female executive

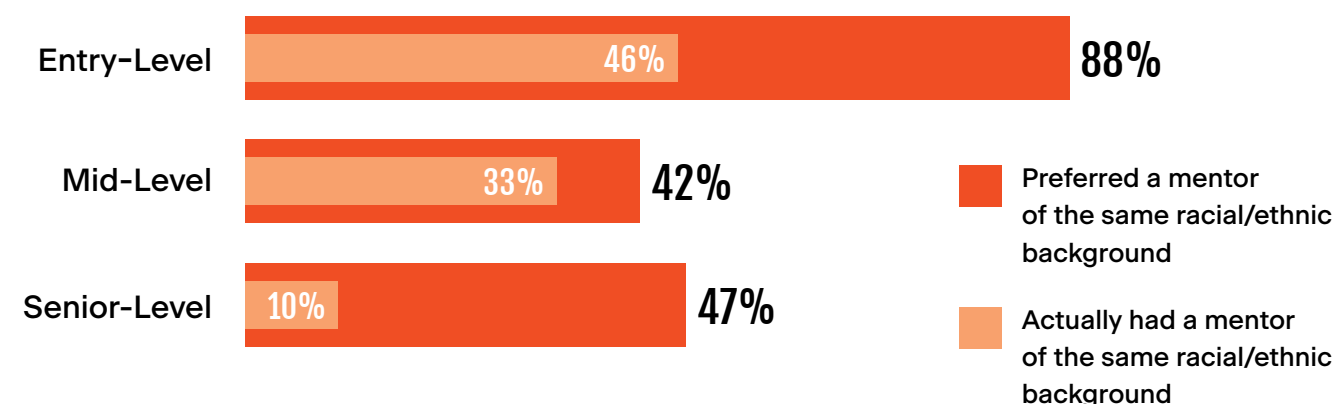
Having the right bosses or mentors could make a real difference in how staff view themselves and their identity as well.

“I’ve been very very lucky to have bosses in every job I had make an effort to [listen to] underrepresented voices - especially because I’ve had a lot of female bosses who have supported me and given me a platform to have a voice. So every step of the way, I’ve had the opportunity to be myself and bring in writers, directors, younger voices and be able to present them without feeling any shame or trying to fit into a system. I feel my experiences have been unique but it’s allowed me to accept my identity in every capacity.” - **Senior-level female executive**

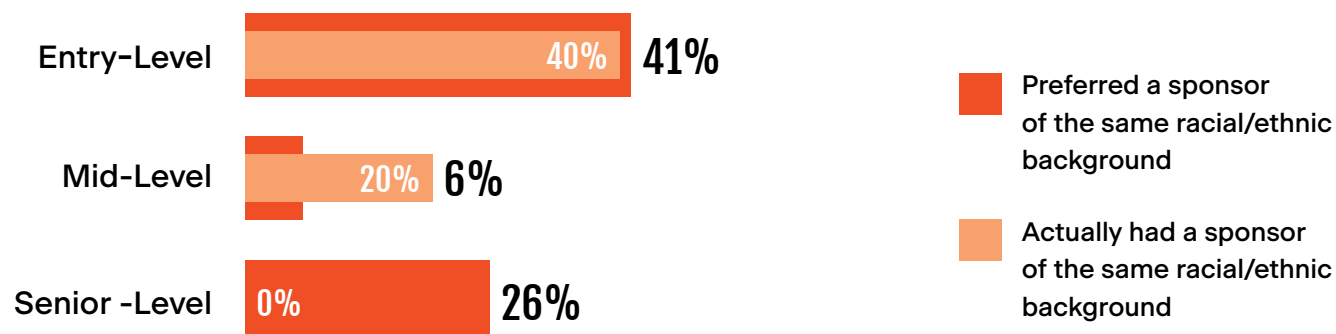
1 out of 4

senior-level respondents preferred to have a sponsor from their racial or ethnic background, none of the respondents actually had a sponsor of the same background.

Mentors of the same racial/ethnic background:



Sponsors of the same racial/ethnic background:



Additional Challenges in Advancement

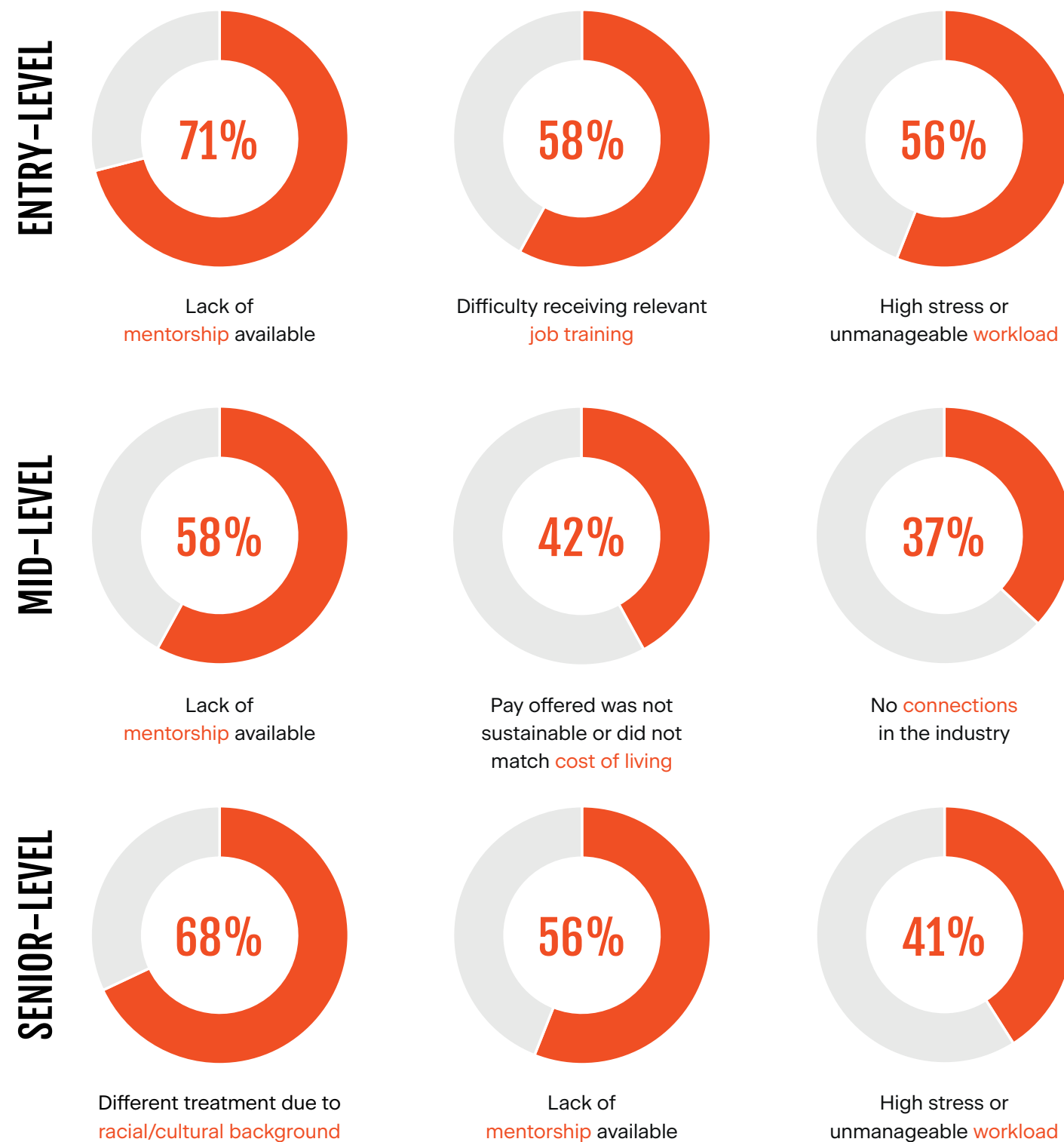
For entry-level respondents, receiving relevant job training (58%) was another challenge to advancing. Having high stress and an unmanageable workload did not provide much space to think about next career steps and this was a factor for both entry- (54%) and senior-level (41%) staff.

Not being able to advance because of experiencing differential treatment because of how they look or their racial or cultural background was most acutely felt by entry- (50%) and senior-level (68%) staff.

Mid-level staff specifically felt that even advancing did not really improve their salary prospects (42%) and lack of connections made it challenging to identify opportunities to advance.



TOP 3 CHALLENGES IN ADVANCEMENT



RECOMMENDATIONS



Career support advice

The most common next planned career step for respondents (32%) was to stay at their current position for 1-2 years. The next most commonly selected option was asking for a promotion at their current company (22%). This option was the top choice selected by entry-level respondents (41%), compared to its selection by 25% of mid-level and 13% of senior level respondents.

“It’s more about, how do we make sure that we don’t just have a seat at the table but that we’re also speaking up and being ourselves at the table instead of wearing a mask and acting more white-passing.”

- Senior-level female former executive

“I think it’s [about] the whole community getting behind these people with potential. It’s about community support but also about what they present, what they can do. We have to constantly prove that there is value in bringing different perspectives, [but] there’s value in our community.”

- Senior-level female former executive

ADVICE FOR ENTRY- AND MID-LEVEL EXECUTIVES:

- Use networking opportunities to meet with higher-level executives.
- Reach out for mentoring or advice, even if it means cold calling.
- Develop your own voice, draw from your experience, and use your identity to your advantage.
- Seek opportunities to make yourself more visible to supervisors

STRATEGIES FOR MID- AND SENIOR-LEVEL STAFF TO CREATE A BETTER EXPERIENCE FOR AANHPI STAFF:

- Intentionally recruit, support, and nurture AANHPI/diverse individuals of color at all levels
- Show leadership the financial benefits of having diversity in staff
- Give entry-level staff opportunities to prove themselves
- Include entry-level staff in meetings and screenings
- Create paid internships and offer full-time roles with benefits to bring more AANHPIs into the fold
- Provide training opportunities:
 - **Entry-level:** email etiquette, soft-skills development, pitching program that trains staff on how to find and pitch projects
 - **Senior-level:** Training on how to manage senior-level staff, especially when facing racist behavior (which is usually forgiven given their seniority)
 - **All-staff:** intersectionality/class/race, microaggressions, and racism

Conducting the study has opened the door to more areas ripe for further research.

INTERSECTION OF RACE AND GENDER

Initial outreach for the study and focus groups drew from a wide network of AANHPI creative executives working across all seniority levels in entertainment, yet 72% of respondents identified as female or non-binary, with 92% of entry-level respondents identifying as female or non-binary. This gender breakdown does not reflect reality in Hollywood, where women or non-binary individuals make up closer to 20% of the C-Suite at media companies.³ (It is worth noting the glaring drop-off in women and non-binary individuals at the highest levels of studio leadership, when closer to 70% of Hollywood’s support staffers identify as female or non-binary.⁴) So what could account for the disproportionate response we received from women and non-binary respondents? The focus groups revealed a pattern: AANHPI women

experienced numerous layers of discrimination, which they attributed to an inseparable mix of race, gender, and perceived youth or lack of experience. Did frustration with this uniquely intersectional experience lead to more women or non-binary respondents speaking up?

Thankfully, gender disparity in Hollywood is now a frequently studied topic, due to the groundbreaking work of research institutes such as the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media and the USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative. Similarly, in the wake of the #OscarsSoWhite movement, racial disparities are also now documented and studied with increasing frequency. However, the conversations revealed that AANHPI women and non-binary respondents experience negative stereotypes attributable to both race and gender, and that this intersection must be further explored.

CODE-SWITCHING

Another interesting topic that was discussed during the focus groups was that of different identities being more important at times. One senior-level focus group respondent described how, depending on the situation, he would sometimes lead with his LGBTQ+ identity, or his Asian American identity, or his multi-racial identity. Another mid-level focus group respondent described how his upbringing allowed him to adopt the “fatty, white language” that agents used, which ultimately allowed him to get ahead.

A prevalent stereotype that individuals of Asian descent face in the workplace is that of being the “model minority,” or seen as white-adjacent - non-threatening enough to be “let into the club,” but also not quite leadership material. This is another facet of the “Pet to Threat” phenomenon identified by Dr. Kecia Thomas in 2013,⁵ while studying the experience of women of color in the workplace. In Dr. Thomas’s study, women (typically Black women) were praised and supported by their managers until they began to excel in their roles, at which point their managers would perceive them as a threat to their own careers. Across all gender identities in this study, many respondents spoke of experiencing a similar trajectory, being able to rise quickly through the ranks at the entry level, only to see a ceiling form as they began to approach the highest levels of leadership.



NHPI, SOUTH ASIAN AMERICAN, SOUTHEAST ASIAN AMERICAN, AND MULTI-RACIAL AANHPI

The study team also noted the low number of NHPI respondents, which could be because of a disproportionately low number of NHPI respondents initially available in the outreach pool, reflecting a need for better diversity in hiring practices. A pertinent finding shared by some respondents was that they received a low number of pitches for NHPI content. This speaks to a need to strengthen pathways for NHPI creatives and creative executives to be able to increase their reach in the entertainment industry. Even more importantly, once content focusing on the NHPI community is in development, the importance of reaching out to creatives within that community to work on that content was also raised by respondents, emphasizing the importance of truly authentic representation.

Additionally, the study team would have liked more responses from South Asian and Southeast Asian American respondents, or respondents who identified as multi-racial AANHPI (other than white). AANHPI is a large umbrella that has politically been made to serve many diverse communities. The study team is sensitive to the fact that the issues faced by Asian American communities may not be the same issues faced by the NHPI community, or that East Asian American communities (which made up the majority of the respondents) may face different issues than South Asian American or multi-racial AANHPI (other than white) communities do. The more data is disaggregated to reflect unique experiences, the better. Ultimately, further research that disaggregates the experiences of the NHPI community, the South Asian and Southeast Asian American communities, and multi-racial AANHPI (other than white) communities should be conducted.

WORKPLACE EXPERIENCE

The study also identified numerous challenges faced by creative executives of Asian descent. Many entertainment industry employers tended to put employees of Asian descent in “boxes” based on their identity characteristics (race, gender, sexuality, age, etc.). Respondents also reported unmanageable workloads which brought on high levels of stress. These related issues run along parallel tracks. Awareness of and research about burnout as a form of occupational stress is growing, but the literature on the prevalence and consequences of burnout in underrepresented minority groups is scant,⁶ with no documentation of the impact of racial microaggressions, such as those reported in this study, on burnout in the entertainment industry. How can entertainment industry employers draw upon the unique backgrounds of all their employees without inflicting expectations that employees of Asian descent can and should speak for all people in their identity groups? How do employers build more inclusive workplaces that welcome employees to bring their full selves to the workplace, and not only if said employees conform to a stereotyped or racialized version of who they are supposed to be?





Furthermore, what measures are being taken by employers and managers to reduce stress and workloads and subsequently increase retention? Of particular interest would be the implementation of mentorship and sponsorship programs, which can be put in place to support creative executives at each stage of their careers. In the absence of available mentors, creative executives sought allyship and community among peers. Community created among those with shared experiences, whether it came from people of the same racial or ethnic background, gender, or other shared life experience, was invaluable for sustaining creative executives in the field across all levels. How can employers further create opportunities for mentorship, sponsorship, and true community among their employees?

Another frequently-raised issue was the “scarcity mindset,” or the idea that Asian American executives and Asian American stories were one-and-done - meaning once you had an Asian American executive or a particular Asian American story, that was all that a studio might need to check that particular box. As shown throughout this study, Asian Americans bring a wide range of nuanced and diverse perspectives. The UCLA Center for Scholars and Storytellers has released a well-cited study on the positive impact of authentically inclusive representation on the box office⁷ - taking this one step further, authentically inclusive representation on the screen can only come from having truly diverse and authentically inclusive representation in all levels of staff behind the camera, including those creative executives greenlighting diverse stories. A future study could take up the mantle of further tracking the financial benefits of diverse and inclusive representation in creative executives in Hollywood.

LEADERSHIP

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the study surfaced the need for more examination of the highest levels of leadership in media companies and studios. What is the racial makeup in the C-Suite, or at the senior level? What is the gender breakdown? As the industry contracted in the wake of the pandemic and strikes, which senior leaders were let go? Is the adage “last one in, first one out” being played out in reality, and if so, what can entertainment industry employers do to truly stand behind their professed commitments to diversity? How can senior leadership build inclusive workplaces with larger decision-making tables, and give more diverse voices a seat at the table?

These are big questions. Each one merits a study in its own right. This study provides groundwork upon which to build, and also serves as a call for more research into these areas.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The CAPE and TAAF teams would like to acknowledge Lena Pham, consultant for her work on cleaning and analyzing the data and supporting writing of the report; Maya Hernandez, Ph.D for facilitating interviews; Yukako Fujimori for note-taking; Jennifer Kim Van Nguyen for her beautiful design; Sruthi Chandrasekaran for leading the study from TAAF; and Grace Kao for leading the study from CAPE.



REFERENCES

1. [I Am Not a Fetish or Model Minority: Redefining What it Means to Be API in the Entertainment Industry](#). Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media. 2021.
2. [The Economic Fallout of the Coronavirus for People of Color](#), Center for American Progress, 2020.
3. [Inclusion or Invisibility? Comprehensive Annenberg Report on Diversity in Entertainment](#). Media, Diversity, & Social Change Initiative. Institute for Diversity and Empowerment at Annenberg (IDEA). USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, 2016.
4. [Pay Up Hollywood Survey results](#), 2021.
5. Thomas, Kecia M., et al. Women of color at midcareer: Going from pet to threat. The psychological health of women of color: Intersections, challenges, and opportunities. New York, NY: Guilford Press, 2013.
6. [Racial/Ethnic Differences in Burnout: a Systematic Review](#). Lawrence Jourdyn A, et al. J Racial Ethn Health Disparities. 2022.
7. [Beyond checking a box: A lack of authentically inclusive representation has costs at the box office](#). The Center for Scholars & Storytellers. UCLA, 2020.

PHOTO CREDITS

p2: Source: CAPE, Photo by: Hao Feng

p3: Source: TAAF

p4: Source: TAAF, Photo by: Christine Chang

p5: Source: CAPE

p6: Source: TAAF

p9: Source: TAAF

p10: Source: Geena Rocero, Photo by: Sidewalkkilla

p11: Source: TAAF, Photo by: Heritage Heroes 2023 / Alexander Bocchieri

p17: Source: TAAF, Photo by: Suzi Pratt

p19: Source: TAAF, Photo by: JP Yim

p22: Source: TAAF, Photo by: Christine Chang

p24: Source: Geena Rocero, Photo by: Sidewalkkilla

p25: Source: CAPE, Photo by: Andrew Ge

p26: Source: CAPE, Photo by: Unit 5 Films / Andrew Oh

p27: Source: TAAF, Photo by: JP Yim

p28: Source: CAPE, Photo by: Somlit Inthlangsy



CAPE

CAPE (Coalition of Asian Pacifics in Entertainment) champions diversity by educating, connecting, and empowering Asian American and Pacific Islander artists and leaders in entertainment and media.

CAPE advances representation for Asian American and Pacific Islander creators and executives in Hollywood by nurturing and engaging creative talent and executive leadership, providing cultural content consulting and talent referrals, and championing projects for critical box office and streaming success.

Through our industry-renowned programs such as the CAPE New Writers Fellowship, CAPE Leaders Fellowship, Julia S. Gouw Short Film Challenge for API Women & Non-Binary Filmmakers, CAPE Animation Directors Accelerator, CAPE Emerging Executives Committee, our consulting and talent referral services, the CAPE Database, and #GoldOpen, CAPE is breaking barriers to representation from the writers' room to the boardroom to the living room.

TAAF

The Asian American Foundation (TAAF) serves the Asian American and Pacific Islander community in their pursuit of belonging and prosperity that is free from discrimination, slander, and violence. Founded in 2021 in response to the rise in anti-Asian hate and to address the long-standing underinvestment in AAPI communities, TAAF invests in best-in-class organizations working to mobilize against hate and violence, educate communities, and reclaim our narratives through our core pillars of Anti-Hate, Education, Narrative Change, and Resources & Representation. Through our grants, high-impact initiatives, and events, we're creating a permanent and irrevocable sense of belonging for millions of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in the United States.

