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Article

Industry Myths Meet Folk Theories: How White Avid Film Audiences Speak about Diverse Film Casting

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Abstract

Research demonstrates how false film industry beliefs about the supposed commercial unviability of racially diverse actors have hindered racial casting equality. This article, based on thematic discourse analysis of interviews with film audiences (n = 25), reveals how such industry theories mirror folk theories among white audiences. The study identifies two key folk theories about the limits of diverse casting: the first involves politicizing “authenticity” and the second diverts social justice issues to a “law of economics.” In both discourses, audiences tend to identify with the industry and adopt its ways of speaking about imagined financial disadvantages of diverse casts. We thus conclude that industry theories and folk theories are mutually reinforcing, self-perpetuating myths used to justify the exclusion of Global Majority actors and reaffirm industry norms and white audiences’ pre-existing tastes

Keywords: casting, actors, race, Whitewashing, film audiences, film industry, race and ethnicity

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Believe me, I would have LOVED to cast Asians in the lead roles, but the truth is, we didn’t have access to any bankable Asian-American actors that we wanted.

—Dana Brunetti, producer of *21* (2008)⁴

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.

—Ridley Scott, when confronted with critique about casting white actors in his Middle East-set historical epic *Exodus* (2014)⁵

In an age of persistent inequalities of representation on screen—and a backlash against equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) initiatives—this article seeks to demonstrate how hard-wired, false assumptions about the supposed inauthenticity and unprofitability (and thus unsuitability) of ethnically diverse casts circulate among white audiences and inflect white industry stakeholders’ casting and business decisions, leading to a vicious circle of inequality.⁶

Previous research has noted how (mistaken) industry beliefs have hindered the diversity of film casting: namely, the false contention that racially diverse lead actors will generate lower revenues than white actors (i.e., are not “bankable”) because of the equally false supposition that white audiences prefer to watch films with white actors.⁷ As examples of this sort of belief, see the above epigraph quotations from Brunetti and Scott.

Such statements are founded upon a series of industry assumptions that (1) production funders will not finance a film without prospects of a return on investment and (2) Global Majority actors will not help a film

achieve a significant profit because (3) white, nonurban and international audiences would prefer to watch a film with a white lead actor. Even though study after study has demonstrated that racially diverse casts can actually *improve* financial film returns (when controlling for production and marketing budgets),⁸ why—beyond the obvious charge of systemic racism—might industry figures subscribe to such a belief?

In a series of publications,⁹ John T. Caldwell develops a framework to understand self-reflexive film and television industry discourse, which he calls “industrial screen ‘theorizing.’”¹⁰ Conducting a cultural-industrial study of Hollywood professionals including “textual analysis of trade and worker artifacts; interviews with film/television workers; ethnographic field observation of production spaces and professional gatherings; and economic/industrial analysis,”¹¹ Caldwell concludes that film workers in fact produce and maintain “critical industrial practices” and “self-ethnographic” accounts,¹² which resemble theory. These include “interpretive schemes (the ‘critical’ dimension) that are deployed within specific institutional contexts and relationships (the ‘industrial’ environment) when such activities are manifest during technical production tasks or professional interactions (labor and ‘practice’).”¹³ According to Caldwell, film

production communities themselves are cultural expressions and entities involving all of the symbolic processes and collective practices that other cultures use: to gain and reinforce identity, to forge consensus and order, to perpetuate themselves and their interests, and to interpret the media *as* audience members.¹⁴

In sum, rather than being divorced from theory, film industrial practice and discourse contain “forms of cognition” (and cognitive biases) and internal logics, and “also involve critical analysis, theoretical elaboration, and aesthetic sense making.”¹⁵ Timothy Havens has extended a similar concept, “industry lore,” to describe how (majority white) television executives discursively policed a group of African American television programs. These executives operated under false assumptions that content with white actors held “universal appeal,” while programming with Black actors held limited audience appeal (and thus financial returns), especially in European and other (majority white) international markets. For this reason, Havens shows that international circulations of African American television shows were in many cases hindered (and indeed sometimes their very viability was put into question), and at other times, they were slotted into tropes around “cultural journeys,” presuming, and aimed at, privileged white audiences.¹⁶

Caldwell’s concept and Havens’ extension to racialized contexts (which we will call “industry theories” for brevity’s sake) are first of all useful for understanding the Brunetti and Scott aphorisms above (and other similar industry beliefs surrounding the supposed economic disadvantages of diverse casting). One of Caldwell’s six key industry theories is particularly apt: in the “film and television industry most economic information, budgetary numbers and financial reports can be productively understood as lies” and “habitual tactics.”¹⁷ This is highly relevant to the study insofar as we shall see how discursive invocations of economic “rules,” “laws,” or “facts” are actually rooted in subjective gut feelings, beliefs, and heuristics. Indeed, we will conclude in this article that the concept of “industry theories” is also helpful to understand how lay audiences *outside* the industry talk about diverse casting: we contend that industry theories and (what, as we shall see, Toff and Nielsen call) audience “folk theories” about the commercial (un)viability of Global Majority actors mutually reinforce a vicious circle of exclusion, which maintains a deleterious effect on the diversity of film culture.

Research Context

There has been much valuable research into (the lack of) diversity in film casting. Regular empirical reports by USC Annenberg and by the UCLA Entertainment and Media Research Initiative have indicated that most Hollywood films underrepresent people of color in their overall casts and lead actor choices.¹⁸ In addition, and specifically in the UK context, Sarita Malik and Clive James Nwonka have decoded film policy diversity initiatives (by the British Film Institute and the UK Film Council) and their discursive resonance in the UK news media, demonstrating that the British Film Institute’s diversity policies have been ultimately ineffective

in responding to inequalities in the industry, which still exist in terms of casting and many other metrics.¹⁹ In turn, Kristen J. Warner's *Cultural Politics of Colorblind TV Casting* details how, beyond executives, white (television) casting agents also "maintain an idealistic but myopic view" of "equality of opportunity" that is ultimately based on privileged, normative white assumptions.²⁰ Casting directors associate white actors with "universal appeal" and use racialized discursive heuristics including "credibility," which, following Joseph Turow, is professionals' internalized, instinctive "perception of what most people think someone in a particular occupation or role will look like."²¹ (We will see how audiences echo these discursive logics, both in their invocations of "credibility" and "authenticity," and in their own implications of what imagined "most people" would think or like.)

These are all valuable studies, in particular for the way in which they contextualize and illuminate (the practical effects of) diversity initiatives (across the industry, from production companies to government-subsidized film cultural bodies, funders, and award-granting associations). They provide the essential context for understanding the empirical state of casting diversity, and how diversity initiatives have become tools of (and battlegrounds for) larger neoliberal imperatives. None, however, focuses squarely on the problematics of white film audiences.

Indeed, most previous research into audience preferences for casting racially diverse actors has been purely quantitative in nature and produced mixed results. Andrew Weaver found that the skin color of actors was not significant for audiences' motivation to view a film across most genres, with the exception of romantic films, where white audiences preferred white leads to Black or interracial couples.²² Katherine Aumer and her collaborators found preferences for white actors and Whitewashing only vis-à-vis Asian actors, but not other races.²³ Andrew Weaver and Jessica Frampton found that whites were more likely to be interested in majority-Black films if they saw other white people recommending them on social media.²⁴ As quantitative studies, by design they do not probe deeply into participants' expressed reasoning for their preferences and their rationales for their beliefs; it is also notable that almost all research in this area has been performed in the United States and on convenience samples of university students, a bias that provides a very specific understanding of the effects of race and ethnicity on media consumption.²⁵

Why do we focus in this article on audiences and specifically on white audiences' reception? We believe the importance of this study extends beyond simply filling a gap in scholarship. We seek an applied dimension to the conclusions of this research. Industry myths and lore—articulated by production, funding, and distribution workers and masterfully dissected by Caldwell, Havens, Warner, and beyond—rest on (false) assumptions about white (and especially white ex-urban and international) audience tastes, which then have real-world effects because of (casting, funding, and distribution) decisions made in the cognizance that these white audiences will in turn motor demand and thus returns on investment. Examining white audience discourse, how these people actually speak and grapple with diverse casting in their own language, can help us peel back, nuance, and directly counter industry myths about the unviability of Global Majority actors.

In 2021, we conducted a mixed-method audience study, including a quantitative analysis of a survey ($n = 287$) and a qualitative analysis of interviews ($n = 25$) of a sample of film consumers from Southeast England, purposively targeting higher-frequency viewers, before then embarking on a broader follow-up survey across the United Kingdom ($n = 1,071$).²⁶ In this article, we delve deeper by shifting to a purely qualitative analysis of a portion of the interviews that we have not reported on hitherto. Specifically, our inductive research questions are: How do white film audiences speak about (their preferences for) racially diverse film casting? In particular, what limits or obstacles do they see to casting more Global Majority actors in lead roles?

Our analysis identified two key folk theories that dominate participants' discourse about the limits of diverse casting. The first surrounds "politicizing authenticity" (often articulated around a slippery-slope rhetorical question such as "Can only Welsh play Welsh?"). And the second diverts social justice issues to a "law of economics" (articulated in statements like "actors want to pay their mortgage" or "producers want familiar people ... that can draw audiences in, which tend to be white actors"), by which diverse casting, while perhaps desirable for social justice reasons, must yield to questions of financial viability. (For reasons of space, we report on only the first of these here.) In both of these discourses, we find that audiences tend to identify with industry and adopt its ways of speaking about the supposed unviability of racially diverse casts.

We thus conclude that industry theories and folk theories are mutually reinforcing, self-perpetuating myths used to justify the exclusion of Global Majority actors and to reaffirm industry norms and white audiences' pre-existing tastes.

Methodological Approach

To answer our research questions, we conducted an empirical audience study: qualitative thematic analysis of interviews with twenty-five film-consuming members of the public in Southeast England. On account of the small sample size—and squarely in the tradition of qualitative audience research—our goal in analyzing the interviews was not to come to generalizable claims. Rather, our purpose was to answer our inductive research questions and use this rich data to triangulate, deepen, explore, and explain. Probing deeply, we sought to illustrate how real audiences speak about this issue.

In this article, we use the concept of “folk theory” as part of our theoretical approach to analyzing audience discourse. Following on from research into lay conceptualizations of science, Benjamin Toff and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen have extended the notion of “folk theories” to speak about people’s beliefs about media. Specifically, they define folk theories as “the culturally available symbolic resources that people use to make sense of their own media and information practices.”²⁷ This approach, by providing “important insight, not narrowly into what people do with media, but into what it means,”²⁸ helps us understand how lay audiences express beliefs about diverse casting in ways beyond proving or disproving the veracity of audiences’ utterances. Indeed, folk theories (like scientific theories) “offer generalized notions, distinct from fact and practice, which purport to capture patterns durable enough so that no single experience or piece of evidence will typically falsify them decisively.”²⁹ Folk theories “sometimes complement each other, sometimes exist in tension with each other, and sometimes contradict each other.”³⁰ (We will often see how the very same white participant offered a contradictory folk theory, according to the circumstance, to explain why Global Majority actors should be excluded from a role.) We see these discourses as ways that audiences—in particular engaged, high-frequency film viewers—accumulate and interpret information they receive from watching films but furthermore consuming entertainment news, publicity and advertising, critics’ reviews, gossip or cinephile magazines, internet sites (from IMDb to blogs), word of mouth from clued-in friends, and so on. These users assimilate this information to arrive at their own idioms and understandings, which often mix facts with fiction, rumor, and subjective assumptions. Nevertheless, these folk theories reflect how real users talk about, and understand, attitudes toward diverse casting. It is our contention that, on the issue of diverse casting at least, folk theories and industry theories merge and commingle, producing a vicious circle by which—although both industry and lay audiences submit that they would prefer to see more racially diverse actors in films—casting Global Majority actors is seen as unprofitable to imagined others, “unenlightened white bigots” that our white audiences again and again invoked or implied as likely making up a significant portion of the public.

A Note on Terms

Why do we use the word “race” in this study when we acknowledge that race exists as a social construct, not as a biological fact? We follow Anamik Saha here in using the term with the understanding that “while race itself is an empty signifier ... it nevertheless contributes to the unequal stratification of society.” He continues: “Put more simply, while a social construct, ‘race’ still produces real, material effects.”³¹ Racial categories inflect the counting and measuring that underpin industry diversity initiatives (and academic research) regarding casting; racialized assumptions (about genres, roles, and so on) underlie industry assumptions and, as we shall see, audience tastes. “Race” thus figures as an important structuring principle and concept in the industry with real material effects, via casting decisions, on the careers and livelihoods of individual actors, producing inequalities in aggregate. Furthermore, in what follows, we use specific ethnic descriptors wherever possible and applicable; when we need to describe group experiences or communities, in line with the BFI Race Equality Network, we use the term “Global Majority” as a way to decolonize language in a way that is a more accurate illustration of global diversity.

Research Design

After piloting on a group of students to ensure deception and useability, in April–May 2021 we sent out a link to a seventy-five-question survey designed for quantitative analysis of the mailing list of a cinema in Southeast England ($N = 14,000$); the response rate was 2.05 percent ($n = 287$). (These results are reported elsewhere.) From the survey sample, we recruited twenty-five participants for semi-structured interviews,³² the basis for our analysis here. Interviews took place in June and July 2021. Conducted by a research assistant, they lasted between 24 and 70 (mean 46.24, median 46) minutes and were audio-recorded, transcribed, and then coded thematically.

The interview sample ($n = 25$) included fourteen female and eleven male respondents. In terms of race, twenty-two identified as white, one Asian, one mixed-race, and one another ethnicity.³³ The ages of participants skewed older: two participants were in the 25–34 years range, six were between 35 and 44 years, four were between 45 and 54 years, six were aged between 55 and 64 years, four belonged to the 65–74 years bracket, and three were older than 75 years. Most respondents (sixteen) reported having no religion; eight identified as Christian, and one as Buddhist. In terms of education level, one had completed secondary school; three had trade, technical, or vocational training, and one had some university experience; the majority had completed a bachelor's degree (thirteen), master's degree (three), or doctorate (four).

By design (i.e., in seeking out participants from a pool of cinema mailing list subscribers), we sought out a purposive sample of higher-than-average film viewers. Why? Although it is theoretically interesting to elicit the views of the ca. 13 percent of the UK population who say they hardly ever or never watch films, because of the potential applications of our research—to dispel myths about white audiences' supposed antipathy to racially diverse casts and to advise the industry of how real film consumers actually speak about these matters—we sought out the views of those individuals who actually form the core market demand for films. And indeed, our interviewees' media use was well above average. Only two respondents said they hardly ever or never go to the cinema in a “typical year,” fourteen attended four to eight times per year, six said they went two to three times per month, one attended about once per week, and one participant said they attended more than once per week. To put these numbers into context, in 2019 the average annual cinema attendance in the United Kingdom was 2.7 and the Southeast England region was in line with this figure: 2.8.³⁴ Most respondents were also heavy users of VOD (video on demand) services; two used VOD services every day, while an additional sixteen reported streaming media once a week or more; only four reported streaming two to three times per month, one said four to eight times per year, and one said one to two times per year. Overall, our sample was not out of line with the demographic characteristics that one would expect from the audience of a regional independent cinema in the United Kingdom. Research into the sector found the market to be disproportionately older, more white, and of the higher (ABC1) social classes than both the UK general population and general cinema audience.³⁵

The sample we use here addresses three key gaps in scholarship. First, our sample from Southeast England cinemagoers complements previous studies of ethnic casting preferences among majority white audiences, which have for the most part focused on US-based convenience samples of undergraduate students. Second, as stated, the specific higher-consuming group we targeted represents a crucial audience for industry—after all, the top 10 percent of film consumers (“avids”) constitute over 50 percent of revenue and thus, based on their heavy consumption, disproportionately determine films' commercial success.³⁶ Third, as implied in industry beliefs, this particular demographic (older, white, atheist or Christian, and non-United States) 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 the industry assumes might be disinclined to watch films with lead Global Majority actors and uses this assumption to justify the exclusion of actors of color.

Politicizing Authenticity: Folk Theories of the Limits of Racially Diverse Film Casting

One of the most striking themes in the analysis of interviews revolved around the politicization of the term “authenticity” and associated terms (“credibility”). In the interviews, the usages and meanings of “authenticity” and “credibility” shifted to become a battleground (also of deflection, diversion, or absence) for various beliefs surrounding ethnicity and casting in relation to film generic traditions or fidelity to written

historical records. These beliefs emerged often spontaneously, seemingly digressing from the interviewer's explicit questions and prompts, diverting the conversation to intervene in current media debates.

Summing up the nuances of this folk theory, which ranged across the ideological spectrum, participants variously (1) argued that social justice casting should be limited when it worked to erase the historical reality of racism; (2) advocated for a situational form of colorblind casting that respected the tradition of cinematic vernaculars (i.e., genres such as Westerns); (3) propounded that diversity should be subordinated to historical authenticity for the purpose of audience pleasure/suspending disbelief; or (4) submitted that diverse casting represents tokenistic political correctness gone amok.

Social justice casting should be limited when it works to erase the historical reality of racism

Pleas for "authentic" racial representation of public figures or respect to historical conditions and events sometimes took on left-wing guises. For example, Participant 22 contended that colorblind casting in historical films (or even pseudo-historical settings such as the *Lord of the Rings* franchise or *Game of Thrones* [2011–2019]) could sanitize history and thus encourage some to believe that racism and sexism were not facets of life for much of human history: "I don't know, I go back to that being realistic sort of thing. Not that those stereotypes are realistic," but certain genres and settings called for preserving authenticity in order to be both credible to audiences and faithful to the norms of the times. "I feel like when *Game of Thrones* came out, a lot of people were saying that it was quite sexist because it degraded women, and yes, sure some scenes it probably did." She continued,

but the fact that it was supposed to be in a medieval-inspired setting, that is what it was like back then. So, I feel like you shouldn't just try and block out all the bad stuff and try and remove it from history, because it was history and we've learnt from it.

This view has also been articulated by some industry elites.³⁷

Colorblind casting should respect cinematic vernacular traditions

Perhaps the most common rationale among the interview sample was a plea for a *limited, situational* form of colorblind casting, with criteria that respected prior norms: in particular, forms of casting ethnicities of actors that varied based on genre and that in participants' words, maintained "authenticity" and "credibility." These participants typically differentiated between genres where colorblind casting was desirable or at least tolerable, and other genres, in particular period or historical films, where they felt colorblind casting was jarring (suspending belief in the narrative) or otherwise inappropriate. For Participant 7, "I think probably in a sort of a *Fast and Furious* film, it doesn't matter who's driving the Ferrari. Yeah. Just providing they look good," the interviewee said, invoking attractiveness as a more important criterion in contemporary settings and Hollywood action films. Participant 6 hoped that incidents such as Scott eschewing casting a local actor in his historical epic *Exodus* were "changing," diverting the conversation to argue a different point:

Because I, I'm not sure about colorblind casting, just because in, in some, particularly in historical roles. I'm not sure that that works. But certainly in contemporary roles, I think it should be absolutely colorblind. And it should just be, it doesn't matter whether you're black or pink, or yellow or whatever. It's all part of, you know, life's tapestry, and different people can be different things.

Although this respondent feels that colorblind casting in contemporary films should be a goal, she asserts the need for authenticity in films set in the past. For Participant 3, similarly, "it depends on the film. I think if it is a pure escapism, fantasy, fun type film, I think most actors can be relatively credible. But I think if it's a more in-depth plot, and it looks what somebody perceives to be out of character, right?" She deemed "somebody who obviously presents as a Muslim" to be inappropriate for a role as a hard drinker in *Whiskey Galore* (1949/2016): "you wouldn't necessarily associate a Muslim person being in that community, being part of that culture." The participant's implied understanding that alcohol consumption is forbidden (*haram*) in Islam renders a Muslim actor inhabiting this storyworld incredible.

Diversity should be subordinated to historical authenticity for the purpose of audience pleasure

Participants often gestured to a larger imperative and prioritization: diversity must yield to “historical authenticity” so as to preserve audience “credibility.” For these white participants, casting Global Majority actors is only credible (and thus acceptable) when it does not challenge audience expectations about (mediated) history.

Time and again, respondents spontaneously invoked the media discussions surrounding the casting of Jodie Turner-Smith in the Channel 5 miniseries *Anne Boleyn* (2021) to signal irritation or displeasure about colorblind casting and “shoehorning” Global Majority actors into roles in which they played historical figures who were, in fact, white. The program had premiered on Channel 5 on 1 June 2021 (about 4–5 weeks before the interviews took place) and elicited considerable media attention. The high-circulation right-wing tabloid *Daily Mail* programmatically titled a story on the reception “Anne Boleyn Was a Straight, White Female,” airing the grievances of Twitter users as well as actor and right-wing broadcaster Laurence Fox’s complaint that the “Diversity agenda is racism.”³⁸

A few of the participants who spontaneously broached the Channel 5 program used it as an extreme example—it represented the limits of their tolerance for colorblind casting because it tested their credulity. For these respondents, *Anne Boleyn* was something new that they would need “time” to process because of longstanding industry norms that Global Majority actors typically do not play white historical figures (even if there is a long tradition of Whitewashing: white actors playing non-white historical figures, such as John Wayne as Genghis Khan in *The Conqueror* [1956] or Alec Guinness as Prince Faisal in *Lawrence of Arabia* [1962]). Admitting he had not actually viewed the program, Participant 7 said he thought

it would take me a bit of time to get over the fact that ... one of Henry the Eight’s wives. It would take me a bit of, bit of time to appreciate that that the woman playing this wasn’t, wasn’t white, a white medieval woman. Yeah. So in a sense, there’s a bit of sort of credibility.

Similarly, Participant 24 thought the Anne Boleyn case, even if she did not “fancy” it, provoked her to self-reflect on casting norms and her own preconceptions:

Then again, it depends on the part too, doesn’t it? What was it, they did *Anne Boleyn* with a Black actress, and you just think, “Oh, that is a bit ...” That sort of makes you kind of stop, because you think, “But she was not Black.” But then you think, “Well there have been loads of white actors that have played Black characters,” and nobody ever stops and thinks, “Oh ...” But it is still unusual to see it, because it is not done that often. So it is not to say that it is wrong, but it makes you stop and think. I mean, I just did not fancy the *Anne Boleyn* thing, but I do not think it would have been because it was a Black actress playing Anne Boleyn. I do not know. I do not think so.

Other participants were more forthright in their rejection of colorblind casting in period productions for a supposed lack of authenticity. According to Participant 9 [emphasis added],

I’m sorry if this makes me racist, I’d have to take it, but I hope I’m not. I think it was something like Anne Boleyn. There’s some series on television. And a Black actress playing Anne Boleyn. And I, my immediate reaction is “Oh, come on.” You know, that’s really a bit much. *It’s just not true. Not credible.*

She continued:

The story of Henry the Eighth and Anne Boleyn and repackage it in a different era, with Black actors? Yes, that’s great. But saying this Black person is Anne Boleyn *is just not credible*. And I wouldn’t watch it because I just think it’s, it’s a waste of talent. Really. So yeah, shoehorning. No, that that doesn’t do anyone any favours, I don’t think.

The repeated use of the words “not credible” or “not true” by Participant 9 and others (e.g., Participant 12’s use of “authenticity”) hints at how the *Anne Boleyn* comments fed a larger theme: for several participants,

perceived “authenticity” outweighs the importance of diversity. Overall, participants’ discomfort with the *Anne Boleyn* case represented attempts to place limits and borderlines between historical authenticity (and credible representations of white historical figures), on the one hand, and diversity and social justice casting, on the other. These participants relegated casting diversity below a larger imperative: “authenticity,” which did not necessarily signify historical truth or accuracy in any meaningful way. Rather, they desired a faithfulness to *industry norms*, the sorts of characters and narratives that corresponded to their pre-conceived picture of what the past looked like: less what they learned at school in history books but rather their lived media memories.

Diverse casting should not be tokenistic or undertaken for politically correct purposes

Several interviewees gestured explicitly to the dangers of tokenism and the harm of well-intentioned diversity agendas. Participant 11 agreed that stereotypes of ethnic minorities were a problem and praised recent Disney films such as the live-action *Aladdin* (2019) and *Mulan* (2020) for making strides in this regard, but then offered:

But I think there is a general problem of typecasting, like the opposite of typecasting, where you’re kind of almost changing history in facts by getting the wrong type of person to portray the wrong [part]. I think it should be better and *we should be getting, getting the right person for the right place* [emphasis added].

The phrase “the right person” or “the best fit” featured across responses: for example, “I think there’s another danger of just falling into being too politically correct. If somebody is the *best fit for the job*, for that role, it’s a shame that people aren’t more color blind” (Participant 19). Participant 11 opined that “You should be looking to *get the right, the right person to fill the actual position*” [emphasis added]. In turn, Participant 13 ventured, using yet another meaning of the word “authentic”:

it doesn’t do anybody any good to be ticking some quota. If the film isn’t doesn’t work, so. So you know, whether, you know, James Bond, what’s his name? Ali? Who’s the, who’s the guy who plays Luther? [Interviewer: Idris Elba.] Yeah, yeah. So I know, he was rumored as being a contender. And, and that would make sense because he is a good actor. But *their ability to be able to inhabit the role and play it authentically is, is far more important than taking some sort of criteria of allocation and forced, forced diversity* [emphasis added].

It is difficult to pinpoint what these participants mean when they say the “right person” (and it is conceivable that each means something slightly different). (Participant 11 sought, above all, the “right person” for the part; in the words of Participant 7, his preferred casting “really depends on how that particular actor fits the plot.”) But when respondents couple this term with “forced diversity” or similar phrases, it is difficult not to conclude that they believe that a talented *white* actor should prevail. Indeed, this seemed to be the point that Participant 18 was making—in the guise of supporting gay actors:

But then does that mean that gay actors can’t go up for straight parts because if you’re going to do it one way, you’ve got to do it back the other way. Therefore, then a lot of actors wouldn’t get jobs that were great actors and right for the part.

This comment, and others like it, seemed to express anxieties about a zero-sum game of identity politics, whereby supporting social justice casting could result in many well-trained and talented (white/straight/male) actors losing their livelihood. These white respondents revealed a struggle with changing norms. Although often in favor of casting diverse actors in principle, they simultaneously perceived diversity as a loss for their in-group.

It is important to emphasize how tensions and contradictions punctuated this folk theory. On the one hand, participants explicitly advocated “the best actor” (pure talent, regardless of color or appearance). On the other, however, they wanted the “right person” or “right fit.” They implied, in other words, that the authenticity of ethnic background and appearance is in fact very important. In this way, “authenticity” was often a one-way street for participants. White respondents argued that, for the sake of historical authenticity, white actors should play white historical figures. And yet there were many passages where the same

respondents argued for the opposite case: authentic casting for Global Majority or LGBT and other historically excluded characters was going too far.

Participants voiced this sentiment in a remarkably similar language. They tended to gesture to a “slippery slope” where unchecked political correctness might lead. Respondents highlighted what they felt to be an absurd endpoint to diversity campaigners’ focus on “authentic representation” (here yet another meaning of the word “authentic,” a consonance between the identity and lived experience of the actor with the character they are playing) over “imaginative transformation.” The latter has traditionally constituted a mark of artistic success and acting craftsmanship for white men, as exemplified in Academy Award wins or nominations for Dustin Hoffman playing as autistic man in *Rain Man* (1998), Eddie Redmayne playing a transwoman in *The Danish Girl* (2015), or Tom Hanks or Eddie Redmayne playing disabled men in *Forrest Gump* (1994) and *The Theory of Everything* (2014), respectively, and so on.

These formulations often took the form of rhetorical questions. For instance, Participant 18 asked: “Should you only cast Welsh people for a Welsh film? Should you only cast people from Newcastle for a film set in Newcastle? This is an area that we’re definitely going into.” She continued, broaching media debates about authentic representation and imaginative transformation:

Whether actors should *act* or whether actors should *be*. I think that’s a tricky area... . whether actors are able to cross lines because what we, as in actors, was able to be done at one point is no longer seen as correct. But then where does it go back to? Should only gay actors play gay parts?

Participant 15 saw a similar slippery slope, articulating a series of metaphors that suggested a circumscribed freedom of artistic expression:

we’re going down a tunnel and painting ourselves into a corner, where you can’t ... in the future, would you be allowed to [depict] a Black person if you’re not Black? ... We’re getting to a situation where you can’t make a film about Black people unless you’re Black and that is really, really redundant.

She continued: “I also don’t want to live in a world where directors are forced to only have gay people playing gay characters or only have disabled people playing... . I mean, it’s called acting.” Like the *Anne Boleyn* or Idris Elba/James Bond comments, participants here also reflect their discomfort through the lens of current media debates: in this context, several participants cited the comments of the Channel 4 series *It’s a Sin* (2021) director Russell T. Davies. Davies attracted media attention for his statement in an interview that, in the name of authenticity, only gay actors should play gay characters, comparing heterosexuals acting gay to blackface.³⁹

Overall, these comments gesture to and explain the logic behind participants’ seemingly contradictory folk theory: total authenticity for white roles but pure economics for non-whites. As a succinct illustration, see the comments of Participant 7, who had earlier cited authenticity as his reason for preferring a white actor for the role of Anne Boleyn. When discussing authenticity in racially diverse contexts, however, he contradicted his earlier point, saying that “cinema isn’t life and whilst cinema may reflect life, depending upon the film and the script and the actors, it’s still celluloid.” These countervailing opinions are suggestive for several reasons. First, such comments fit into a larger scholarly discussion about the needs of taste communities—in particular, white British middle-class cinema audiences. Claire Monk has detailed in an empirical audience study of two contrasting audiences of historical films how one of these audiences (a sample drawn from National Trust members of largely older, white, ex-urban period film fans) was especially attuned to matters of authenticity and accuracy in their viewing and enjoyment.⁴⁰ Second, the disregard of authenticity demonstrated above in cases of Global Majority actors playing white historical figures (or even roles, such as cowboys in Westerns, that are not strictly historical) complicates this picture. In these cases, our participants resorted to notions of “credibility” (i.e., norms and expectations) and expressed economic anxieties about talented white/straight/male actors losing work to place limits on authenticity.

Discussion: On the Possibility of Change

This last criterion anticipates the second key folk theory we determined from the interviews: white participants often thought principles of diverse casting should subordinate ideals of social justice to economic considerations. We called this the “law of economics,” summed up in statements such as “actors want to pay their mortgage” or “producers want familiar people ... that can draw the audiences in, which tend to be white actors.” Although we do not have the space to present our analysis here, a key feature underwriting this folk theory was a resigned disbelief in the possibility of change in the film industry regarding diversity and casting. In both folk theories then, competing views on human agency in the film industry provided an important subtext. As a way to discuss the implications of the above results, let us briefly broach this subtext.

Although some participants believed there was “nothing to be done”—or indeed believed that the industry has changed already too much with colorblind casting, tokenism, political correctness, and so on—many expressed rosier views on the possibility of industry change.

Participants’ positive ways of speaking about change in some instances clung to the imperatives of industry theories such as Brunetti’s and Scott’s aphorisms. According to Participant 8,

I can see that financially speaking, that will be a fact. They will never say as much, producers in the backroom, but that would be in the back of their mind or front of them when. You know, it’s very, very hard, it’s hard for people of color to get decent parts, [but] it’s getting better.

Participant 9, who thought that Scott’s statement is “a truth or a truism” but did not agree with it, evinced an array of attitudes toward the potential for change within a single response (including an echo of Brunetti’s “bankable” aphorism):

I think the only way you can do it is by showing that people, people different from what we’ve been bombarded with previously, can do just as good a job. It is. Yeah. Yeah, you go back to things like *Lawrence of Arabia*, and Alec Guinness, sort of blacked up. And you know, this ain’t right. This ain’t right. There are Indian actors, but very few. So they’re very familiar. And that can hamper in a film. So, yeah, we need more. *It’s just a vicious circle, isn’t it?* We need more of a pool of actors who are bankable, as they say, from all sorts of, you know, ethnic backgrounds. *[Emphasis added.]*

Despite her belief in the vicious circle of excluding Global Majority actors, she continued to suggest that, as a believer in the potential for change, casting would also become more diverse and less stereotypical in future:

I’m a great believer that change in like, you know, women’s rights and in, you know, equal opportunities for racial groups. Well, they’ve given it enough of a try. People say, “oh, we mustn’t push it, it will happen naturally.” Well, you know, it hasn’t happened naturally over the last 80–90 years. So it’s probably not going to is it? You’ve got to do positive discrimination.

Directly thereafter, however, she evinced her own discomfort with the pace of change, especially worrying that many “average viewers” would respond poorly and create a “backlash.” This response is a complex portrait of a participant negotiating with her own ideals of social justice, her anxious feelings about changing norms, and projecting worries that imagined others—other, unnamed, less racially conscious whites, that is—remain less open to change (than she purports to be) and might arrest or reverse progress:

I think somebody’s slightly over-egging it on, on adverts and things now, because they [seem] very disproportionate to the makeup of the country at the moment. And I’m thinking, I worry, there’s going to be a backlash, that people who think like that are going to think, well, what I’m seeing on television is like 90% Black, Indian, whatever, people in adverts, and they are, that’s going to reinforce their view, that there are this many people and they think it’s a bad thing of different ethnic origin in the country. And it’s not, but then you are going to have to do some positive discrimination to change things. So yeah, I’m afraid I think Ridley Scott [is] sadly, probably right there. And that’s what’s wrong with Hollywood.

Recent empirical studies of production diversity belie these beliefs about change, however. Even if some white audiences are reaching their limit about what they feel to be the norms and proper proportions of Global Majority participation in the film industry, reports have demonstrated that serious inequalities still exist. The Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, which examined the top hundred grossing films annually between

2007 and 2023, found that, despite much positive industry public relations about more inclusivity, there is little improvement in diverse casting representation.⁴¹ Studies of the inclusion of individual groups such as Muslims, Asians, and Pacific Islanders or the diversity of directors, producers, film music composers, screenwriters, and film critics demonstrate a similarly problematic overall picture.⁴² There have been reports that recently hired diverse studio executives are now leaving the industry⁴³ and—equally troubling in the light of our research—that Hollywood is doubling down on its old theories that white audiences motor demand in the industry and that these “red state” audiences do not want any whiff of diverse casting, same-sex relationships, or troubling themes like climate change on screen.⁴⁴ In some ways, the rhetoric of some of our participants (voiced in the summer of 2021) about colorblind casting going too far and being politically correct presaged the open “anti-woke” rhetoric of the Conservatives under Kemi Badenoch and the meteoric political rise of Reform UK in 2024–2025, not to mention the dismantling (or renaming) of corporate EDI initiatives, also in the media and communications sectors, in the wake of the 2025 Donald Trump presidential inauguration in America.

In this article, we have detailed examples that demonstrate the limits of white audience demand for racially diverse casting. But these elements of illustrative context should not cloud our survey finding (an experimental study in which audiences were asked to provide casting preferences for a—fictitious—film) reported elsewhere⁴⁵ that, overall, white audiences in the main survey sample (or interview subsample for that matter) were hardly uniformly opposed to change in casting norms. The portrait that has emerged in the follow-up interviews we analyze here is complex, displaying a shifting landscape and individuals often conflicted about changing casting norms. (And, of course, despite our efforts to mitigate—including framing the study as one on “Audience Tastes” rather than one on race or diversity, embedding direct questions on casting diversity after and among other more oblique follow-up queries on the survey and film choice, and hiring a young, white British PhD student research assistant to conduct the interviews—general caveats obtain about social desirability bias that can be displayed in interview settings, particularly on sensitive and emotive topics over which there is broad debate and no uniform societal consensus.)

In the interviews, whose participants skewed older, the younger members of the sample were more comfortable talking explicitly about race and often broached the topic unprompted, sometimes using phrases like “unconscious bias,” “confirmation bias,” or “systematic racism.” In turn, the older members usually proved themselves aware of current debates surrounding social justice in the news media but were more likely to exhibit colorblind discourses about racism (e.g., Participant 9: “it doesn’t matter whether you’re black or pink, or yellow or whatever”). Tyrone Forman and Amanda Lewis define the key tenets of colorblind racist discourse:

(1) most people do not even notice race anymore; (2) racial parity has for the most part been achieved; (3) any persistent patterns of racial inequality are the results of individual and/or group-level shortcomings rather than structural ones; (4) most people do not care about racial differences; and (5) therefore, there is no need for institutional remedies (such as affirmative action) to redress persistent racialized outcomes.⁴⁶

It is not too long ago that colorblind discourses informed how race and discrimination were taught in Western democracies including the United Kingdom: treat everyone the same. And indeed, Warner has demonstrated how a pseudo-meritocratic colorblind ideology underpins industry “best-man-for-the-part” rationales for the lack of Global Majority casting.⁴⁷ Among primetime television casting agents and showrunners, Warner shows that “credibility”—the “right look”, i.e., the caster’s perception of what the average viewer would imagine someone in that particular role or occupation to look like—becomes a justification for industry elites to “continue to churn out predominantly white-casted programs, as if the powers that be have no alternative.”⁴⁸ Our interviews demonstrate that such views are not only propounded by professionals; audiences espouse remarkably similar discursive logics.

Older study participants thus used the learned resources of their own past generation’s consensus on race—but also industry theory—to think through today’s public issues and media debates, even if scholars⁴⁹ have shown how colorblind discourses are themselves a part of systematic racism in film culture: the view

imagines a level playing field and thus absolves institutions like the film industry, instead shifting the onus of breaking barriers onto individual actors. Most of the tenets of colorblind racist discourse, as defined by Forman and Lewis, abounded in our participants' responses and folk theories.

The belief that only older viewers in Britain are resistant to watching diverse actors, expressed by some interviewees, may or may not be specious. But it is clear (from older participants' resistance to the changed cultural consensus on Whitewashing and their insistence on the "authenticity" of white actors playing white historical figures) that the norms that the industry is challenging these days in cases like *Anne Boleyn* will no doubt reset the horizon of expectations that many younger viewers have.

Ronald Inglehart's longitudinal, multinational studies on how beliefs in tolerance and equality between ethnic groups arise within stable societies over time would foresee that more positive attitudes toward diverse casting will increase as older generations die out.⁵⁰ In the meantime, however, it may be that economics, and in particular the industry theory that many white viewers in the sample subscribed to, may be a more powerful motor of change in the medium term. Casting more Global Majority actors will spur heightened awareness, which we have demonstrated quantitatively elsewhere, tends to stoke demand. At scale, taking this first step would break the current vicious circle and create a virtuous circle. Even the most conservative participant in our study, Participant 7, who called himself "totally right wing" and said that a positive *Guardian* review would make him *less* likely to watch that film, advocated casting Asian and Black actors on economic grounds—to appeal to global audiences. In a numerically exaggerated assessment, he made the case for diverse casting to help Hollywood rein in global audiences by meeting their demand for well-known local actors. He said

China's got 9 billion potential cinema goers, and, you know, you pick it up with, you know, the South, the sort of the Asian countries. So clearly, you know, I'm sure that everybody in an Asian country would like to see an Asian actor, or an Asian actress, and just as Bollywood with Indian actors.

Some might find such views disingenuous or cynical, hardly derived from principled moral stances on diversity and inclusion. Nevertheless, such arguments—made by a lay audience member thinking and speaking through the appropriated aims and motives of industry theory—might actually help achieve what social justice campaigners seek: more representative casting through heightened awareness of racially diverse actors, which our overall project shows is a key driver of demand.

This article has demonstrated how many higher-frequency film audiences, through their engagement with not only films but also wider film culture (news, promotion, adverts, user forums, and so on), have internalized industry discourses and norms about race and the "credibility" and "authenticity" of certain casting decisions. In this way, we have seen the convergence of Caldwell's "industry theories" and Toff and Nielsen's "folk theories." Although each of these concepts takes implicit note of audiences (e.g., Caldwell's recognition that film workers also interpret media "as audience members") or industry/advertising, respectively, our findings here suggest that the connection between these two may be far closer than previously imagined.

We have shown how industry theories and folk theories mirror each other and use one another as justification, hastening an echo chamber of assumptions, which both industry elites and audiences deploy to confirm their own tastes about film and biases about out-groups, and to foreclose the possibility of social change. Here we have dwelled upon how this circle can be vicious, perpetuating myths such as Brunetti's and Scott's contentions that funders will not finance a film without a white A-list actor (because of industry elites' belief, in turn, that mass audiences will not be interested in seeing a film with a lesser-known Global Majority actor). But we submit that the circle of industry and folk theories can be redirected to a virtuous one, whereby the industry introduces new norms of casting, makes audiences aware of exciting diverse talent, and breaks stereotypes as a way to not only enliven old narrative formulas but also benefit commercially.

Notes

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4. MANAA, “Controversy Surrounds DVD Release of Movie *21*,” 23 July 2008, <https://manaa.org/archives/157>. See also Christina Shu Jien Chong, “Where are the Asians in Hollywood? Can §1981, Title VII, Colorblind Pitches, and Understanding Biases Break the Bamboo Ceiling?” *Asian Pacific American Law Journal* 21, no. 1 (2016): 29–79, here 30. [↑](#)
5. Quoted in Scott Foundas, “Exodus: Gods and Kings’ Director Ridley Scott on Creating His Vision of Moses,” *Variety*, November 25, 2014. [↑](#)
6. Authors’ note: Mattias Frey (60%) co-designed the methodological approach, co-designed the interview schedule and data collection procedure, performed the qualitative analysis and wrote up the results. Dieter Declercq (35%) co-designed the methodological approach, co-designed the interview schedule and data collection procedure and undertook a significant part of the data processing. Guillermo Reyes Pascual (5%) informed the methodological approach and performed the quantitative analysis, whose results informed our overall approach to the qualitative part reported on here. The authors thank David Brown, whose excellent research assistance included conducting the interviews for this study, and the anonymous participants, who took the time to share their valuable lived experiences for this study. [↑](#)
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9. John T. Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008); John T. Caldwell, “Screen Studies and Industrial ‘Theorizing,’” *Screen* 50, no. 1 (2009): 167–179. [↑](#)
10. Caldwell, “Screen Studies,” 167. [↑](#)
11. Caldwell, *Production Culture*, 4. [↑](#)
12. Caldwell, *Production Culture*, 5. [↑](#)
13. Caldwell, *Production Culture*, 5–6. [↑](#)
14. Caldwell, *Production Culture*, 2. [↑](#)
15. Caldwell, *Production Culture*, 7. [↑](#)
16. Timothy Havens, *Black Television Travels: African American Media around the Globe* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 2–8. Havens (p. 7) uses the term “African American television” to “refer to series that make consistent reference to African American political, thematic, or cultural concerns. I make this definition intentionally broad in order to allow us to explore the widest possible diversity of trade routes suggested by the history of U.S. exports.” [↑](#)
17. Caldwell, “Screen Studies,” 174. [↑](#)
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28. Toff and Nielsen, “‘I Just Google It,’” 637. [↑](#)
29. Toff and Nielsen, “‘I Just Google It,’” 639. [↑](#)
30. Toff and Nielsen, “‘I Just Google It,’” 639. [↑](#)
31. Anamik Saha, *Race, Culture and Media* (London: Sage, 2021), 7. [↑](#)
32. The survey contained a final optional question that prompted participants, should they wish to further take part in a follow-up interview on their tastes in film, to provide their email address. A total of 134 participants left their contact details and—after removing from consideration those individuals who correctly guessed that the true intention of the survey (which was billed to be about “audience tastes” regarding which actors a production company should cast for an upcoming film) was indeed having to do race or diversity—we contacted email addresses down the list, i.e., randomly, until we had set up twenty-five interviews. [↑](#)
33. Because the aims of this particular article are to identify the discourses that white audiences use to articulate their “limits” on racially diverse casting, in the reported results below we are not including quotations from those Participants 2, 5 and 23, who identified as another ethnicity, mixed-race or Asian. Their responses feature in our other studies from this data set. [↑](#)
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50. Ronald F. Inglehart, *Cultural Evolution: People’s Motivations Are Changing, and Reshaping the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). [↑](#)

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