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The Roles of Race and Ethnicity vs. Awareness and Attractiveness in Film Audiences' Casting Preferences

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ABSTRACT

Film industry elites justify racially exclusionary casting practices with the rationale that White audiences prefer to watch White actors. Nevertheless, previous academic research into White audience demand for minority film casting has produced mixed results in testing this claim. Presenting findings from a mixed-method quantitative (n = 1071) and qualitative (n = 25) study, this article examines the relationship between audience race and ethnicity and actor race and ethnicity versus other potential influences on demand, and investigates how film audiences discursively justify their casting preferences. We find that, overall, awareness and perceived attractiveness of an actor remain more important criteria than race and ethnicity when audiences make consumption choices. Nevertheless, racialized assumptions and issues of systemic racism pervade White audiences' casting rationales, particularly in the way that Eurocentric beauty standards and expectations about what actors should "look like" inflect audience discourses around perceived fit of an actor to a role.

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film audiences; film industry; actors; race and ethnicity; diversity; Whitewashing; awareness; attractiveness

I can't mount a film of this budget, where I have to rely on tax rebates in Spain, and say that my lead actor is Mohammad so-and-so from such-and-such ... I'm just not going to get it financed. So the question doesn't even come up.

- Film director Ridley Scott, responding to accusations of Whitewashing in casting *Exodus* (2014)

This article investigates the extent to which lead actors' race and ethnicity informs White audiences' film preferences. Previous research and the public discourse of industry elites (exemplified in the epigraph above) tend to assume that casting POC lead actors exerts a significant, negative impact on audience demand. Our results indicate that these assumptions are largely a myth and that other factors, in particular, awareness and perceived attractiveness, are significant factors. This suggests that increasing social justice in film casting is not antithetical to commercial viability and mainstream appeal. Nevertheless, we demonstrate that race and ethnicity (and, arguably, systematic racism) are not absent from audience rationales; our qualitative data analysis reveals how audience discussions

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of attractiveness and fit intersect with race and ethnicity and Eurocentric standards of beauty.

1. Research Context

In recent academic debate surrounding systematic discrimination and exclusion in the cultural realm, scholars have empirically demonstrated serious inequalities of diversity in film production and representation. For example, only 8% of the top 100 Hollywood films each year are directed by a person of color; 87% of Hollywood films underrepresent people of color in acting roles.¹ Khan et al. found that, of the top 200 films released between 2017 and 2019 in the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand, only 1.6% of the 8956 characters in these films were Muslim, despite the fact that Muslims represent 24% of the global population.²

One common scholarly explanation for this underrepresentation is industry elites' risk aversion based on beliefs that "mass audiences" (White, non-urban, international) exhibit less demand for films with POC protagonists, such that these films will not be profitable.³ Director Ridley Scott's aphorism,⁴ presented above as an epigraph, serves as an example of this sentiment. Scott – whose many period films such as *Gladiator* (2000) and accompanying promotional materials persistently gesture to faithfulness to the historical record – explains his deviations from authenticity as an economic recognition that a POC lead actor would generate lower revenues, which in turn disincentivizes production funding. Indeed, in general, industry elites base this belief on the fact that, in the past, Hollywood films with POC casts attracted smaller international audiences – even if studies that control for the size of production and marketing budget have shown that, for example, US films with Black-majority casts actually *outperform* average gross earnings.⁵ We thus contend that in academic discussions of evaluating (and attempting to resolve) demonstrable inequalities of POC representation in film casting, questions of audience preferences and demand must figure more prominently. This research could be applied in industry to help erode what we surmise are myths surrounding commercial potential.

Scholarly debate on this issue has typically hinged on whether "mere exposure" (to people of other races and ethnicities, and to films featuring racially diverse casts)⁶ or in-group similarity ("social identity theory")⁷ may be more decisive for White audience preferences. Mere exposure has long featured as a powerful explanatory concept across the gamut of media forms, including research into abstract art, classical music, advertising, and marketing,⁸ although more recent scholarship⁹ has suggested that mere exposure may not be unidirectional (i.e. it can in some cases lead to a *decrease* in preference). In the context of film audience demand for diverse casting, scholars have predicted that viewers "may prefer to see movies with predominantly White actors because they are accustomed to seeing predominantly White actors in the movies and in the media."¹⁰ Such a phenomenon, if substantiated empirically, would support Zajonc's theory of the mere-exposure effect. In turn, Tajfel's social identity theory has been offered as another possible explanation as to why White audiences may prefer White actors and Whitewashing. Social identity theory assumes that people prefer to see positive representations of their own in-group as a way to affirm their self-esteem; some psychology research regarding race and music genre¹¹ and gender and film genre¹² suggests that

social identity may indeed be a factor in media preferences. The logic of social identity theory, when applied to White audience demand for diverse casting, predicts the following: Just as in the way that many oppressed communities have advocated in recent years for more socially just (and positive) representations, Whites also have a fundamental desire to see “people like them.” Much in the vein of social identity theory, social cognitive theory has also been offered¹³ to predict that Whites prefer seeing White actors because of an innate preference for observing behavioral models similar to their own.

Although the mere-exposure effect here is essentially understood as endogenous (i.e. it sees the role of demand and taste being created by and within media environments) and social identity theory (and social cognitive theory) implies exogenous forces (i.e. preferences emanate from outside the media environment and indeed are innate within individuals’ in-groups), both theories assume – to our mind problematically – that White audiences prefer White actors. Not only has this proposition failed empirical testing; these theories elide the industry’s agency (and echoes industry discourses) by assuming that rational-agent filmmakers are simply satisfying a majoritarian audience’s immutable tastes.

Indeed, up to now empirical studies of White audience demand for films with POC casts to test these theories have produced mixed results. For example, Grier et al. manipulated film summaries and actors’ names to sound either White or Black, using a sample of (n = 67) Black and (n = 62) White Americans from ethnically diverse cities on the West Coast USA.¹⁴ They found that although Black participants tended to prefer Black-oriented film casting, Whites showed no preference for White-oriented film casting. Weaver, surveying attitudes based on four versions of actors’ head shots (all-White; all-Black; 70% White; 70% Black) and manipulated film synopses of several genres, across a sample (n = 88) of undergraduate university students, found that the race of actors was not significant for participants across most genres, with the exception of romantic films, where White audiences preferred White leads to Black or interracial couples.¹⁵ Weaver and Frampton deploy manipulated film synopses, two cast conditions (70% White; 70% Black), and two social media feed conditions (80% White commenters; 80% Black commenters) on a sample of MTurk workers in America (n = 219) to conclude that Whites are more likely to be interested in majority-Black films if they see other White people recommending them on social media.¹⁶ Aumer et al. randomly assigned participants (a n = 228, 38% multiracial, 30% monoracial people of color, 30% White, and average age of 21.42 sample recruited from social networks and at a university in Hawaii) to one of three conditions (Asian cast, Black cast, White cast) of well-known and often culturally coded film adaptations (e.g. *Aladdin* and *Mulan*).¹⁷ They found preferences for White actors and Whitewashing only in cases when Asian actors (but not other races) were proposed for stories culturally coded as Western (e.g. *Harry Potter*, *Titanic*, *Little Mermaid*).

Almost all research in this area has been purely quantitative studies performed in the United States and on small convenience samples of university students, a sampling bias that provides a very specific understanding of the effects of race and ethnicity on media consumption.¹⁸ These studies and samples raise questions about the extent to which they represent film audiences – and indeed the types of audiences (White, non-US) that the industry invokes in their exclusionary rationales. There are good reasons to believe that other participant samples might be more helpful in understanding audience

demand; the specific sample we use here addresses three key gaps in scholarship. First, our larger-scale ($n = 1071$) survey sample from the United Kingdom and in particular our interview sample ($n = 25$) of South-East England cinemagoers complement previous studies of ethnic casting preferences, which have for the most part focused on US-based convenience samples of undergraduate students. Second, the specific high-consuming group we target in our interview sample represents a crucial audience – after all, the top 10% of film consumers (“avids”) constitute over 50% of revenue and thus, based on their heavy consumption, disproportionately determine films’ commercial success.¹⁹ Third, as implied in industry beliefs, this particular demographic (older, White, atheist or Christian, non-US) is not typically seen as a driver of the recent calls for more inclusive casting strategies in the wake of #OscarsSoWhite and other social justice campaigns. These are precisely the sorts of viewers that researchers and the industry assume might be disinclined to watch films with lead POC actors, and industry elites use to justify the exclusion of actors of color.

In this article we test the assumption, often stipulated in research and industry alike, that race and ethnicity²⁰ of audiences predict casting choice. We do so by also analyzing whether other variables are in fact more decisive in audiences’ casting preferences: specifically, awareness and attractiveness. We choose these variables not only because they are two of the principle scholarly explanations for film actors’ professional success.²¹ There is also a wealth of scholarly literature, from economics and psychology to advertising, to suggest that these might be powerful motivators for media preferences overall.²²

In the following research we seek to transfer and translate some of these insights to the film industry and film audiences by scrutinizing the relative relationships of race and ethnicity vs. awareness and attractiveness in film audience preferences and rationales for casting actors. In particular, we tested two research hypotheses and explored one research question:

H1: The race and ethnicity of respondents have a less strong influence on their decision to prefer a White or POC actor for a role, in comparison to respondents’ awareness of that actor.

H2: The race and ethnicity of respondents have a less strong influence on their decision to prefer a White or POC actor for a role, in comparison to respondents’ assessment of the attractiveness of that actor.

RQ: How do (in particular, White) audiences rationalize and justify their casting preferences for White and POC actors and what discursive roles do awareness, attractiveness and race and ethnicity play?

2. Methodology

2.1. Research design

To test these hypotheses and answer this research question, a mixed-method design was employed which combined one quantitative and one qualitative phase in a sequential manner.²³ The rationale for this time orientation was that the first quantitative phase was designed to scope out and inform the more detailed inferences expected for the

second qualitative phase.²⁴ Following this logic, the first quantitative stage served more as an exploratory phase and the second qualitative analysis went into more depth to capture those fine-grained findings that this study expected. In simple terms, the purpose was to first observe the *what is there* and second to try and elucidate the *why*. When it came to the weight of each phase and to follow the above argument, the qualitative one was given priority to obtain those necessary more nuanced findings that this method allowed for.²⁵ The justification for this was to avoid extracting conclusions that could have been heavily affected by biased responses in the questionnaire, a potential danger when it comes to investigating sensitive topics such as racism or discrimination employing this type of evidence and data collecting instrument.²⁶ Using a between-method triangulation²⁷ served to harness statistical power to obtain a *complete* picture as well as to provide *in-depth* explanation through detailed and rich observations.²⁸ Overall, this mixed methods approach aimed to increase the validity and reliability of the findings.²⁹

2.2 Data Collection

This sequential design, sought to achieve a complete and in-depth understanding of the research problem, needs to be understood separately from the time frame in which the data was collected. Data was collected in three stages: a (1) pilot survey (for reasons of space we do not report on these results in this article), followed by (2) semi-structured interviews, and finally followed by the (3) principal survey. This approach was utilized to adjust to the constraints that this project faced at different points in time and it did not change the purpose of the mixed-methods design adopted in this paper, especially the arrangement and order of the quantitative and qualitative phases.

2.3 Samples

After pre-testing on a group of students to ensure the true purpose of the study remained hidden and the survey was usable, a mixed sampling approach was utilized to better adapt to the methodological requirements of each phase in this mixed methods design.³⁰ More concretely, a parallel sampling model was employed where two different samples were obtained from the same population of interest to feed both the quantitative as well as the qualitative phase.³¹

For the qualitative phase, 25 participants amongst the (n = 287) questionnaire respondents from the initial pilot survey were recruited for semi-structured interviews (the questionnaire was sent to the mailing list of a cinema in Southeast England (N = 14000)). The justification for this sampling procedure was (1) to vet the questionnaire's concepts for the principal survey employed in the quantitative phase and (2) to procure the necessary conditions for the researchers to have geographical access to the interviewees during the semi-structured interviews. In line with our intervention noted in the literature review above, this sample purposefully targeted a population of *White* and *higher-viewing-frequency* cinemagoers. Twenty-two participants identified as White; one person as Asian (or Asian British); one person as Mixed/Multiple ethnic groups; and another person declined to define their ethnicity. Eleven participants identified as male; and fourteen as female. Two participants were between 25-34 years old; six between 35-44; four between 45-54; six between 55-64; four between 65-75; and three were 75 or older.

Twenty-one people had (or were completing) a degree in higher education. Being a higher-viewing cinemagoer was measured as follows: When asked how often they go to the cinema in a “normal” year, 52.6% of respondents reporting attending on average 4 to 8 times year; 24.7% went 2 or 3 times a month; 5.9% went once a week; and 1.4% even went more than once a week. Only 3.8% hardly ever or never went to the cinema; 11.5% reported attending only 1 or 2 times per year. To put these numbers into context, in 2019 the average annual cinema attendance in the United Kingdom was 2.7 and the South-East England region was in line with this figure: 2.8.³² This corresponds to the first two stages of data collection.

For the quantitative phase, we accumulated via MTurk a randomly obtained sample ($n = 1071$) that was large enough to provide robust statistical power with a significance level of .05 and a power of .8.³³ This corresponds to the third and last stage of data collection.

2.4 Quantitative Analysis

Participants filled in a questionnaire which ostensibly tested audience tastes for different films available for distribution later in the year (thus hiding the investigation into the influence of race and ethnicity on film choice). Unbeknown to the respondents, all films and plot summaries were fictitious. The questionnaire was designed around four Tests (from now on labelled as: Test 0, 1, 2, and 3). Tests 0, 1, and 2 were employed to test H1 and H2, and Test 3 was used to test a hypothesis that we report on in a separate study. It contained 75 questions, organized into four main sections: (1) a series of choices between different actors to cast on the basis of a fictitious plot summary; (2) a series of fictitious plot summaries to rate; (3) demographic information; and (4) a series of questions about media habits and individual psychology. For reliability purposes, it contained social desirability bias mitigations and attention checks.

For Tests 0, 1, and 2, respondents were presented with a summary plot of a reality television concept called *Dog Eat Dog* alongside a series of actors' photographs and names to determine preferred casting choices for three archetypical roles in the film (i.e. a hero, a villain, a sage character type). Participants were asked to indicate whether they had heard of or seen each actor in question before taking the survey, and also to rate the attractiveness of each actor on a scale. Although all these three tests had the same intention of capturing the importance of the determinants that can affect the viewer's choice of an actor for a certain role in a film (and more particularly race/ethnicity), this research team took the decision of separating them to help participants avoid adopting answers that would not be reflecting with precision their thoughts and choices if they had known of the real intentions. Reporting and analyzing topics such as race and ethnicity is always complicated and subject to social desirability bias; for this reason, we took this precaution when collecting data.

Test 0 presented respondents with a choice between two White cis-gender men for the role of THE DOG TRAINER, the film's villain who gets a chance to change his evil ways for love. This White-White comparison served to create a bias control mechanism in terms of race (but one in which a “local” UK actor was nonetheless pitted against a “foreign” European one). The purpose of this initial Test 0 was to make the aims of

the study harder to decipher for participants, further helping with the above-mentioned problems when it comes to questionnaires and the topic of racial discrimination.

Test 1 presented respondents with a choice between three cis-gender women for the role of ROBIN, the lover/hero who falls in love with and tries to win over THE DOG TRAINER. At the time, two of the three choices ranked at the time near place 100 on the IMDb Top Star Meter, i.e. Simona Brown, a Black British actor of Jamaican descent; and Nasim Pedrad, an Iranian-American actor. The other choice, whom we labelled “Rebecca Burrige,” was fictitious (a headshot of a White woman with no acting experience taken from the internet).

Test 2 presented respondents with a choice between two cis-gender women for the role of DR. KIND, the sage who advises ROBIN on her quest to win over THE DOG TRAINER. Each choice was a personality from British reality programs. Respondents were asked to choose between Lottie Lion, a White British who appeared as a conniving contestant on the 2019 iteration of *The Apprentice (UK)* (2005-), and Nadiya Hussain MBE, a British Bangladeshi Muslim and winner of *The Great British Bake Off* (2010-) in 2015.

To examine H1 and H2 in this analysis, a regression test was applied to Test 1 and 2.³⁴ A regression, amongst the different statistical tests available, is the most suitable technique to obtain a robust level of detail to measure, capture, and compare the impact and influence that the above identified factors exert in the choices made by spectators when evaluating an actor as suitable for a particular role.

This regression test contained one main outcome, three explanatory, and three control variables. The main outcome variable determined the viewer’s preference for an actor/actress to play the role. This was measured in a nominal-binary scale (Yes/No). This coding scheme determined this regression to be specifically a logistic binomial regression. The three main explanatory variables were: awareness; attractiveness of the actor to play the role; and ethnicity of the participant. As explained above, these factors are thought to have a major impact grading the viewer’s choice of an actor for a role. Awareness was measured using a nominal-binary scale (yes/no) where the participants were asked if they have had heard of or seen the actor that the producers were considering for the role. Attractiveness was measured applying an increasing ordinal scale with six categories, with “very unattractive” and “very attractive” at opposite ends of the spectrum. Finally, ethnicity of the participant was measured with a nominal scale with five categories: White; Black; Asian; Mixed; and another ethnicity not listed. This original coding was transformed into a nominal-binary scale for analysis and interpretation purposes (White/Non-White). The three control variables were: gender, age, and education. Gender was measured employing a nominal-binary scale (Female/Male). Age was measured using an increasing ordinal scale with six categories, but for technical requirements in running the analysis, it was considered continuous. Finally, education, as with age, was measured employing an increasing ordinal scale with six categories but considered in the analysis as continuous.

As explained above, this first quantitative stage was intended to be more exploratory than explanatory. To achieve this aim and provide the qualitative analysis with a solid list of inferences and further expand its more detailed analysis, two slightly different logistic binomial regressions were performed. The first (Table 2 below) was intended to capture and measure the effect that each different predictor and control variable in isolation had

in the audience when choosing one of the actresses as suitable for the role. For this, the regression contained unstandardized coefficients. The second (Table 3 below) had the purpose of comparing each predictor and control variable vis-à-vis to weigh their relative importance in this same choice. In this case, the regression represented standardized coefficients with all scales homogenized. This combination provided detailed information that was very valuable for the posterior qualitative stage.

2.5 Qualitative Analysis

The qualitative phase was built on an *ad hoc* topic guide designed for the semi-structured interviews, which asked interviewees to expand on their answers to enrich, complicate, and illustrate the results of the quantitative analysis. After some introductory questions about taste in film, the interviewer systematically asked interviewees to clarify their choices in the questionnaire. Finally, interviewees were asked to respond to some statements by industry professionals about diversity in cinema – presenting an indication of what the study was really about only after asking them to clarify their survey choices. Interviews, conducted by a research assistant, lasted between 24 and 70 minutes (mean of 46.24, median of 46) and were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed. The qualitative data was coded thematically using NVivo software.

3. Results

3.1. Quantitative Analysis

Before proceeding with the two logistic binomial regressions, starting with some basic descriptive statistics can help set the scene. Table 1 below contains a summary of the variables analyzed in this section.

From the above, the following observations can be useful to set the scene for the analysis contained below. When it comes to the outcome, except Rebecca Burrridge (representing a remarkable deviation in this case – with 93% of participants saying “no”) and to some extent Nasim Pedrad (not quite as an exceptional “outlier” as Rebecca Burrridge, but still somehow divergent – nearly 60% replied “no”), the audience is more or less split in half when judging the different actresses as a suitable choice for the role. From the three main explanatory variables, the most outstanding observation is that most participants were not aware of the actresses suggested except for Nadiya Hussain: 60% replied that they knew who she was. In terms of the level of attractiveness, all actress received scores that on average deemed them as overall more attractive than not. Rebecca Burrridge was the actress with the lowest scores, being located midway on this scale. From the final explanatory variable, it can be observed that the White category was by far the most represented, both in the original nominal and in the binary one employed in the final analysis. From the control variables, the average participant could be described as “male,” with an age between 25-34 and at least attending university or already graduated.

Table 2 contains the results from the first regression. As these refer to unstandardized coefficients, the inferences that were presented at this point were used to measure the impact that each predictor and control variable had in articulating the decision of

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics.

Variable	Level of Measurement	Total Count	Statistics
Outcome: <i>Choice of actor/actress suitable for the role</i>			
Nasim	Nominal	942	Yes: 40.97% (385) No: 59.13% (557) NA: 18
Rebecca	Nominal	942	Yes: 7.12% (67) No: 92.89% (875) NA: 18
Simona	Nominal	942	Yes: 52.02% (490) No: 47.98% (452) NA: 18
Nadiya	Nominal	953	Yes: 48.16% (459) No: 51.84% (494) NA: 7
Lottie	Nominal	953	Yes: 51.84% (494) No: 48.16% (459) NA: 7
Predictor 1: <i>Awareness</i>			
Nasim	Nominal	957	Yes: 28.56% (273) No: 71.44% (683) NA: 3
Rebecca	Nominal	957	Yes: 6.90% (66) No: 93.10% (891) NA: 3
Simona	Nominal	957	Yes: 19.12% (183) No: 80.88% (774) NA: 3
Nadiya	Nominal	957	Yes: 60.61% (580) No: 39.39% (377) NA: 3
Lottie	Nominal	957	Yes: 30.09% (288) No: 69.91% (669) NA: 3
Predictor 2: <i>Attractiveness</i>			
Nasim	Ordinal	956	Very attractive: 34.52% (330) Attractive: 37.45% (358) Somewhat attractive: 13.49% (129) Somewhat unattractive: 6.80% (65) Unattractive: 5.65% (54) Very unattractive: 2.09% (20) NA: 4 Min: 1 Median: 5 Mean: 4.82 SD: 1.25 Max: 6
	Treated as Continuous in the analysis		
Rebecca	Ordinal	953	Very attractive: 1.89% (18) Attractive: 9.13% (87) Somewhat attractive: 24.87% (237) Somewhat unattractive: 33.05% (315) Unattractive: 22.77% (217) Very unattractive: 8.29% (79) NA: 7 Min: 1 Median: 3 Mean: 3.09
	Treated as Continuous in the analysis		

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued.

Variable	Level of Measurement	Total Count	Statistics
Simona	Ordinal	956	SD: 1.23 Max: 6 Very attractive: 24.16% (231) Attractive: 40.69% (389) Somewhat attractive: 18.20% (174) Somewhat unattractive: 7.64% (73) Unattractive: 7.85% (75) Very unattractive: 1.46% (14) NA: 4
	Treated as Continuous in the analysis		Min: 1 Median: 5 Mean: 4.61 SD: 1.23 Max: 6
Nadiya	Ordinal	956	Very attractive: 11.19% (107) Attractive: 25.52% (244) Somewhat attractive: 30.33% (290) Somewhat unattractive: 19.35% (185) Unattractive: 10.67% (102) Very unattractive: 2.93% (28) NA: 4
	Treated as Continuous in the analysis		Min: 1 Median: 4 Mean: 3.98 SD: 1.26 Max: 6
Lottie	Ordinal	958	Very attractive: 15.55% (149) Attractive: 35.70% (342) Somewhat attractive: 26.93% (258) Somewhat unattractive: 12.21% (117) Unattractive: 6.99% (67) Very unattractive: 2.69% (25) NA: 2
	Treated as Continuous in the analysis		Min: 1 Median: 5 Mean: 4.33 SD: 1.23 Max: 6
Predictor 3: <i>Ethnicity of the participant</i>	Nominal	957	White: 76.38% (731) Black: 6.58% (63) Asian: 9.51% (91) Mixed: 4.91% (47) Other: 2.61% (25) NA: 3
	Treated as Binary in the analysis		White: 76.38% (731) Non-white: 23.61% (226) NA: 3
Control 1: <i>Gender</i>	Nominal	942	Female: 36.41% (343) Male: 63.59% (599) NA: 18
Control 2: <i>Age</i>	Ordinal	956	18-24: 23.64% (226) 25-34: 41.63% (398) 35-44: 21.76% (208) 45-54: 9.83% (94) 55-64: 3.03% (29) 65-74: 0.10% (1) NA: 4

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued.

Variable	Level of Measurement	Total Count	Statistics
	Treated as Continuous in the analysis	956	Min: 1 Median: 2 Mean:2.27 SD: 1.03 Max: 6
Control 3: <i>Education</i>	Ordinal	951	Secondary education: 12.51% (119) Apprenticeship: 12.62% (120) University but not degree yet: 15.88% (151) Bachelor's degree: 37.85% (360) Master's degree: 18.82% (179) PhD Degree: 2.31% (22) NA: 9
	Treated as Continuous in the analysis	956	Min: 1 Median: 4 Mean:3.45 SD: 1.33 Max: 6

Table 2. Results actress suitable for the role – Unstandardized Coefficients.

	<i>Dependent variable - Actress as suitable for the role [Yes]</i>				
	Odds ratio (CI 95%)				
	Nasim	Rebecca	Simona	Nadiya	Lottie
Awareness [Ref. Category: No]	1.691*** (1.390 - 1.991)	7.339*** (6.669 - 8.009)	1.116 (0.763 - 1.469)	1.738*** (1.441 - 2.034)	1.300 (1.000 - 1.600)
Attractiveness Scale	1.293*** (1.179 - 1.408)	1.465** (1.226 - 1.703)	1.549*** (1.431 - 1.668)	1.656*** (1.533 - 1.779)	1.297*** (1.184 - 1.410)
Ethnicity [Ref. Category: Non-White]	0.803 (0.474 - 1.132)	0.809 (0.150 - 1.468)	1.248 (0.917 - 1.579)	0.656* (0.313 - 0.999)	1.366 (1.036 - 1.696)
Gender [Ref. Category: Female]	1.760*** (1.473 - 2.047)	1.157 (0.586 - 1.728)	0.686** (0.402 - 0.970)	0.477*** (0.179 - 0.774)	2.695*** (2.412 - 2.978)
Age	1.010 (0.875 - 1.146)	1.340* (1.086 - 1.593)	0.941 (0.807 - 1.076)	0.868 (0.725 - 1.010)	1.086 (0.951 - 1.221)
Education	0.886* (0.782 - 0.991)	0.930 (0.716 - 1.145)	1.076 (0.972 - 1.180)	1.127* (1.019 - 1.235)	0.854*** (0.750 - 0.959)
Constant	0.211*** (-0.593 - 1.015)	0.010*** (-1.366 - 1.386)	0.132*** (-0.657 - 0.921)	0.175*** (-0.582 - 0.933)	0.194*** (-0.551 - 0.939)
Observations	916	914	917	926	928
Log Likelihood	-596.650	-200.441	-597.467	-559.779	-596.813
Akaike Inf. Crit.	1,207.301	414.883	1,208.935	1,133.559	1,207.625

Note: *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001

selecting one of the actresses as suitable for the role. It can be observed that from the three predictors, the one with the most consistent results was *attractiveness*. This variable scored statistical significance in all cases and the coefficients remained all in the same direction and with a robust positive magnitude for all actresses. In this sense, the more attractive a viewer judged an actress, the greater the chance for that actress to be also judged as suitable for the role. *Awareness* can be ranked second in consistency of results, with three out of five occasions where statistical significance could be found.

As with the first predictor reported above, the magnitude is again robustly positive in all cases, even where there was no significance. If viewers were aware of the actress, this increased the chance they judged her as suitable for the role. Finally, when it came to the variable of *ethnicity*, this had the weakest consistency. Only on one occasion did the results show statistical significance. The magnitude also varied, with positive and negative results. As it stands, it would be difficult to predict with some degree of accuracy the influence of the ethnicity of the viewer when judging an actress to be suitable for a role; however, it was clear that, on average, White respondents did not necessarily favor the White actresses presented for the roles. Out of the three control variables, *gender* had the strongest consistency, with significance in all cases except for one. In terms of its magnitude, one could say that its impact is strong regardless whether the result is pointing to “female” or “male.” A possible conclusion for this factor could be that the gender of the viewer sharply influences how an actress was judged. Although *education* and *age* both had less homogeneous results, the former could be ranked as first. As a general conclusion, in most of the cases, the higher the viewer scored in the education scale, the less an actress was judged as suitable for a role.

Once the individual impact of the different predictors and control variables were reported, a comparison vis-à-vis the six factors was possible with the same logistic binomial regression but with standardized coefficients. With these standardized coefficients, measuring the individual effects of the variables on the outcome was not the aim (this was done in the first regression); rather, the purpose was to provide the grounds for a comparison. Examining the results contained in Table 3, the following was deduced as the main findings. Comparing all three explanatory variables, and in line with the results reported above for Table 1, *attractiveness* had the strongest influence both in its statistical significance and magnitude. Viewers, on average, were more influenced by how attractive an actress was in comparison to awareness and the ethnicity of the respondent. This was

Table 3. Results actress suitable for the role – Standardized Coefficients.

	<i>Dependent variable - Actress as suitable for the role [Yes]</i>				
	Odds ratio (CI 95%)				
	Nasim	Rebecca	Simona	Nadiya	Lottie
Awareness	1.268***	1.658***	1.044	1.310***	1.128
[Ref. Category: No]	(1.132 - 1.404)	(1.488-1.827)	(0.905 - 1.183)	(1.165-1.455)	(0.990 - 1.265)
Attractiveness Scale	1.380***	1.554**	1.716***	1.888***	1.376***
	(1.236 - 1.523)	(1.279 - 1.830)	(1.570 - 1.862)	(1.733 - 2.043)	(1.238 - 1.515)
Ethnicity	0.911	0.914	1.099	0.836*	1.142
[Ref. Category: Non-White]	(0.771 - 1.051)	(0.634 - 1.194)	(0.958 - 1.239)	(0.690 - 0.982)	(1.001 - 1.282)
Gender	1.313***	1.074	0.834**	0.700***	1.612***
[Ref. Category: Female]	(1.175-1.451)	(0.798 - 1.348)	(0.697 - 0.971)	(0.557 - 0.843)	(1.475-1.748)
Age	1.011	1.352*	0.940	0.864	1.089
	(0.871 - 1.150)	(1.091 - 1.613)	(0.801 - 1.079)	(0.717 - 1.011)	(0.950 - 1.228)
Education	0.852*	0.908	1.103	1.172*	0.811**
	(0.713 - 0.991)	(0.624 - 1.193)	(0.964 - 1.241)	(1.029 - 1.316)	(0.672 - 0.950)
Constant	0.694***	0.054***	1.063	0.904	1.084
	(0.558-0.830)	(-0.263-0.371)	(0.928-1.198)	(0.763-1.045)	(0.948-1.219)
Observations	916	914	917	926	928
Log Likelihood	-596.650	-200.441	-597.467	-559.779	-596.813
Akaike Inf. Crit.	1,207.301	414.883	1,208.935	1,133.559	1,207.625

Note: *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001

anticipated by the consistency of the results for the same variable in the first regression with unstandardized coefficients, but in this case a comparison was technically possible to confirm this observation. *Awareness* ranked in second place in this comparison between the three explanatory variables, both based on its significance and magnitude. *Ethnicity* came in the last place. Comparing the three control variables, *gender* was the most important of the three, followed by *education* and *age*.

The results reported above were used to derive the following two overall conclusions when testing both hypotheses: first, the inferences that were extracted from [Tables 2](#) and [3](#) broadly confirmed H1 and H2. When comparing *awareness* and *attractiveness* with the *ethnicity* of the viewer when judging an actress as suitable for a role, the first two had more importance than the last (both in significance and magnitude). Across Tests 1 and 2, there were only two occasions where *awareness* or *attractiveness* had no statistical significance and the effects were always consistently positive. This is not to say that the ethnicity of the respondent did not play a role, but rather to conclude that, in comparison, awareness and perceived attractiveness of an actress had a stronger influence in the preferences of respondents. Second, the ethnicity of the respondent did not have a clear direction in influence when choosing one actress over the other(s). One could not conclude that a White viewer would necessarily identify more positively with a White actress for the role. The mix of positive and negative coefficients point in this direction. The most plausible reason for this is that there were other factors outside the scope of this quantitative analysis that could better explain the influence on casting choice. As a final observation, and to further expand on the relation between the different explanatory and control variables, especially the ethnicity of respondents with awareness and attractiveness, interaction effects were also added to the analysis to explore possible moderation effects, but the results were meaningless and therefore not included in this section.

At this point, it was worth further exploring the second main conclusion: that there was no clear pattern between the ethnicity of the viewer and the choice of actress. In other words, the results of both regressions demonstrated it was not obvious that White participants preferred White actors. For example, in Test 1, White viewers, in comparison to non-White viewers, judged Simona Brown (a Black actor) as more suitable for the role and they judged Rebecca Burr ridge (a White actor) as less suitable for the role, although there was no statistical significance. At the same time, the opposite was found with Nadiya Hussain and Nasim Pedrad (POC actors) and Lottie Lion (White actor) in Test 2. Although this could be explained by the greater importance of awareness and attractiveness in comparison to ethnicity, for the purpose of increasing robustness this was judged as worthy of further exploration.

To do so, we performed contingency tables and chi-square tests to examine if the distributions of casting choices in Test 1 and 2 between White and non-White participants showed any kind of patterns and significance.

Observing the results contained in [Table 4](#), White viewers did not have any apparent preference for the White actor (Rebecca Burr ridge) in comparison to POC actors (Nasim Pedrad and Simona Brown) in Test 1. There was no statistical significance, but the pattern showed no “ethnic coincidence.” If any synchronicity between the ethnicity of the viewer and the ethnicity of the actors was expected, the percentages of Nasim Pedrad and Simona Brown would have been reversed. To further expand this finding,

Table 4. Contingency Table and Chi-square Test for Ethnicity of the respondent by actress Test 1.

	Nasim Pedrad	Rebecca Burrige	Simona Brown
Non-white	25.19%	23.88%	22.29%
White	74.81%	76.12%	77.71%
Chi-square Test = 1.0114, df = 2, p-value = 0.6031			

Table 5. Only White respondents by actor: Test 1.

	White Viewers' Choice
White Actor (Rebecca Burrige)	7.09%
POC Actors (Nasim Pedrad and Simona Brown)	92.91%

we turned our focus to the White viewers to isolate their choices from other ethnic groups.

The results contained in [Table 5](#) helped expand the pattern outlined by the contingency table in [Table 4](#). An immense proportion (above 90%) of White respondents preferred one of the two POC actors in comparison to the White actor. This distribution helps to confirm that, in the case of Test 1, there was no “ethnic coincidence” between the viewer and the actress. All things considered, the possible final inference from Test 1 was that there was no evidence that pointed in the direction that White viewers preferred White actors.

Applying the same procedure to Test 2 to try and confirm the above preliminary findings, the same pattern was observed (see [Table 6](#)). There was no apparent coincidence between the ethnicity of the actor and the ethnicity of the viewer. In this case, we would have expected, if the above held true, to see the percentages of Nadiya Hussain and Lottie Lion reversed. In comparison to [Table 4](#), this pattern held statistical significance $< .05$.

In comparison with the results in [Table 5](#), [Table 7](#) shows that White respondents preferred Lottie Lion for the role in Test 2, the White actress. This does not necessarily contradict the initial inference outlined in Test 1 - that there is no apparent connection between the ethnicity of the actress and the viewer - on the contrary, this lack of pattern precisely allows for both connection and its absence.

Considering the results from the two regressions and the different contingency tables presented above in relation to the second main conclusion of this quantitative analysis, it

Table 6. Contingency Table and Chi-square Test for Ethnicity of the respondent by actor: Test 2.

	Lottie Lion	Nadiya Hussain
Non-white	19.27%	28.32%
White	80.73%	71.68%
Chi-square Test = 10.297, df = 1, p-value = 0.001332		

Table 7. Only White respondents by actor: Test 2.

	White Viewers' Choice
White Actor (Lottie Lion)	54.75%
POC Actor (Nadiya Hussain)	45.25%

was deduced that there is no evidence to suggest that there is an “ethnic connection” between the viewer and the actor being judged as suitable for the role. Before concluding this quantitative stage, it is valuable to report an unexpected result that was neither theorized nor expected, and which is unconnected to the race and ethnicity of respondents. This was the influence of the respondents’ gender. In Test 1, men were more likely to prefer Nasim Pedrad (1.760***) for the role of ROBIN (the lover), while they were less likely to choose Simona Brown (0.686**). Test 2 demonstrates a similar result. Overall, we expected that knowing Nadiya Hussain (who is presented in British media as a beloved public figure with a warm persona) made her the more likely choice for the role of DR. KIND (the kind sage character), but conversely, men were far less likely to prefer Hussain for the role (.477**). It was nonetheless unexpected that knowing Lottie Lion (a conniving contestant from *The Apprentice*) did not have an influence on *not* choosing her for the role. Moreover, men in the study were more likely to prefer Lion for the role (2.695***).

These results could be explained by a prevalence of Eurocentric standards of beauty, especially given that “attractiveness” yielded a unilaterally positive and statistically significant result on preferring an actor across all Tests. Consider the difference in appearance between the actors in Test 1. Simona Brown, who has very dark skin, has her hair styled in an afro, while Nasim Pedrad, who has a light brown skin, has long straight hair. Likewise, in Test 2, Nadiya Hussain, who has brown skin, is represented wearing a headscarf, while Lottie Lion, who has white skin, wears her sleek hair in a tight bun. In other words, the actors preferred by men in our Tests are those who more clearly adhere to Eurocentric beauty ideals. Therefore, although our quantitative analysis overall confirms H1 and H2, i.e. the race and ethnicity of respondents is less influential than “awareness” or “attractiveness,” the results in Tables 2 and 3 are nonetheless not inconsistent with the prevalence of systemic racialized preferences in film culture.

3.2. Qualitative analysis

The qualitative analysis investigated the question of how audiences – and in particular, White audiences – discursively justify their preferences for (White and POC) actors and the roles that awareness, attractiveness and race and ethnicity play in these rationales.

3.2.1. Awareness: Matches, Mis-matches and the Meritocratic Impulse

The qualitative analysis offered further information and context about the complex role that awareness can play in film audiences’ psychology of decision making. First of all, as expected, in Test 2, participants reported that knowing Nadiya Hussain was a decisive factor in choosing her for the role of DR. KIND: they selected her as a “good match” to the role from their knowledge of Hussain from media appearances. In their justifications, participants often deployed contrasts that took into account their awareness of Lottie Lion, in other words that knowing Lottie Lion was an additional deciding factor to definitely *not* pick her for the typecast role of “the kind sage.”

As an example of this “matching” tendency, Participant 16 justified their preference of Hussain by saying “probably because what I know of her personality already,” while rationalizing not choosing Lion with the contrast “from how she [Lion] appears on *The*

Apprentice, she's quite a hard lady." Participant 11 echoed that "certainly from Lottie's appearance on *The Apprentice* I think the idea of her being cast as DR. KIND, that just didn't, didn't sit right." By contrast, he felt that Hussain has "got that warming character of there's not a bone wrong [in] her body kind." Similarly, Participant 10, stated "definitely Nadiya Hussain" because "in everything I've ever seen her, she appears extremely kind, extremely compassionate, intelligent, empathic, all those lovely qualities. And the poor Lottie Lion. Well, I've only seen her in *The Apprentice* where she was absolutely none of those things." For Participant 12, it was also evident that, "knowing their personalities, as I do, Nadiya, obviously, would fit that role more because she's, you know, very warm, kind, gentle, etc." whereas "Lottie, if, if I remember rightly was kind of more kind of hard-faced and (...) out for herself [in *The Apprentice*]."

However, awareness of either Hussain or Lion did not always and automatically lead to the same preference. Some respondents voiced preferences for casting "mis-matches": they wanted to see well-known actors or celebrities play *outside* their usual roles or media personas for the sake of novelty or narrative surprise and suspense. The participants' justifications help explain why the connection between awareness and audience selection in the quantitative results was not even stronger. For example, Participant 22, who had solid awareness of both Lion and Hussain, chose the former precisely for her unconventional fit, indeed mismatch, to the role of DR. KIND: "I watched Lottie when she was on *The Apprentice*, so I know her weird personality and I thought it would be an interesting choice. (...) So, yes, I just thought Lottie would be a quirky choice, which I would probably watch just for the sake of it."

Moreover, for some respondents, awareness of Hussain's celebrity status was reason *not* to cast her for the role, specifically because of (1) convictions about the importance of professional background and training; (2) expectations about fit based on previous formats, genres and roles; as well as (3) audience (dis)taste for commercialism and celebrity overexposure. Often, when interviewees preferred Lion to Hussain, they knew the latter from her fame following *The Great British Bake Off*, but not the former from her appearance on *The Apprentice*. As a result, these interviewees assumed that Lion was an actor, whereas they knew that Hussain was not an actor (but rather a media personality who appeared primarily in reality television baking programs).

We call this phenomenon the "meritocratic impulse." As an example, Participant 8 stated that "Nadiya Hussain might be absolutely brilliant, but also, I mean, she's very well known, [so] it doesn't really work," adding "I am anti people who haven't trained getting starring roles in films." When the interviewer pointed out that Lion is also a reality television contestant, this interviewee responded: "Well, they're [both] awful then," because "they're not actors." Other interviewees, who shared a similar insistence on only casting professional actors, also expressed an additional distaste for celebrity overexposure and commercialism. For example, Participant 15 said that

I cannot bear it when they find somebody and they use them for absolutely everything. She is, you know, the Muslim Alan Titchmarsh³⁵ of whatever. What's she going to do? First of all, she does some cooking, and then she's, kind of, presenting shows and then ... she looks kind, she looks like she'd be quite a good ... but she brings too much of her baggage to this and that would be so cynical for them to use that and I definitely wouldn't go to see a film that had somebody who'd come from TV.

In other words, for some participants, Nadiya Hussain was simply too well-known (for different types of media activity) to be suitable for a role in a film, which, they implied or explicitly stated, should only be inhabited by professionally trained actors, not “celebrities.”

3.2.2 Attractiveness: What an Actor “Looks Like”

The quantitative analysis revealed that attractiveness had an even more consistently robust influence on actor choice. The survey did not define attractiveness and asked respondents to rate choices based on their “attractiveness as an actor.” The qualitative analysis revealed how some respondents conceived attractiveness as a broad category related to appearance, type, and suitability for a role. For example, Participant 6 explained “I didn’t know any of them [actor choices]. So it was going purely on physical attributes and thinking how that might relate to the role. Not in my mind, but in the casting director’s mind if you like.” Alternatively, respondents could – and often did – interpret attractiveness more narrowly in terms of romantic or sexual appeal (e.g. Participant 21, who rationalized choosing one actor because they were “somehow probably more appealing to my eyes”).

Irrespective of how they conceived of “attractiveness,” appearance was a particularly influential factor especially when interviewees had no or weak awareness of the actors in a particular Test. For example, while Participant 16 was guided by his awareness of both Lion and Hussain to cast the latter and not the former in the role of Dr. Kind, he idiosyncratically preferred Rebecca Burrige for Test 2 because “She has a quite serious look to her face. I am not familiar with the actress at all.” Likewise for Test 1, Participant 11 chose Simona Brown, whom he did not know, because “it was a story I was envisioning in my head. And I think for me she was the better fit. And I guess again it came down to the attractiveness of the various actors.” Consistent among these answers is a defensive or apologetic appeal to a lack of awareness to justify why appearance was primary to their decisions. As Participant 19 commented in the context of Test 1, “if I was familiar with the work that they’d [Brown, Burrige and Pedrad] done perhaps my answer might be different,” so “I’ve only based it purely on how she [Brown] looks because I’m not familiar with her work.” Participant 11 formulated a similar justification: “I think a lot of these answers did just come down to the, the appearance of the actor because I didn’t actually know who they were.”

Sometimes, interviewees read intangible qualities into physical appearance. For example, in the case of Test 1, where Simona Brown was a popular choice, Participant 3 said that “I just think the pose that young lady’s showing, gives you a hint that perhaps [there] is a little bit more going on with her” and therefore “I would say that she looked as though she could portray that character and be believable.” Participant 20 thought “I’d like looking at her on screen” and “she looked nicer ... Kinder.” Others appealed more directly to sexual and romantic attractiveness. Participant 13, when pressed, offered that Brown was “physically attractive.” Conversely, Participant 22 thought “Simona Brown was probably not the best looking but more suited to the role. I can imagine her as ROBIN.” This comment is revealing, because it implies a horizon of expectations around appearance for a role which was typecast as a sensitive hero/lover.

By contrast, Rebecca Burrige was typically dismissed as inappropriate for the role due to a perceived lack of (the right kind of) attractiveness. This was an expected result, as the

selected photo was an awkwardly cropped thumbnail, which we hypothesized made this fictitious, White actor appear less professional and less attractive. Indeed, Participant 3 judged that Burridge looked “quite sullen,” continuing that she is “not really perhaps portraying a depth of character ... She looks quite nondescript.” According to Participant 19, Burridge looks like “quite a submissive person ... she looks quite vulnerable in that and I think the film would require somebody who looks to be a bit feisty.” Participant 22 concluded that Burridge’s appearance suggested “she would be a better fit into a more realistic film.” At the same time, there were occasional outlier perspectives, including Participant 7, who thought Burridge *would* fit the role precisely because she “looked sort of a bit homely,” which Participant 4 echoed, especially compared to the “very glamorous headshot” of Nasim Pedrad.

In this respect, although the quantitative analysis demonstrates “attractiveness” as a consistent and unilaterally positive influence on actor preference, several interviewees indicated that they found Pedrad too “glamorous” for the role (e.g., Participants 4, 9, 10). These decision-making narratives linked Pedrad’s perceived glamour to conventional Hollywood attractiveness and therefore a poor fit for the role of the hero/lover in a quirky sci-fi indie film. Participant 15 thought Pedrad was more suited for a “blockbuster Marvel [movie]” and called her a “glamour puss” who “looks like she just wants to go shopping” – a clear mismatch for the “vulnerable” ROBIN. Participant 19, in turn, found the “very glamorous” Pedrad better suited “in a role as a ‘Bond’ sidekick or a villain even, you know, rather than somebody in the sort of role that ROBIN would be.” A similar pattern presented itself for Test 2, where many interviewees (particularly those who were unaware of her) identified Lion’s glamorous appearance as incompatible with the role of DR. KIND.

Crucially, these reflections on attractiveness are underpinned by Eurocentric beauty standards. For example, several interviewees stated that Lion “looked” like an actress – implying that Hussain, wearing a headscarf in the selected publicity still, does not. Participant 9 said that Lion looks “a bit less homely than Hussain (...) So sort of glamorous.” Similarly, Participant 25 identified Lion as “conventionally attractive or more [like a] film starlet,” while Participant 13 agreed that “[Lion] looks like a movie star. [Hussain] looks like a nice celebrity.” Clearly, for some participants, Lion’s adherence to Eurocentric standards of Hollywood stardom provided her with a credibility bonus as an actor (even though she is not an actor). As Participant 19 put it, “I don’t know who Lottie Lion is but (...) I assume that she’s an actor.”

In the case of Pedrad, because of her image’s consonance with Eurocentric norms of beauty in media industries, she was almost exclusively viewed as a glamorous movie star, rather than through the prism of race, ethnicity or nationality. Indeed, on several occasions it was clear that some participants judged Pedrad to be White. When discussing Test 1, Participant 18 justified her selection of Simona Brown as “possibly for diversity... purely on diversity” but then checked herself when she realized that Pedrad is “also of an ethnic origin.” Participant 21 also justified his choice for Brown because “it’s good to have more people of color and diversity on screen. That’s probably why it was her over the other actor” – again, seemingly not registering Pedrad as a person of color. Similarly, Participant 11, who also selected Brown, shared that “obviously, the one I picked was a Black actress. So I guess, essentially, the idea of not everyone being quite so comfortable with seeing an interracial couple on screen.”

3.2.3 Race and Ethnicity: Social Justice and Tick-Box Economics

Neither in the survey nor in the interviews for the questions under analysis in this article did we explicitly ask about race or ethnicity; as stated, there is no evidence from the quantitative analysis that ethnic difference between actor and audience consistently and robustly influences audiences' casting preferences. Nevertheless, the above discourse on attractiveness anticipates how respondents – unprompted – thematized racial and ethnic difference in justifying their casting choices. As per the examples above, some interviewees openly appealed to social justice to support choosing Brown in Test 1. Participant 14 stated that “Black women are underrepresented (...) in films like this and in general. It depresses me. (...) I don't need to see another White woman.” Participant 15 also endorsed the view that “it's good to have more people of color and diversity on screen.” Other explicit acknowledgements of the role of ethnicity and race in decisions departed from a pure articulation of diversity as a moral virtue, act of social justice, or societal benefit. Participant 18 said that “diversity” was one criterion she used among other imperfect metrics (appearance, attractiveness) when awareness about professional experience or talent, her primary criterion, was unavailable.

Such interviewees tended to use economic (or even virtue-signaling) rationales, often adopting industry discourses and implying (contrary to Scott's aphorism) that casting POC actors would garner *more* financial success, often because of a belief that this would result in increased POC and international audience interest. According to Participant 17, choosing Brown was “purely a box-ticking exercise, it's another - you've got an ethnic protagonist as well.” Participant 13 explained selecting Brown as “a sort of a diversity vote for being a colored lady. Black lady. I don't know what the precise right language is, appropriate language is. But yeah, so I think people might be stirred by that.” Participant 25 acknowledged that “maybe unconsciously I was being politically correct, because the first actress is an actress of color. ... So, I might've been being a little woke on that, I suppose. [Laughter].” Participant 7, who described himself as “totally right wing,” entertained choosing Brown because “White guy, Black girl (...). could boost sales.”

These comments reveal complex and ambiguous attitudes toward racial and ethnic differences among White audiences. Some of the attitudes seemed underpinned by a genuine commitment to social justice; other attitudes appeared uninformed or cynical. Nevertheless, none of these rationales explicitly endorsed Scott's aphorism. In fact, economic rationales, of which there were several, tended to assert that POC actors would *boost* revenues. At the same time, as the quantitative analysis demonstrates, there is no consistently robust and statistically significant causal connection between the race and ethnicity of participants and the actors they preferred in the Tests. Still, triangulating the quantitative results with the qualitative results, particularly around Eurocentric standards of beauty and who has the privilege of a “credibility bonus” as an actor, show how highly racialized assumptions inflect audience casting preferences and rationales.

4. Discussion

In triangulating the two analyses contained in this study, we identified a number of crucial insights. In the first quantitative stage, the results showed that awareness and attractiveness had more influence on viewers' casting choices. This could be said both in their individual effects and when comparing against the different factors brought

into the discussion, especially if compared to the ethnicity of the viewer. However, this is not to say that ethnicity plays no role. The quantitative analysis could not find a clear pattern that could be used to conclude that White viewers in general preferred White actors; in addition, we found that other specific factors (awareness, attractiveness) tend to influence casting decisions in a stronger way. When transitioning to the second, qualitative stage in the analysis, the complexity of the findings increased considerably. The qualitative results suggest how racialized assumptions surrounding standards of White beauty and expectations about the Eurocentric appearance of actors *intersect* with discourses of attractiveness and awareness in audiences' conclusions about perceived fit of an actor to a role. Iranian-American Pedrad, who was by many perceived as a "Hollywood star," has a comparatively lighter skin tone to Brown, who is of Jamaican heritage, and Hussain, who has Bangladeshi roots. On the publicity stills we selected, Pedrad also wears her hair straight and long – a look commonly associated with White ideals of female beauty – while Brown has an afro and Hussain wears a headscarf. Biases and discrimination against especially Black women's hair are well documented.³⁶ Clearly, although most survey respondents did prefer Brown and Hussain for their respective roles, our interviewees betrayed unconscious biases about the normative appearance of "real" A-list actors. The quantitative results – men's preferences for Nasim Pedrad – were exceptions that prove the Eurocentric beauty rule. Such biases, by which Whiteness assumes a "hidden" normativity,³⁷ derive from a vicious circle (the overrepresentation of White actors means that audiences associate Whiteness with the essence of a leading actor) and can be only overcome by casting more POC actors in appropriate roles to increase awareness.

The qualitative data analysis confirmed the suggestion of Crisp et al. that mere exposure may not be uniformly unidirectional:³⁸ some participants stated wishes for mismatches or eschewed figures they felt had too much media exposure. Future studies might more fully explore the nuances of the "meritocratic impulse" by which some participants explained they avoided choosing Hussain because they knew she was not a trained actor. Meritocratic discourses often overlap with racist "color-blind" ideologies.³⁹ After all, who – in terms of race, ethnicity, class, etc. – has the luxury of attending one of the elite UK drama schools to receive such an education and springboard into the industry?

The qualitative data analysis furthermore revealed how the binary survey questions on awareness of individual actors masked a whole spectrum of awareness, which in turn influenced decision-making in complex ways. This point corresponds with theories of brand awareness in general marketing literature, for example the spectral "pyramid of awareness" proposed by Aaker,⁴⁰ by which audience awareness of a brand can range on a continuum from being top of mind, recall, recognition or unawareness. The overall spectral quality of awareness points to a larger phenomenon: that real audiences use associations with other known figures ("looks like a Kardashian") and vague or even false awareness (e.g. the Burrige outlier result, whereby respondents imagined knowing – and thus preferred – a fictitious actress) to form consumption decisions.

Like awareness, perceived attractiveness maintained a clear function in decisions. Especially when interviewees had no awareness of an actor, they admitted that the publicity stills guided their ultimate decision. In this, our study tended to buttress and extend what Lev-On & Waismel-Manor found regarding voters' preferences for

politicians about whom they had little to no information (i.e., they defaulted to perceptions of attractiveness as their criterion).⁴¹ Like awareness, attractiveness exhibited multi-directionality in some interviews – although perceived attractiveness usually figured as a positive factor in casting preferences, some interviewees reported justification where it figured as negative (and in some cases perceived *unattractiveness* was a positive), depending on the perceived suitability for the role. This finding, a contradiction of the “physical attractiveness stereotype,” tended to confirm revisionist scholarship such as that of Bassili, which found that attractiveness can degrade from a “good” to the “syndrome of glamour” and associations such as vanity, elitism, shallowness, pomposity, egotism, and excessive sexuality.⁴² The qualitative data analysis thus explained why attractiveness as a variable was not even more predictive of choice in the quantitative results.

5. Limitations, implications and future directions

This study has confirmed its hypotheses using a sample of non-US-based audiences, nuancing these findings by triangulating with qualitative data derived from a sample of non-US avid cinemagoers. Despite predictions and assumptions in some previous research (e.g. mere exposure, social identity, and social cognition theories) and widespread industry beliefs that international audiences prefer White leading actors, actor race and ethnicity exerted no statistically significant effect in our Tests; other variables, especially awareness and perceived attractiveness were indeed significant factors. We have also demonstrated that race and ethnicity nonetheless maintain a distinctive role here. Audiences imputed Eurocentric standards of beauty in what an actor should “look like.” In this more limited sense, the data presented here anticipate larger issues that we will pursue elsewhere: in particular, the economic and industry discourses that (lay audience) participants adopted in justifying their choices. These suggest that industry myths about the commercial unviability of POC lead actors are also immanent as folk myths – even as these very same participants said that they themselves would prefer a POC actor.

A key limitation of an experimental study of this nature is precisely the awareness factor: film stars and media personalities are, to an extent, apples and oranges. Film acting is a highly specialized field where practitioners accrue certain associations among audiences through (selective) knowledge of previous roles, media appearances, and publicity: even if Tom Cruise, Hugh Grant, and Brad Pitt are all White Anglo A-list “leading men,” they are not interchangeable. Furthermore, in real-life consumption situations potential viewers might examine not just a single publicity still and name but potentially an array of information sources including film posters, VOD thumbnails, trailers, and other marketing materials tailored to make the actor fit with the genre and role. In addition, the stars of a film are just one factor among many that audiences use to guide consumption. Some of these factors are intrinsic to the film itself (subject matter, genre, intellectual property), but many others derive from intermediaries (a compelling film poster, an Oscar win, or a positive review by a trusted critic) and especially social factors (word of mouth, group viewing, wanting to keep up with conversations in one’s social circle).⁴³ In crucial ways, however, these macro-issues, far from undermining our thesis, contribute to supporting it: if neither the race of the actor – nor the presence of

any actor in particular – is determinative in film consumption choices, industry elites ought to be reassured that the mere fact of casting a POC actor cannot by itself destroy commercial prospects. Indeed, investing in the promotion of a diverse array of stars could yield access to an underserved market – of POC but also avid White international audiences. The recent worldwide box office success of *Black Panther* (2018) and *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) provide anecdotal support.

Finally, this research causes us to reflect on what has and has not changed since Ridley Scott made his statement in 2014. Although lately the film industry has emitted much public relations noise about commitments to change (and one can hardly imagine industry elites publicly commenting in Scott's vein these days, for fear of being "cancelled"), the empirical production data tell a different story of persistent underrepresentation. And yet, our findings in the present study suggest that this must not be the case: diverse casting and commercial profits are not mutually exclusive.

In order to apply these research insights to industry, marketing and education are key to improving social justice in film casting by breaking out of the vicious circle: currently, mainstream White audiences may be de facto still less likely to want see a film with a POC lead, because they are less likely to have awareness of these actors. The vicious circle can transformed into a virtuous one through more proactive inclusive casting practices in mainstream cinema, and then promoting these actors properly. This was, after all, the path to international recognition for Nadiya Hussain or Idris Elba – the Black British star that interviewees, spontaneously and unprompted, frequently mentioned to illustrate their beliefs surrounding how awareness and exposure to certain actors and ethnic types might be more acceptable to the "average viewer." (Participant 12, broaching recent media discussions of casting the next James Bond, thought that a "British Muslim Asian man" as James Bond would make the franchise "take a [financial] hit compared to whether they put, you know, another White man," but thought the "average viewer" would have a much more positive reaction to a well-known Black British actor: "I think it's a spectrum as well, so I think if they put Idris Elba in it, it probably wouldn't take such a big a hit because people know him etc. quite well. ... He's kind of been in quite a few sort of big blockbuster films and people, you know, would've probably seen him in *The Wire*" [2002-2008].) Concurrently, White audiences need to be educated about unconscious biases and other mistaken assumptions rooted in systemically racist practices of the film industry, given our findings about ongoing assumptions about Eurocentric standards of beauty. Fortunately, our study demonstrates that increasing social justice in cinema is not antithetical to commercial viability and mainstream appeal.

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Disclosure Statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

Data Availability Statement

The data underlying this article cannot be shared publicly due to the privacy of individuals that participated in the study. The data will be shared on reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

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