

Advocates and Media Giants:  
Representation in the U.S. Film and Television Industry

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On my honor as a University student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments.

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## **Advocates and Media Giants: Representation in the U.S. Film and Television Industry**

Marginalized groups have struggled with representation and inclusion, both onscreen and off, since the beginnings of the U.S. film and television industry in Hollywood. In the first half of the twentieth century, exclusion was sometimes almost complete. African Americans resorted to establishing independent film companies to produce and distribute films featuring Black themes and casts, for Black audiences. Such exclusion receded, but marginalization and underrepresentation persist (Erigha, 2018; Hunt & Ramón, 2022). Representation is not reducible to time on screen. The quality, type and variety of roles matters too. Off camera, project budgets and marketing considerations are influential, as are pressures from studios and distributors. Representation of marginalized groups on screen and off promotes equity in popular culture and in perceptions of groups, especially among children (Erigha, 2018; Ward & Grower, 2020).

Participants include studios, producers, distributors, and the trade associations that represent them; organized professional actors, social equity advocacies, and some viewers. The commercial success of some diverse films and shows, plus growing public demand for diversity in entertainment, constitute internal and external pressures that have improved the representation of historically underrepresented groups in media.

### **Review of Research**

#### *Industry Representation Trends*

Onscreen representation of marginalized groups is generally better than offscreen; representation in film is better than on television. In film casts, including leads, onscreen representation by race and sexuality approximate population demographics, though females still account for only about 42 percent of casts. For Latinos and transgender people, marginalization persists. Though Latinos constitute about 19 percent of the general U.S. population, in 2020 films in wide release only about 7 percent of film leads were Latino. No characters were transgender (Deerwater, 2021; Hunt & Ramón, 2022). Inequities are also evident in film budgets. About 5 percent of films with female leads have budgets over \$100 million, compared to 15 percent for

male-lead films. In television, onscreen representation of marginalized groups is worse. Nonwhites, who are 43 percent of the US population, account for only 27 percent of broadcast scripted leads. On cable channels and in other digital media, representation is better. For female and LGBTQ characters, representation in cable and digital media is reflective of the general population (Deerwater, 2022; Hunt & Ramón, 2022).

In film, nonwhites and women are significantly underrepresented among writers, directors, and other creatives. Nonwhites, who are 43 percent of the US population, account for about 31 percent of directors and writers. Just 22 percent of directors are women. Only 6 percent of directors and writers are Latino. Nonwhite and women directors have lower film budgets. Respectively, they are 14 percent and 20 percent more likely to have a film budget under \$20 million than white male directors. In television, representation imbalances among directors, writers, and other creatives are substantial. Only about 13 percent of broadcast scripted creators are nonwhites. In television, budgets are lower for creators who are nonwhite or female. On average, a nonwhite creator's budget is 13 percent less; a female creator's budget is 35 percent less (Hunt & Ramón, 2022).

While analyzing representation quantitatively is useful, qualitative analyses are also necessary, particularly onscreen. For example, stereotype-confirming minority representations increase minority representation quantitatively, but can be harmful, confirming racial stereotypes and promoting negative attitudes towards minorities. Besana, Katsiaficas, and Loyd (2019) found that while Asian stereotype-resisting representations have increased recently, negative stereotype-confirming representations are still prevalent e.g., nerdy and emasculate Asian male side characters and soft-spoken Asian female supporting characters requiring assistance of a male lead to gain confidence. Lauzen and Dozier (1999) found that female television characters engaged in less powerful language behavior compared to male characters e.g., having less first and last words in conversations and less often interrupting other characters.

### *Perpetuation of Poor Industry Representation and Its Effects*

Industry institutional biases are largely, if not exclusively, responsible for industry

marginalization and underrepresentation. Karniouchina et al. (2022) concluded such biases favor nonminority film directors in project assignment, budgeting, and distribution, despite nonminority directors achieving similar revenues with lower budgets. Further implicating institutional biases, deficient onscreen and offscreen representation cannot be attributed to viewer preference, audience-population proportion discrepancies, project financial success, or lack of industry career interest from underrepresented groups (Kuppuswamy & Younkin, 2020; Lauzen & Dozier, 1999).

Maintaining proportionate and high quality representation of marginalized groups in film and television is essential to overcoming legacies of marginalization, particularly with child audiences. Block et al. (2022) shows that children's exposure to stereotypical and counter-stereotypical vignettes influences their gender stereotypes. Jaspal and Cinnirella (2010) argue that consistent media representations, of any quality, eventually transform into prevalent social representations as they become ingrained in the social and psychological context. Ward and Grower (2020) conclude that connections exist between children's exposure to film and television and their gender role attitudes, their support of traditional gender roles, and their stereotyping of activities and occupations.

### *Industry Representation Efforts*

Molina-Guzmán (2016) argues that a higher emphasis on onscreen representation over offscreen has limited awareness of deficient offscreen representation and the institutional power perpetuating it. She specifically notes that the increased viewership metrics of streaming compared to traditional distribution methods have promoted onscreen representation of marginalized groups, especially for Latinas / Latinos, with no parallel increase in offscreen representation. Bielby and Bielby (1992) concluded that dismantling gender barriers is difficult for television writers, as writers are hired similar to contractors outside of formal organizational structures; this likely applies to many barriers for marginalized groups in both film and television, onscreen and off.

## **Industry Players Representation Activity**

### *Directed Funding and Investment*

Industry players increasingly set up company specific funds for the purpose of increasing representation of marginalized groups. Sony Group Corporation, which includes Sony Pictures Entertainment, launched a \$100 million Social Justice Fund directing investment toward “civic and community engagement, criminal justice reform, education, [and] diversity through impact” (Sony Group Corporation, 2022). Netflix established a \$100 million creative equity fund to collaborate with organizations that promote industry representation. The co-CEO of Netflix said the fund “will invest in the next generation of underrepresented storytellers” (Sarandos, 2021). Comcast established a \$100 million fund to fight injustice and inequality; goals include “educating our viewers on diverse and inclusive cultures, perspectives and experiences” (Roberts, 2020).

Streaming industry players, with increased targeted content strategies and viewership metric awareness compared to established industry players, have aggressively invested in content featuring historically underrepresented groups that is popular with subscribers. Netflix’s VP of Korean content, following the success of the Korean series *Squid Game*, stated Netflix was “increasing our commitment and investment in Korea” (Kim, 2023). Outside of Korea, the success of *Squid Game* and other Asia-Pacific content has increased targeted content investment, namely in Japan, India, and Indonesia (Goldbart, 2023). Hulu, following the success of content featuring Latinas / Latinos, such as the series *East Los High*, further invested in such content including the series *Only Murders in the Building*, which attracted further subscribers to the platform (Molina-Guzmán, 2016; Quinn et al., 2022).

Industry players increasingly fund projects featuring representation of marginalized groups attached to established properties, such as cinematic universes or popularly known stories and characters. Disney increasingly funds such films and television shows within their Marvel Cinematic Universe, including *Black Panther*, *Shang-Chi*, *Captain Marvel*, and *Ms. Marvel*, featuring African American, Chinese, female, and Pakistani-American centric stories,

respectively (Marvel, 2023a; Marvel, 2023b). Disney has also done the same with Star Wars, by featuring female, African American, and Latina / Latino leads in *The Force Awakens*, and by featuring female and Mexican leads in *Rogue One* (Hurtado, 2017). For known stories and characters, examples include Warner Bros funding the African American lead and created film *Creed* derived from the popular Rocky film series, Disney's new live-action *Little Mermaid* African American lead film, and Legendary Entertainment's and Netflix's female lead *Enola Holmes* derived from the popular character Sherlock Holmes (Disney, 2023c; Netflix, 2020a; Whitten, 2023).

### *Employee and Executive Focused Efforts*

Creating specific executive roles for the sole purpose of ensuring representation of marginalized groups is increasingly popular for industry players. At Sony Pictures Entertainment, Paul Martin serves as Chief Diversity Officer, integrating diversity, equity, and inclusion “into every aspect of Sony’s business including hiring, retention, talent pipelines, supplier diversity, employee inclusion, content, and media and talent partnerships” (Paul Martin, 2023). Netflix’s Vice President of Inclusion Strategy, Vernā Myers, helps “devise and implement strategies that integrate cultural diversity, inclusion and equity into all aspects of Netflix’s operations worldwide” (Netflix, 2023c). Disney’s Chief Diversity Officer, Latondra Newton, “partners with various business segments and leaders across the enterprise to build on Disney’s commitment to produce entertainment that reflects a global audience and sustains a welcoming and inclusive workplace for everyone” (Disney, 2023d).

Beyond establishing specific executive roles, industry players increasingly integrate executives and upper-level employees into diversity efforts and programs. Sony Pictures Entertainment has 13 executives make up its Action Council, which oversees initiatives aligned to Sony Pictures Entertainment’s “multi-pronged racial equity and inclusion strategy... and seven global subcommittees” (Sony Pictures Entertainment, 2023a). At Paramount, the BAME (Black, Asian and minority ethnic) Talent Sponsorship Program allows “junior staff to be mentored by members of the leadership team” and the Female Talent Program “mentors and promotes

women” (Paramount, 2023a). Also at Paramount, the Writers Mentoring Program provides “opportunities to build relationships with network and studio executives and show runners... and personal access to executives and the decision-making processes” (Paramount, 2023b).

Industry players increasingly provide employee resources to help ensure representation of marginalized groups at all possible levels and foster cultures of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Netflix, in 2021, “held 90 virtual learning workshops on inclusion topics ranging from accessibility on service to understanding US Latino/a/x representation on-screen,” where over 4,500 employees participated (Myers, 2022). Netflix also has 16 Employee Resource Groups, which “are communities of employees who create space to connect on their shared experiences... serving Latino/a/x, veteran, Black, and disability communities to name a few” and “are vital to creating this sense of inclusion and belonging” (Netflix, 2023b). Disney supports “more than 100 [Business Employee Resource Groups]... voluntary, employee-led groups formed around shared identity, interests, and pursuits... a key component of nurturing a sense of employee belonging, visibility, and cultural understanding” (Disney, 2023b).

### *Internal Programs*

Company diversity efforts and programs at industry players increasingly target ensuring representation of marginalized groups internally, especially for executive and production roles. Disney’s Executive Incubator Program continues Disney’s “commitment to expand its diverse talent workforce and better reflect the audiences it serves, and will seek out talent with diverse and varied perspectives, including women, people of color, the LGBTQ+ community,... and others aspiring to hold network executive roles and production positions across the Walt Disney Television studios” (Disney, 2023e). Netflix’s Producers Inclusion Initiative trains “Indie Producers, Unit Production Managers, Supervisors, and 1st Assistant Directors who come from historically underrepresented communities... as Line Producers within the studio system,” and Netflix’s Ladder program is “specifically designed to provide an opportunity for individuals from underrepresented groups... to gain the necessary onset experience and training required to succeed in the film and television industry” (Netflix, 2022). Sony Pictures Action, Sony Pictures

Entertainment’s “global multi-pronged racial equity and inclusion strategy” initiatives include internal leadership development, production hiring, directors / writers programs, and justice-related social content (Sony Pictures Entertainment, 2023a).

Industry players increasingly implement supplier diversity programs to help ensure company supply chains and sourcing includes suppliers owned and operated by members of marginalized groups. Sony Pictures Entertainment’s supplier diversity program “seeks to increase our engagement with diverse-owned businesses” through the use of industry-standard diversity certifications (Sony Pictures Entertainment, 2023b). Netflix is seeking to hire a Director of Supplier Diversity to establish “a global Supplier Diversity program that aligns the various procurement needs of our business with utilization of suppliers that diversify our supply chain, such as small, minority, and/or women-owned businesses” (Netflix, 2023a). A+E Networks’ supplier diversity program provides “opportunities to minority-owned, woman-owned, veteran-owned, LGBTQ+ and other diverse businesses as we evaluate potential providers of goods and services” (A+E Networks, 2023).

### *Efforts Communicating Representation to Users and the Population*

Dedicated streaming apps, content collections, and content brands have increasingly been launched by industry players to explicitly designate for users content which represents, features, and is created by marginalized groups. AMC Networks’ ALLBLK streaming service is “dedicated to featuring content that is inclusively and unapologetically for, by and about Black people,” and their WE TV channel is “dedicated to developing and presenting programming focused on positive, diverse female voices” (AMC Networks, 2023). Comcast’s Black Experience on Xfinity is “the largest curated collection of independent Black film collection on demand... curated by industry leaders, the channel is the only one of its kind endorsed by African American Film Critics Association” (Comcast, 2023). Disney’s Onyx Collective is a “content brand on Hulu designed to curate a slate of premium entertainment by creators of color and underrepresented voices” (Disney, 2021).

Industry players increasingly use social media to communicate the importance of representing



and creating a culture of inclusion for marginalized groups, especially by criticizing audience views and behavior which is harmful towards marginalized groups. Amazon Studios tweeted support for Black Lives Matter, stating “we stand with the black community – colleagues, artists, writers, storytellers, producers, our viewers – and all allies in the fight against racism and injustice” (Amazon Studios, 2020). Disney’s official Star Wars twitter account, in response racist backlash directed at Moses Ingram for playing an African American lead in the series *Obi-Wan Kenobi*, tweeted “there are more than 20 million sentient species in the Star Wars galaxy, don’t choose to be a racist” (Star Wars, 2022). Netflix, in response to criticism that all new Netflix series contain an unnecessary gay character, tweeted “sorry you have yet to realize that every gay person is very necessary” (Netflix, 2020b).

### *External Efforts*

Through programs of trade associations representing them, industry players have indirectly undertaken efforts to ensure proper representation of marginalized groups within the film and television. The Motion Picture Association (MPA), made up of the major U.S. film studios and Netflix, is “working hard with our member studios to collectively address diversity, gender parity, authentic cultural representation, and pipeline recruitment opportunities from underrepresented communities in our industry” by partnering with organizations improving representation in the industry and hosting events highlighting the importance of representation (MPA, 2022). The Internet & Television Association (NCTA), made up of major U.S. broadband and television companies, undertakes diversity efforts “from implementing diverse hiring practices, to funding organizations that provide career development for diverse employees, to working with nonprofits and more” (NCTA, 2023). The Streaming Video Technology Alliance (SVTA), made up of the major U.S. film and television distributors with a streaming presence, is “strongly in support of increasing the opportunities for historically under-represented or repressed groups within the streaming industry... As such, we are committing our organization to helping improve inclusion and diversity within the streaming industry” by increasing conference diversity, diversifying leadership, and partnering with minority-focused organizations, among other activities (SVTA,

2022).

Industry players increasingly financially partner with advocacy organizations to ensure proper industry representation of marginalized groups. Disney has partnered with organizations that “reflect the lives and experiences of the communities we serve across creative content” and are “dedicated to equal representation and access to meaningful careers for the communities we serve,” including Gold House (Asian and Pacific Islanders), GLAAD (LGBTQIA+), and the NAACP (Disney, 2023a). Netflix has partnered with the organizations /dev/color, techqueria, Ghetto Film School, and TalentoTotal for the purpose of “connecting [hiring managers] to networks outside of their own” to ensure proper representation in recruiting efforts (Myers, 2021). AMC Networks has partnered with organizations including the NAACP, the T. Howard Foundation, and Women in Cable Telecommunications (WICT) to “actively support and help prepare the next generation of diverse leaders” (AMC Networks, 2023).

## **Advocate Representation Efforts**

### *Organized Efforts*

Formalized groups representing industry professionals, both those onscreen and off, increasingly ensure marginalized groups are represented in their respective professions within the industry. The Writers Guild of America, the largest labor union for U.S. film and television writers, Committee of Black Writers states that their “mission is to empower, increase visibility, and create career and networking opportunities for Black writers in Hollywood” and that they are “willing to do our part to continue to bring diverse, dynamic, and authentic storytelling to the rest of the world” (Amor, Guess, & Sams, 2020). The Screen Actors Guild - American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA), the largest labor union for U.S. actors, offers “a variety of incentives in its contracts to encourage producers to pursue diversity in their casting,” including Diversity-in-Casting Incentives for film producers (SAG-AFTRA, 2022). The Society of Camera Operators’ Inclusion Committee works to “address inclusion and diversity within our corner of the industry... through education, events, partnerships, outreach, support, exposure, and creating best practices, amongst others” (SOC, 2023).

Formalized advocacy groups representing specific marginalized groups within the industry increasingly ensure proper respective representation. GLAAD, a nonprofit LGBTQ advocacy standing for the equitable interests of the LGBTQ in media, “increases media accountability and community engagement that ensures authentic LGBTQ stories are seen, heard, and actualized” by “working closely with TV networks, film studios, production companies, showrunners, [and other parties] to help bring fair and accurate representation of [LGBTQ] people to the screen” (GLAAD, 2022a; GLAAD, 2023). The Black Film Allegiance is “united by a commitment to create visibility for underrepresented creatives” and “provides mentorship, networking opportunities, promotes independent projects and talented creatives” (Black Film Allegiance, 2023). Women In Film (WIF) “advocates for and advances the careers of women working in the screen industries... Our job at Women In Film is to keep attention focused on this issue, to continue putting forth innovative solutions, and to believe that change is possible.” (WIF, 2020).

Groups monitoring and publicizing representation data of marginalized groups, for the industry as a whole, for specific productions, or for specific marginalized groups, is an increasingly popular method of ensuring industry diversity. GLAAD releases annual TV and film reports highlighting “the number of LGBTQ regular and recurring characters on primetime scripted cable programming and original scripted streaming series” and “the quantity, quality, and diversity of LGBTQ characters in films,” respectively (Deerwater, 2021; Deerwater, 2022). The UCLA College of Social Sciences’ annual Hollywood Diversity Report generates “comprehensive research analyses of the inclusion of diverse groups in film and television, including lead roles, writing, directing, producing, and talent representation” (Hunt & Ramón, 2022). Mediaversity, a TV and film review site, “measures how well a TV show or film presents different and overlapping identities” and “examines the social context surrounding a program and grades how inclusive it is” (Mediaversity, 2023).

Organizers of industry award shows, both those historically significant and those recently created for the purpose of honoring diversity, have increasingly launched efforts to ensure and honor representation of marginalized groups in industry projects. The Oscars established “new

representation and inclusion standards for Oscars eligibility” for the Best Picture category (AMPAS, 2020). The Hollywood Foreign Press Association (HFPA), which determines the Golden Globe Award nominees and winners, has implemented reforms to “guard against any exclusionary practices and achieve a more diverse membership” (HFPA, 2021). GLAAD bestows annual Media Awards to “recognize and honor media for their fair, accurate and inclusive representations of the [LGBTQ] community” (GLAAD, 2022b).

### *Unorganized Efforts*

Primarily through social media, unorganized and semi-organized viewers increasingly advocate, demanding better representation and urging others to support inclusive industry projects. Following the trailer release of *The Little Mermaid* starring African American Halle Bailey, many African American viewers shared positive reactions; sharing children’s favorable responses was especially popular. Candace (2022) tweeted that the trailer “brought [her daughter] so much joy,” along with an accompanying video. The film *Black Panther* caused similar positive reactions for representation both onscreen and off, including “by far the best looking MCU film... and the representation of Black women... made me feel seen” (Theodore-Vachon, 2018a; Theodore-Vachon, 2018b). Actors of major productions have also participated, such as the Mexican star of *Rogue One*, Luna (2017), tweeting an emotional response to a father relating to Mexican representation in the film.

### **Conclusion**

While diversity advocate efforts are certainly increasingly emphasized and prevalent for the industry, and representation of marginalized groups both quantitatively and qualitatively has shown improvement in recent years, the direct effect of specific advocacy efforts on industry diversity, equity, and inclusion can be unclear; this is especially true given the recent marketplace success of diverse content, increasing public opinion on the importance of diverse media, and the years long gap between project inception and release within the industry. Given the major role film and television plays in shaping popular culture, societal perceptions of groups, and personal

identities, more research should be conducted on qualitative industry representation of marginalized groups and the effectiveness of specific diversity advocacy efforts within and external to the industry.

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